

Kali's Child Revisited

—or—

Didn't Anyone Check the Documentation?

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Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Kali's Child* has tremendous value for one very good reason: it is written by one who is not a part of the tradition that has grown around the life and teachings of Ramakrishna. Such works from "outside" the tradition are valuable because they often bring new perspectives and new life to a subject. These books can also provide a splendid opportunity for fruitful dialogue between those who are "inside" the tradition and those who are "outside." Such dialogue has the potential to enliven research, broaden understanding, correct misconceptions and enrich the knowledge of people on both sides of the fence.

Moreover, *Kali's Child* is quite an interesting book. So interesting, in fact, that even as a dissertation at least one reader was found (we learn from the Foreword) "smiling often and laughing almost as often" when she took chapters of it to the beach. Academic dissertations, as we are painfully aware, are not generally known to produce this kind of effect! Kripal has an engaging writing style: were the book not strewn with endless reference numbers in parentheses and innumerable endnotes it could have passed for a novel.

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The documentation indeed looks impressive until one actually *checks* the references Kripal quotes. That is what happened in my case. As I began to browse through *Kali's Child*, I would say to myself, "I know the *Kathamrita* quite well and I've never seen *that* before!"¹ As a sample check, I compared a reference with the original in Bengali and saw that there was a problem. So I began checking more references, comparing Kripal's translations with the Bengali originals and I too found myself "smiling often and laughing almost as often"—but for reasons quite different from those that provoked a similar reaction on a beach several years ago.

The second edition of Dr. Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child* begins by telling us that much has changed since the book's initial release. While the American Academy of Religion had bestowed upon *Kali's Child* the History of Religions Prize in 1996 for the best new book, *Kali's Child* had also provoked a flurry of criticism and, according to Kripal, the specter of "censorship" in India.

Why the strong reaction? Kripal tells us that the negative reaction was due to a "deep cultural rejection of homosexuality" (KC xxi);² it was an angry response to exposing the "secret" of "Ramakrishna's homoerotic desires" (KC xv).

In fact the truth is much more simple: yes, the criticism the book received was due to its conclusions regarding Ramakrishna's purported homosexuality. But Kripal's conclusions came via faulty translations, a willful distortion and manipulation of sources, combined with a

¹ The *Kathamrita* is a five-volume book, written in Bengali by Ramakrishna's disciple M. Based on the notes from M's diaries, the book is a record of Ramakrishna's conversations. The *Kathamrita* was later translated by Swami Nikhilananda into English under the title *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.

² In this essay *Kali's Child* is often abbreviated to KC, the *Kathamrita* to KA and the *Lilaprasanga* to LP.

remarkable ignorance of Bengali culture. The derisive, nonscholarly tone with which he discussed Ramakrishna didn't help matters either.

To make the facile claim that the criticism leveled against *Kali's Child* was due to homophobia is to deflect from the real issue of shoddy and deceptive scholarship. Should a person with a good grasp of Bengali language and culture seriously read the Bengali source books on Ramakrishna and *then* come to the conclusion that Ramakrishna was a conflicted homosexual, I would respect that person's freedom to come to this conclusion. I would strongly disagree with him or her, but I—and many other devotees of Ramakrishna—would fully support that person's freedom of inquiry and thought. What I and others will never support is the freedom to distort the text and the freedom to misuse citations.

Since I am a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, some may argue that my Bengali translations and my use of citations will only serve to reflect my biased viewpoint. Let me then quote Narasingha Sil regarding Kripal's scholarship. Sil (whom Kripal particularly thanks in his preface to the first edition) has been Kripal's occasional collaborator and colleague. Moreover, no one would ever accuse Narasingha Sil and the Ramakrishna Order of mutual admiration.

Speaking of Kripal's Bengali, Sil says: "Jeffrey is very adept at using Bengali-English dictionaries and picking the most appropriate synonyms for words (disregarding the primary, secondary, tertiary meanings) he feels could make his point." Sil also notes that Kripal "is unable even to converse in Bengali (but very prompt at using dictionaries)."³ Indeed, even Kripal's associates in India acknowledge that when he arrived in

Calcutta his knowledge of Bengali was fairly elementary. After eight months of study, Kripal's Bengali improved, but never beyond the intermediate stage. He still cannot speak Bengali and understands little when spoken to. Such a limited understanding of a foreign language and culture could hardly give Kripal the background necessary to understand a man whose village Bengali was worlds apart from the conventional Bengali appearing within the neat margins of the dictionaries. Further, Kripal's ignorance of Bengali culture jumps right off the page. Many of the author's misinterpretations are due to a simple lack of familiarity with Bengali attitudes and customs. The notes following this introductory essay will make this shortcoming abundantly clear.

Finally, regarding *Kali's Child* itself, Sil notes: "...[Kripal's] method of supporting his thesis is not only wrong but reprehensible in that it involves willful distortion and manipulation of sources. . . . Kripal has faulted Swami Nikhilananda for his 'concealment' and doctoring of the crude expressions of *KM [Kathamrita]*, but he has unhesitatingly committed similar crime[s] of omission and commission to suit his thesis."⁴

In this essay, which serves as an introduction to the "Notes" which follow, I give clear examples of the mistranslations and deceptive documentation which cover nearly every page of *Kali's Child*. The notes detail a page-by-page overview of some of the most egregious examples of Dr. Kripal's flawed scholarship. Yet even these notes are not exhaustive. Nor do they propose to be. They are only indicators of the

³ Letter of Narasingha P. Sil to Swami Atmajnanananda, 25 February 1997. Dr. Sil, a native Bengali, is professor of history at Western Oregon State College and the author of several books, including *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, *Ramakrishna Revisited* and *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment*.

⁴ Ibid.

kinds of problems that abound in *Kali's Child*. The purpose of this essay and the notes is only to encourage further studies and discussion.

To return to matters *about* the book before I discuss what is *in* the book, why was there an uproar when Narasingha Sil's inflammatory review of *Kali's Child* appeared in the Calcutta edition of the *Statesman* in 1997? Because the readers found the premises of *Kali's Child* insulting. Literally millions of people have read the Bengali *Kathamrita* for the past one hundred years. What Swami Nikhilananda chose and did not choose to translate into English is not relevant in this instance. Bengalis know the language, the culture, the source materials better than any American Ph.D. student who stays in Calcutta for eight months, reads Bengali with the help of a dictionary, and then tells the Bengalis that they are reading Ramakrishna wrong. Strangely enough, they find this sort of thing patronizing and arrogant. For more information regarding the "censorship" issue, please see note #1 at the end of this essay.

Who Closed the Case?

Except for a few minor corrections in the book's second edition, Kripal's original thesis remains intact, indeed has been strengthened, in the years between the book's first and second edition. Kripal now says with a clearer authority: "The case of Ramakrishna's homosexuality ... seems to be closed" (KC xxi).

Who has closed the case? While Kripal informs us that *Kali's Child* "has been lauded by scholars ... for being right (KC xxii)," one wonders if any of those praising the book have ever read its citations. Have any of

those scholars who have given this book so much acclaim actually *read* the Bengali sources that he quotes? How many of them can actually read Bengali *well*, if at all?

Oddly enough, Kripal attempts to invoke Christopher Isherwood as having a "homosexual reading of Ramakrishna" (KC xiii). It is odd because if one reads the book that Kripal cites, *My Guru and His Disciple*, Isherwood clearly declares exactly the opposite: "I couldn't honestly claim him [Ramakrishna] as a homosexual, even a sublimated one, much as I would have liked to be able to do so."⁵

Kripal buttresses his claim for Isherwood's "homosexual reading" of Ramakrishna by providing us with the following anecdote: In 1995 a well-known scholar, having heard Kripal's talk on Ramakrishna and his homosexual orientation, informed the author and the audience, "Chris Isherwood was a close friend of mine, and I want you to know that, if he could have been here today, Chris would have been very pleased" (KC xiii). Yet, to my surprise, this particular "well-known scholar" approached me at the November 2000 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and declared that he had been completely misquoted. In fact, the scholar said, he had never even *met* Christopher Isherwood, so he could hardly be considered a "close friend"! It is precisely this kind of fraudulent scholarship that forms the backbone of *Kali's Child*. For a fuller discussion of Isherwood along with a discussion of Kripal's claim that Isherwood was subjected to "censorship" by the Ramakrishna Order, please see note #2.

Perhaps the centerpiece of *Kali's Child* is the assertion that "Ramakrishna was a conflicted, unwilling, homoerotic Tantrika" (KC 3).

Further, Tantra's "heterosexual assumptions seriously violated the structure of his own homosexual desires. His female Tantric guru and temple boss *may have* forced themselves ... on the saint ... but Ramakrishna remained ... a lover not of sexually aggressive women or even of older men but of young, beautiful boys" (KC 2-3, emphasis mine).

Interesting thesis; how does he document his claims?

Ramakrishna, Kripal informs us, went into samadhi "while looking at the *cocked* hips of a *beautiful* English boy" (KC 19, emphasis mine). Interesting choice of adjectives. Kripal repeats this phrase later by declaring: "stunned by the cocked hips of the boy, Ramakrishna falls into samadhi" (KC 66). But what does the original Bengali say? Kripal gives two references (KA 2.49; KA 2.110) neither of which mentions the boy as being "beautiful" and, perhaps obviously, there is no mention of "cocked" hips either. The *Kathamrita* simply states that Ramakrishna went into samadhi upon seeing a boy who was—as Krishna is traditionally depicted in Hindu iconography—*tribhanga*—bent in three places (i.e., bent at the knee, waist and elbow, with flute in hand). It is this sort of documentation that Kripal uses to build the case for Ramakrishna's purported homoerotic impulses.

Then we have the issue of the sword. Even casual readers of the Ramakrishna literature are familiar with the story of how Ramakrishna, stricken with grief and frustration at not having experienced a vision of Kali, decided to end his life. Just as he was seizing the sword to slit his throat, Ramakrishna was overwhelmed by rolling waves of bliss and entered into samadhi. How does Kripal view this incident? Kripal

⁵ *My Guru and His Disciple* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 249.

presumes that Ramakrishna's spiritual crisis was something much more interesting: the suicide attempt was an attempt "to end his erotic torment (*vyakulata*) and the shame attached to it by symbolically castrating himself" (KC 76).

How does he come to this conclusion? Although Kripal tells us that he doesn't follow Freudian methodology, this sounds pretty close to me: "Psychoanalytically trained students of Hindu culture have tended to see such symbolic self-castrations as productive of a 'negative Oedipus complex' in which the boy, instead of renouncing his desires for the mother and identifying with the father (the 'normal' outcome of Freud's Oedipus complex), ends up identifying with the mother by renouncing his masculine identity through a symbolic castration. . . . This in turn creates a marked homosexual tendency in the boy" (KC 344).

This is how we've arrived, via circular logic, at Kripal's thesis: Ramakrishna, in wishing to slit his throat, *must* have really wanted to castrate himself since he was presumed to be suffering "erotic torment." But there's no evidence of "erotic torment" whatsoever. Kripal tries to build it into his thesis with prejudicial translations and false documentation, but there is no textual evidence for his thesis. The clincher for the head=phallus metaphor is Kripal's assertion that "the head in the mystical physiology of yoga and Tantra [is] the ultimate goal of one's semen and so an appropriate symbol for the phallus" (KC 76). Sorry, wrong. The ultimate goal is the *retention* of semen which strengthens the body-mind complex. The phallus and head are not interchangeable parts.

What other evidence does Kripal marshal to promote his homoerotic thesis? There's the case of Mathur Babu, Rani Rasmani's son-in-law and

the manager of the Kali temple. Curiously, Kripal revels in calling Mathur the "temple boss." What's the point? Mathur was the temple *manager*. It's interesting, however, to ponder the weight "boss" carries in contrast to "manager." "Boss" seems more dangerous, more authoritarian; there's a swagger in the word which Kripal attempts to build into his text.

This is typical of Kripal's use of loaded language which he employs throughout *Kali's Child*. The notes section of this paper will provide many more examples of Kripal's repeated use of loaded words to create an effect. Why would Kripal chose a word with a pejorative and slightly ominous subtext? Because Kripal has already decided that Mathur sexually forced himself upon Ramakrishna.

Mathur, as all the Ramakrishna literature openly states, was immediately attracted to Ramakrishna, because of his "good-looks, tender nature, piety, and youth." Then Kripal adds: "Saradananda tells us, seemingly completely unaware of the homosexual dimensions of his own description, a 'sudden loving attraction' arose in the mind and heart of the temple boss" (LP 2.5.1).⁶ The "homosexual dimensions" which somehow evade us in the *Lilaprasanga* I will quote here: "It is often seen that when a very close and lasting relationship is established with anyone in life, the loving attraction towards them is felt right away, at first sight" (LP 2.5.1). I fail to find the homosexual dimensions here. All of us have had the joy of meeting people with whom we immediately establish a warm rapport; even though we've just met them, we nevertheless feel very drawn to those people. In the Hindu worldview, this phenomenon is seen as

⁶ The book cited here is the *Lilaprasanga*, a biography of Ramakrishna written by his disciple Swami Saradananda. The English translation of this book is entitled *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*.

completely natural. There is absolutely no sexual connotation in this phenomenon whatsoever.

We've Got Some Serious Translation Issues Here

Kripal's treatment of the word *vyakulata*, which he translates as "erotic torment," brings us to the subject of his prejudicial translations. Since we know that Kripal can only read and translate Bengali texts with the help of a dictionary, let's see how the dictionary translates *vyakulata*. The widely used 1968 edition of the Bengali *Samsad* gives us these possibilities: "eagerness, excitement; impatience, anxiety, worry, hustle, bustle, busyness, business, distraction, perplexity; scattered state; diffusion; inversion." *Where* in these possibilities do we find "erotic torment"? Let's take a look at the 1924 Mitra Bengali-English dictionary; perhaps Kripal might have found something in there. *Vyakulata* here is defined as: "perplexity, distraction, agitation, flurry, anxiety, eagerness." No erotic torment to be found here. Alas, the poor author has to install the erotic torment into the text himself, since it doesn't exist there independently.

In attempting to build a case for Ramakrishna's homosexual attraction, Kripal states: "Ramakrishna's anxious desire was often directed to his young male disciples" (KC 65). The word used here is again *vyakulata*; and, as we have seen, there's nothing in the word to suggest "desire," which, typically for Kripal, carries a sexual connotation.

In any language, a word carries different shades of meaning depending on the context. Take the word "eagerness" or "anxiety," for example, and we'll have the same situation. A person can be eager or

anxious to see a close friend; a person can be eager or anxious to see one's child; a person can be eager or anxious to have a stiff drink; a person can be eager or anxious to see one's beloved. The weight and meaning of the word depends on the context. To load the Bengali words heavily with sexual innuendo is to completely distort the meaning of the text.

Kripal carries his argument further by declaring: "The same longing that was once directed to Kali and her sword is now directed to Narendra and his sweet singing voice" (KC 65). *Vyakul* is used here, but—as we have seen—the "longing" that one feels for God doesn't presume the same feeling that one has for another human being; the contexts are obviously different.

Not to unduly belabor *vyakul*, but one last example. (See the notes for more references on this point.) To quote *Kali's Child* which is purportedly quoting from KA 3.126: "Again *troubled* by his *desire* for the boys, Ramakrishna asks M, 'Why do I feel so anxious for them?' M can give no answer before an *upset* Ramakrishna breaks in, 'Why don't you say something?'" (KC 65, emphasis mine).

In comparing Kripal's translation against Nikhilananda's, I find Nikhilananda's translation to be perfectly accurate. Nikhilananda writes, and I would translate the text in exactly the same way: "The Master lay down on the small couch. He seemed worried about Tarak. Suddenly he said to M, 'Why do I worry so much about these young boys?' M kept still. He was thinking over a reply. The Master asked him, 'Why don't you speak?'"

Nikhilananda's translation, "worry so much," is the perfect English equivalent for this context. If we look at Kripal's translation, we find

sexual innuendo that isn't in the text and, interestingly enough, we also find words that are not in the text. The adjective "upset" describing Ramakrishna is not in the original. But by giving the KA 3.126 reference, Kripal indicates that this description is in the text. This is nothing short of deceptive documentation.

Another word which Kripal warps in order to shore up his homoerotic platform is *uddipana*, which means "enkindling" or "lighting up." Discussing the "obvious . . . homoerotic element" in KA 2.24, Kripal writes: "When it comes time for the disciples to leave one evening, Ramakrishna turns to the youth Bhabanath and says: 'Please don't leave today. When I look at you, I get all excited (*uddipana*)!'" (KC 67). Let's go back to the dictionary: the *Samsad* defines *uddipana* as: "act of enkindling; incitation; act of inspiring or encouragement; animation; manifestation; augmentation, development." The "obvious" homoerotic element is not obvious unless one would choose to mistranslate the text.

When I checked the Bengali text against Nikhilananda's *Gospel*, I found Nikhilananda's translation accurate with the exception of one word. Nikhilananda writes: "The devotees were ready to return home. One by one they saluted the Master. At the sight of Bhavanath Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Don't go away today. The very sight of you inspires me'" (*Gospel*, 194). In KA 2.24 the word "you" is plural (*toder*): it would therefore be more accurate to translate the last sentence as: "The very sight of you all inspires me."

"If all this seems suggestive," Kripal intones, "consider Ramakrishna's comments on the excitement he feels when looking at pictures of holy men: 'When I look at pictures of holy men I become aroused [*uddipana*] . . . just as when a man looks at a young woman and

is reminded [*uddipana*] of [sexual] pleasure" (KC 67). Again we are faced with loaded English words and skewed translations. Ramakrishna becomes *aroused*? There's nothing in *uddipana* to suggest "aroused," and as we all know, the word "aroused" carries with it heavy sexual baggage.

Kripal obviously wants to emphasize "men" since he translates *sadhuder chhabi* as "pictures of holy men" rather than "pictures of sadhus" or "pictures of monks." Of more interest is the endnote given for this reference (KC 343, #61): "But Ramakrishna wants nothing to do with pictures of women," citing KA 4.263. If we check KA 4.263 however, we find that Ramakrishna is neither expressing any distaste nor dislike for pictures of women; he is simply stating the strict rule for sannyasins: "A sannyasin must not even look at a picture of a woman." Kripal's endnote, as usual, is meant to mislead.

But back to Kripal's sexual baggage in the body of the text: If we check KA 5.120 we find nothing to support Kripal's issue with photos of men. When a devotee describes the sadhus he had met, Ramakrishna says: "Look, one must keep the pictures of sadhus at home (*dekho, sadhuder chhabi ghare rakhate hoy*). One is then constantly reminded of God (*ta hole sarvada isvarer uddipan hoy*)." When the devotee says that he has kept such pictures in his room, Ramakrishna continues: "Yes, seeing the pictures of sadhus, one is reminded [of God]" (*han, sadhuder chhabi dekhle uddipan hoy*).

Nowhere in the *Kathamrita* do we find Kripal's: "When I look" which he has conveniently placed in Ramakrishna's mouth and, even more conveniently, has placed those words within quotation marks. And nowhere is there any "aroused." The context of the quotation makes it completely clear that *uddipana* refers to God: *isvarer uddipana*.

One last point: Kripal needlessly uses ellipses in this short reference to distort the text's meaning. Ramakrishna, when discussing the importance of being reminded of God through holy pictures, gives *two* examples. Kripal, however, cleverly provides only one: Ramakrishna's first example is being reminded of a real fruit when one sees an imitation one. His second example is being reminded of enjoyment (*bhog*) when seeing a young woman. Not surprisingly, the word *bhog*, which simply means either experience or enjoyment, becomes in Kripal's version: "[sexual] pleasure" and the first example of the fruit is omitted entirely.

My final discussion of *uddipana* (please see the notes for more examples) centers around Kripal's translation of KA 3.93. Writes Kripal: "Almost anything he saw or heard could awaken powerful forces that often overwhelmed him. When one is in love, he explained, 'even the littlest thing can ecstatically remind one [of the beloved]'" (KC 66).

I've compared Nikhilananda's text with the *Kathamrita* and found it quite accurate. I would translate the text in this way: "Once love for God arises in the heart, even the slightest thing kindles spiritual feeling in a person. Then, chanting the name of Rama even once can produce the fruit of ten million sandhyas."

But note what is breathtakingly dishonest about Kripal's translation: He writes, "when one is in love." The *Kathamrita* passage which he gives, however, is absolutely unambiguous and clear: Ramakrishna is referring to "love for God" (*isvarer upar bhalobasha*). Thus the obvious meaning of *uddipana* in this context is the "kindling of spiritual feeling."

Kripal, on the other hand, after suppressing the blatant reference to God, turns the text on its head. Suddenly Ramakrishna's words have been twisted into a poor imitation of Rumi: "ecstatically remind one [of the

beloved].” There is absolutely *no* mention whatsoever of “the beloved” in the text. I searched in vain in the preceding page and subsequent page of KA 3.93 as well but nowhere could I find even a hint of “the beloved.” Amusingly, Kripal begins this paragraph by noting: “Ramakrishna might be described as hyperassociative.” I would suggest that it is Kripal who has the hyperassociative problem.

Sometimes Kripal's desire to shove inconvenient facts into the homoerotic box creates unintentionally comic results. Take for example Kripal's dissection of Ramakrishna and Kedar in KA 4.7.: "In still another passage, he looks at boy Kedar and is reminded of Krishna's sexual exploits with the milkmaids" (KC 66).

It's interesting that Kripal describes Kedar as a "boy." Considering that in 1882 Kedar was fifty years old and working as a government accountant, I think "boy" is an exaggeration. In fact, Kedar was older than Ramakrishna himself. But since Kripal is bound and determined to have Ramakrishna be with boys, Kripal will transform even a fifty-something into a boy. In nineteenth-century India, a man of fifty was considered elderly.

More importantly, KA 4.7 simply says that upon seeing Kedar (who was a devotee of Krishna), Ramakrishna was reminded of the *Vrindavan-lila*. I suppose one shouldn't be surprised to find that Kripal translates “the play in Vrindavan” (*vrindavan-lila*) as “Krishna's sexual exploits with the milkmaids.” Though for someone who, when it suits him, can be persnickety about literal accuracy, why would he provide such an interpretative “translation”? Obviously because he wanted to emphasize his own subtext.

Since Kripal wants to associate Ramakrishna with boys, no matter what, we shouldn't be surprised that he first suspects, then assumes, then presents as a fact that Ramakrishna was sexually abused as a child. That there is absolutely no evidence for this makes no difference to Dr. Kripal; we have the effect—Ramakrishna's "homoerotic impulses"—so now the cause must be found. *Aha!* Certainly he must have been sexually abused as a child.

The spiritual ecstasies that Ramakrishna experienced as a child are thus reinterpreted as "troubling trances" (KC 57). The only one "troubled" by them, however, is Kripal who feels compelled to find sexual abuse somewhere in there. He first tries to hang the blame on the itinerant monks visiting the village; the young Ramakrishna enjoyed visiting them and we can only suspect what *that* means. Referring to LP 1.7.5, Kripal somehow intuits that Ramakrishna's mother, "... began to worry about such visits, especially when the boy returned home with his clothes torn into a simple loin-cloth and his nearly naked body covered with ashes, but Gadadhar assured her that nothing was wrong" (KC 57).

This reference not only shows us Kripal's ability to mistranslate but also his remarkable ignorance of Indian customs. Please note that it was not the boy's "clothes" but rather his "cloth" that was torn into a loincloth. The distinction is important. Perhaps the author doesn't know what a loincloth is and how much material it requires—or he is just embellishing his account of the event. It is not the slightest bit unusual to cut a portion of the wearing cloth (*dhoti*) and make it into a loincloth (*kaupin*)—many monks do so, and I have done it myself. The *dhoti* is still worn as a regular *dhoti*.

Kripal's phrase "his near naked body" is his own invention. Nowhere in the LP is there even a mention of the boy's nakedness. In which case we can assume that Ramakrishna wore the kaupin *as well as* the wearing cloth. LP 1.7.5 says that the boy would "tell his mother everything" (*tahake samasta katha nivedan korilo*). When he returned from his visit to the monks, the boy would tell his mother, "Look mother, how the monks have adorned me" (*ma, sadhura amake kemon sajaiya diyachhen, dekho*). It was *then* obviously that he showed her the kaupin. In Kripal's skewed account, the reader is led to believe that the boy returned home with "his nearly naked body" covered with ashes.

Further, in LP 1.7.5 the events are kept quite distinct. The boy's being smeared with sacred ash (*vibhuti-bhushitanga hoiya*) happened on some days (*kono din*), and on some days (*kono din*) he returned home with a sacred emblem on his forehead (*tilak dharan koriya*), and on some *other* days (*abar kono din*) he returned home using a part of his wearing cloth as a loincloth.

Kripal goes out of his way to throw these distinct elements together while adding to it his own version: a tearing of "clothes" and a "nearly naked body." Yet again, we have loaded language which does not exist in the original.

What is especially interesting is that Kripal chooses *not* to mention the nature of Ramakrishna's mother's fear. In the *same paragraph* which Kripal quotes, it is made quite clear by Saradananda that Ramakrishna's mother was "afraid that one day the mendicants might tempt her son to go away with them" (*sadhura tahar putrake kono din bhulaiya sange loiya jaibe na to*). She mentioned this fear to her son who tried to pacify her. When the monks eventually came to know of this, they came to her

house and “assured her that the thought of taking away Gadadhar with them had never even crossed their minds; for, to take away a boy of that tender age, without the permission of his parents, they said, would be stealing, an offence unworthy of any religious person. At this, every shadow of apprehension left Chandradevi, and she readily agreed to let the boy visit them as before.”

All of this information Kripal refuses to acknowledge, leaving the readers with Chandramani's ambiguous “fear.” Finally, by the time we've reached page 303 of *Kali's Child*, we're told in a hand-wringing, pitying tone about the "holy men stripping a trusting little boy"!

Not only were sadhus unable to keep their hands off the "trusting little boy," the village women were equally voracious according to Kripal. For a somewhat lengthy discussion of this issue, please see the notes which follow this essay. Briefly I'll note one point here: While Kripal wonders why Ramakrishna "was letting [the village women] worship him as a male lover," there is *nothing* in either the *Life of Ramakrishna* (which he references as his source) or the *Kathamrita* or the *Lilaprasanga* to indicate anything remotely resembling this. The texts all state that the village women looked upon Ramakrishna as Gopala, the child Krishna. Interestingly, Kripal quotes the *Life of Ramakrishna* as saying, "...the boy actively sought the company of the pious women of the village because they reminded him of the milkmaids of Vrindavan, who had realized Krishna as their husband *and had experienced the bliss and pleasure of his love*" (KC 58, emphasis mine). When we actually check the *Life* we find: "The pious young women of the village, who were mostly devotees of Vishnu, reminded him of the Gopis of Vrindavan, and, therefore, he sought their company. He knew that the

Gopis were able to realize Krishna as their husband and *feel the bliss of his eternal reunion* because they were women."⁷ Note the difference between the "bliss and pleasure of his love"—laden with sexual innuendo—and what is actually in the text. Yet since it is footnoted as a reference to the *Life*, the reader naturally expects the words, or at least an honest summary of the referenced passage, to be there. And it is not.

While Kripal tells us that his approach to Ramakrishna is not reductive, his own words betray him. He writes "...we must admit that there are no clear indications of early sexual abuse in the biographies. But then why should there be? . . . Is it just a coincidence that repeated traumatic events ... [that] in the words of one psychiatrist, 'simultaneously conceal and reveal their origins ... [and] speak in [the] disguised language of secrets too terrible for words?' It is indeed remarkable that the ... literature on sexual trauma suggests that individuals who have experienced abuse often become adept at altering their state of consciousness ... lose control of their bodily, and especially gastrointestinal, functions, experience visions and states of possession, become hypersensitive to idiosyncratic stimuli (like latrines), symbolically reenact the traumatic events, live in a state of hyperarousal ... become hypersexual in their language or behavior, develop hostile feelings toward mother figures, fear adult sexuality, and often attempt suicide. This list reads like a summary of Ramakrishna's religious life" (KC 298-99).

Is *this* what Kripal takes to be a "religious life"? Only if one equates religious experience with pathology. If religious experience can be flattened into a pathological reaction to trauma, then we've lost any real

⁷ *Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 27 (emphasis mine).

meaning behind "religious" and "religion." If this isn't reductive, I don't know what is. But even that's not the entire issue, significant though it is.

None of the symptoms enumerated in the "literature on sexual trauma" is present in Ramakrishna's life. But since Kripal has approached his subject with a predetermined verdict, he resorts to specious reasoning in order to come up with the judgment he has in mind. Ramakrishna has "pronounced homosexual tendencies," ergo he must have suffered childhood sexual trauma, ergo he must reenact the traumatic events. This exercise in weak-link logic is reminiscent of the kangaroo courts where the prisoner is convicted first and then the "evidence" is manufactured at a more convenient time.

Even as an adult, Kripal informs us, Ramakrishna had to deal with sexual predators: his Tantric guru, the Bhairavi Brahmani; his Vedanta guru, Tota Puri; and of course the "temple boss," Mathur Babu. These issues are dealt with at length in the notes, but it's of interest to see how Kripal presents Tota Puri to the reader. As we have seen, Kripal has deduced that Ramakrishna was "homosexually oriented" and so every aspect of his life must be interpreted through that lens.

Take the case of Ramakrishna's Vedanta guru, Tota Puri, who was a member of the Naga sect of sannyasins. A highly austere and uncompromising monastic order, the Nagas normally live with only "space as clothing" (*digambara*), refusing to submit to any comfort the body or mind might enjoy. What does Kripal tell us about the encounter between Tota Puri and Ramakrishna? "One can only imagine," Kripal whispers, "what it must have been like for Ramakrishna, a homosexually oriented man, to be shut away for days in a small hut with another, stark-naked man. Vedanta instruction or no, it was this man's nudity, and more

specifically, his penis, that naturally caught Ramakrishna's attention. How could it *not*?" (KC 160)

Frankly I find this kind of circular reasoning staggeringly preposterous. *Because* one must take for granted that Ramakrishna is homosexually oriented, *then* it stands to reason that the only thing that would interest Ramakrishna about his Vedanta guru is his penis. For more discussion of Ramakrishna's sexual predators, please see the notes which follow.

Were all this not enough, Kripal has taken his child-abuse thesis and stretched it to the utmost: Ramakrishna, in his view, helplessly engages in the same abusive acts with any unsuspecting male that comes near him. In what Kripal diagnoses as a "reenactment pattern," we see Ramakrishna, poor man, "uncontrollably rubbing sandal-paste on the penises of boys" (KC 301). I must admit that when I read Kripal's interpretation of "touching softly" (*aste aste sparsha korchhen*) as attempted sodomy (KC 301-2), I could only laugh. But then, since Dr. Kripal is able to equate "religious life" with "ritual reenactment of trauma" and becoming "hypersexual in ... language or behavior," I should have anticipated the gloss. A discussion of this entire issue is dealt with extensively in the notes which follow.

Suffice it to say here that, yet again, Kripal has willfully distorted the texts and willfully mistranslated the Bengali in order to present a vision of Ramakrishna which will conform to his thesis. By now we shouldn't be surprised that Kripal has omitted texts and omitted portions of the texts he quotes in order to suppress information which would run contrary to his thesis. Yet while I may not be surprised, it's nevertheless difficult not to be disappointed. I'm also saddened when I think of the

unsuspecting reader who has either no knowledge of Bengali or no time to compare Kripal's so-called "translations" with the Bengali originals.

Sometimes a Lap is Just a Lap

In both the first and second edition of *Kali's Child*, Kripal makes much of Ramakrishna's foot and the devotee's lap. The second edition of *Kali's Child* informs us: "It is clear that Ramakrishna saw 'the lap' as a normally defiled sexual space" (KC 2).

Why does the author consider the lap (*kol*) to be "normally defiled"? In Indian culture—and Bengali culture in particular—the lap has an extremely positive and warm maternal association. For example, the national anthem of Bangladesh, written by Tagore, contains the following line: *Takhon khela dhula sakal phele, O Ma, tomar kole chhute ashi*: "After the day's play is over, O Mother, I run back to your lap." In describing a mother holding a child, a person would normally say, *mayer kole shishu jishu*. The defilement, sad to say, exists only in Dr. Kripal's mind.

While the first edition of *Kali's Child* clearly states that "lap" indicates "on the genitals," the second edition merely internalizes the allusion by stating that a lap is "a normally defiled sexual space." The problem is, *kol* carries no sexual connotation. There is no basis either within the text—nothing in KA 4. 278 indicates that the lap is anything other than a lap—nor is there any tradition or reference within the culture to validate this idea. To suggest that the lap is a "defiled space" is to place a Western construct on a culture which associates laps with maternal affection, safety and trust. Sometimes a lap is just a lap.

As for the foot itself, it's illuminating to read Kripal's sources. One of his citations is KA 4.245: "The Master placed his foot on the pundit's lap and chest, and smiled (*panditer kole o bakkhe ekte charan rakhiya thakur hasitechhen*). The pundit clung to his feet and said (*pandit charan dharan koriya bolitechhen*)" Here we are provided the stunning illustration of a foot so awesome that it can encompass not only a person's lap and chest but can also be clung to like a pole. And somehow the unconscious person doesn't lose his balance! As should be obvious, some Bengali expressions are hyperbolic and are not meant to be taken literally. However, these less-than-subtle nuances—of which there are legion in *Kali's Child*—seem to be lost on the author.

Kripal again returns to the foot/lap issue later in the book (KC 238), by making it appear that Ramakrishna's "habit of touching people with his foot" was a routine occurrence. It wasn't. Interestingly, after placing his foot on Dr. Sarkar's lap, Kripal quotes Ramakrishna as saying: "You're very pure! Otherwise I wouldn't be able to place my foot there!" (KA 4.278). Kripal continues, "We see a whole range of opinions focused on Ramakrishna's foot 'there.'"

First, one doesn't find any range of opinions. Second, and much more interestingly, when we check KA 4.278, we find that—with a nod to Gertrude Stein—there's no "there" there. What does the *Kathamrita* actually say? Ramakrishna tells Dr. Sarkar: "You are very pure (*tumi khoob shuddha*), or else I couldn't have touched with my foot (*ta na hole pa rakhate pari na*)." There is no "there" in the text; it is the author who has added the word and placed it in quotation marks even though it's not taken from the text.

Apart from adding his own material and implying it to be Ramakrishna's (and this occurs time and time again in *Kali's Child*—please see the notes for more instances), the author also provides the insinuation of where the "there" is located in order to give weight to his argument that Ramakrishna was homoerotically motivated. Kripal adds that "Ramakrishna never denied that he stuck his foot in strange places." *In?* If we're returning to the first-edition "genitals" argument, let's remember that it would take some serious excavation work to locate the genitals of someone sitting cross-legged on the floor through the many layers of cloth that Bengalis typically wear. Especially since the foot is attached to someone who is unconscious of his external surroundings.

Why did Dr. Sarkar object to Ramakrishna's placing his foot on the devotees' bodies? For the simple reason that in India touching others with the foot is considered disrespectful. Dr. Sarkar was Westernized and proud of his rationalist views. He found this sort of behavior irrational and unscientific. Nevertheless, he was a tremendous admirer of Ramakrishna; by his own admission he let his own medical practice suffer in order to spend more time in Ramakrishna's company. When Girish explained to Dr. Sarkar that Ramakrishna put his foot on others' bodies for their spiritual benefit, Dr. Sarkar quickly withdrew his objection and said, "I confess my defeat at your hands. Give me the dust of your feet" (KA 1: 254). And with that, Dr. Sarkar took the dust of Girish's feet. Was this done sarcastically? There's nothing in any text to suggest so. Dr. Sarkar remained an ardent admirer of Ramakrishna until the latter's death.

The Kathamrita Is Structured to Conceal a Secret?

According to Kripal the five-volume structure of M's *Kathamrita* was designed to "conceal a secret." Since its five-volume, nonchronological structure *is* unusual, I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that Kripal attempts to create a *Kathamrita*-gate from it. There are many other possibilities, however, which the author hasn't considered. Further, as we can see regarding Kripal's conjecture about the book's structure, his guess is first hazarded and then is presented as a fact several pages later.

The *Kathamrita* was originally written in five volumes, which were published over a period of thirty years. Kripal believes that these volumes were "arranged cyclically" in order to conceal "a secret." This, he says, is a "basic thesis" of his study (KC 3). Kripal declares that M "held back" the secret in the first volume, "hinted at" it in the second, "toyed with" it in the third, "revealed it" in the fourth and, according to Kripal, M found that he had hardly any material left for the fifth (KC 4). Perhaps M was a clumsy planner.

If we examine the facts, however, we'll come to an entirely different conclusion. First, there is no evidence whatsoever that M had any predetermined plan to divide his work into five volumes. In Sunil Bihari Ghosh's extraordinary research article on the *Kathamrita*, we learn that portions from M's diaries were published in various Bengali journals long before the *Kathamrita* appeared in book form. These portions were published in the following journals: *Anusandhan*, *Arati*, *Alochana*, *Utsah*, *Udbodhan*, *Rishi*, *Janmabhumi*, *Tattwamanjari*, *Navyabharat*, *Punya*, *Pradip*, *Pravasi*, *Prayas*, *Bamabodhini*, *Sahitya*, *Sahitya-samhita*, and

Hindu Patrika. Quite a formidable list, although it is not exhaustive. It was from these published extracts that the first volume of the *Kathamrita* was compiled, printed and published by Swami Trigunatitananda at the Udbodhan Press in the Bengali month of Falgun 1308 [corresponding to the year 1902].⁸ There is no textual evidence anywhere to indicate that M began transcribing his diaries with the express intention of publishing a "book."

What Kripal chooses *not* to mention in the main body of *Kali's Child* is that at the time he wrote this, the Ramakrishna Order had *already* published a two-volume edition of the *Kathamrita*, arranged chronologically. If the nonchronological device was meant to "conceal" the secret, the chronological edition should have "revealed" it! Apparently, the Ramakrishna Order did not feel any need to hide the "secret."

The Ramakrishna Order could not publish the *Kathamrita* earlier because the copyright rested with M's descendants. The Ramakrishna Order had no control over how the volumes were structured. When the copyright expired fifty years after M's death, the Order published the *Kathamrita* chronologically, making ludicrous the accusation, which Kripal was to make several years later, of "hiding" disquieting information from the public.

As is quite obvious, nothing was *ever* "hidden" from those who could read Bengali. At least four generations of Bengalis have read the *Kathamrita* and their perception of Ramakrishna is in most respects diametrically opposite to the picture presented in *Kali's Child*. But what

⁸ Sunil Bihari Ghosh, "Kathamrita Prakashan-Granthapanji," *Sri Ramakrishna O Tanr Kathamrita* [Bengali] (Howrah, 1983), 220.

about the “translations” of the *Kathamrita* in other languages? In *Kali’s Child* much of the talk about “secrets” centers around Swami Nikhilananda’s English translation of the book under the title *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. According to Kripal, Nikhilananda “systematically concealed” the secrets by “ingeniously mistranslating” them. “Those passages,” Kripal continues, “for which he could not find a suitably safe enough ‘translation,’ he simply omitted” (KC 4).

Reading this serious allegation, my curiosity was fueled and I compared the *Kathamrita* with the *Gospel* page by page. In my estimate, about 25 pages of the *Kathamrita* (which may roughly translate into about 18 pages of the *Gospel*) have been omitted. This may seem to be considerable, but here is the breakdown: almost half of the omitted material (12 pages, to be exact) consists of a brief biography of Ramakrishna (in the *Gospel* this is replaced by a longer biography) and a very detailed description of the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar. The remaining half of the omitted material is mostly either M’s “reflections” (under the title *sevak hridaye*, literally “In the Heart of the Servant”) or his poetic portrayal of the Ganges and the ambiance of Dakshineswar. Here is a typical sample from the “omitted” material:

Come brother, let us go to see him again. We’ll see that great soul, that child who knows nothing other than Mother, and who has taken birth for our benefit. He will teach us how to solve this difficult riddle of life. He will teach the monk and he will teach the householder. The door is always open. He is waiting for us at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar. Come, come, let us see him (KA 1.165).

The “brother” in the above passage, by the way, refers to M’s own mind. The *Kathamrita* text emerged as a result of long meditations that M did on his diary notes. That is how we find a few passages in the *Kathamrita* containing M’s “reflections” on Ramakrishna’s life and teachings.

What is most important to note is that Nikhilananda was honest when he said that he omitted “only a few pages of no particular interest to the English speaking readers” (*Gospel*, vii). He did not deny the omissions and it seems to me unfair to question his integrity—as Kripal does—simply because Kripal finds something of “particular interest” which Nikhilananda didn’t. A few phrases, examples and incidents were indeed omitted; it was done not to “hide” secrets but only to respect the Western sense of decorum, at least as it existed in the 1940s, when the *Gospel* was translated.

Translating texts across cultural boundaries is not easy: if you translate the “word,” you risk being misunderstood; if you translate the “idea,” you are charged—as Kripal does—with “bowdlerizing” the text. His allegation that Nikhilananda omitted portions containing “some of the most revealing and significant passages of the entire text” (KC 4) is not only textually unjustified but completely untrue.

Part of Kripal's *Kathamrita*-gate thesis is his idea that the Ramakrishna Order and M's descendants are still zealously guarding M's original diaries from the probing eyes of researchers. Says Kripal: "...no researcher has ever seen, and may never see, the original manuscripts of M's diaries. They do exist. Thanks to the foresight of Swami Prabhananda and the Ramakrishna Order, they have been carefully photographed. Unfortunately, however, they are kept under lock and key. Like the contents of Ramakrishna's thief's chamber, they contain a secret that is kept hidden from the public's eye" (KC 311).

Like all conspiracy theorists, Kripal sees intrigue lurking in every corner. The truth is much more mundane. Neither the diaries nor their copies are in the Ramakrishna Order's archives. The original diaries are with M's descendants, and scholars—including a monk of the Ramakrishna Order whom I know—have seen those diaries, even photographed them, without undue difficulty.

Kripal's desire to see "secrets" at every turn has not only distorted his interpretation of the *Kathamrita* and its *Gospel* incarnation, it has also warped his perception of Tantra. Thus we find another serious problem when we deal with Kripal's understanding (or misunderstanding) of the term.

"Tantra Was Ramakrishna's Secret"

Since this statement initially appears incomprehensible, we'll have to decipher what Kripal means. "Tantra for Ramakrishna," the author intuits, "was not some simple thing that one practiced in private and then intentionally denied in public; rather, it was a grave and ominous tradition of teachings and techniques that haunted him, that horrified him, and yet that somehow formed who he was" (KC 5).

What is "Tantra" to Jeffrey Kripal is the real problem here. Defining his "basic thesis" of *Kali's Child*, the author writes: "Ramakrishna's mystical experiences were constituted by mystico-erotic energies that he neither fully accepted nor understood." According to Kripal, the Hindu Tantra proclaims "the link between the mystical and the sexual." He understands the Tantras to be a tradition in which "human eroticism and religious experience are intimately related, even identical on some deep energetic level." Kripal asserts the "basic relationship between the

mystical and the sexual” and proposes that “Ramakrishna was a Tantrika” (KC 4-5).

What is Kripal’s understanding of the word “Tantrika”? He says that it is a term associated with “magical power, strangeness, seediness, and sex.” He dismisses the “philosophical expositions” of Tantra as inauthentic because they are “designed to rid Tantra of everything that smacked of superstition, magic, or scandal” (KC 28-29). But since Kripal's thesis would have no support were these to be eliminated, he instead tries to show that these are central to the Tantric tradition. But is this really the case? Since the weight of scholarly opinion on Tantra would deflect Kripal from his predetermined course, he informs us that he is "naturally more interested in what Tantra *feels* like in Bengali than in what it *thinks* like in Sanskrit” (KC 29).

Unfortunately, Kripal is not in a position to judge what Tantra *feels* like in Bengali. Sadly, he has spent a mere eight months in the city of Calcutta; he understands neither the language nor the culture. He also has a very serious lack of knowledge concerning Hinduism in general. As for what "it *thinks* like in Sanskrit," it's good that Kripal beats a retreat. It's painfully clear that he also has little knowledge of Sanskrit. The entire package does not position him well for a sound understanding of Ramakrishna.

Were the above not enough, Kripal’s apparent ignorance of the systems of Indian philosophy truly makes it hard not to smile. His identifying of three “textual traditions (the Puranas, the Tantras, and the Vedas)” with three “types of practitioners (the Vaishnavas, the Shaktas, and the Vedantins)” (KC 94) betrays a serious lack of understanding of some of Hinduism's most basic underpinnings. Kripal may be at his most

laughable when he tells us that Ramakrishna's practice of Vedanta consisted of only taking the monastic vows and eating rice in the portico of the Dakshineswar temple.

So we are not surprised when Kripal seeks to "define" Tantra by quoting Ramakrishna (KC 30-33). In itself this is a good idea, but the problem is that, as elsewhere in the book, Kripal lifts sentences out of context and puts his own spin on them. The result is that we have a version of a so-called Tantra that Kripal is eager to paint as a tradition known for "its stubbornly 'impure' ways" (KC 29). No wonder, therefore, that Kripal identifies Tantra exclusively with Vamachara, "the left-handed path" (see #16 in the notes which follow). In the major Tantras such as *Kularnava*, *Mahanirvana* and *Kamalakala Vilasa*, Vamachara finds no place at all. But in Kripal's vision, Tantra=Vamachara.

It is clear that at least a part of Kripal's confusion is regarding the relation between the Shakta tradition and the Tantra tradition. As Teun Goudriaan says—and Douglas Renfrew Brooks reiterates—"not all Shaktas are Tantrics and ... Tantrism, unlike Shaktism, is not restricted to any one Hindu denomination, or even to any single Indian religious tradition."⁹

Thus a worshipper of the Goddess is a Shakta but that doesn't automatically make him or her a Tantric. Ramakrishna was born in a Vaishnava family and, because he worshipped Kali, he could be called a Shakta. It must be remembered also that both these traditions—along with others, such as the Shaiva—are parts of Vedanta. As N.N.

⁹ Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Shakta Tantrism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 48.

Bhattacharya points out in his *History of the Tantric Religion*: "... The traditional Indian approach finds no difficulty in equating the essentials of Tantrism with the Vedantic interpretation of the contents of the major Shaiva-Shakta schools."¹⁰

Much can be said about Kripal's attempt to pigeonhole Ramakrishna's life into what he calls the "Tantric world." But it is enough for the time being to point out Narasingha Sil's observation: "In order to fit the square peg of a Tantrika Ramakrishna into the round hole of a homosexual Paramahansa, Kripal manufactures evidence by distorting the meaning of sources."¹¹ This will become obvious by studying the notes to this paper.

Does this mean that Tantra played no part in Ramakrishna's life? Of course it played a part. Ramakrishna did practice Tantra under the guidance of a qualified teacher, just as he practiced the disciplines of other traditions. Through every form of discipline he discovered the raising of his consciousness from the relative to the absolute. His practice of Tantra had a direct bearing in Bengal because it was there that the Kaula division among the Shaktas attained its highest development. It was associated not only with temples and devotional worship but also with esoteric cults and circles (*chakras*) of Tantric adepts. It was in a few of these circles that Vamachara was practiced and for that reason forms only an insignificant strain of Shakta Tantra.

The basic idea of Shaktism and Tantra is that the world is a play of Shakti, the Divine Mother's power, and can be converted into a means of transcending the world and attaining the Supreme Reality. The idea

¹⁰ N.N. Bhattacharya, *History of the Tantric Religion* (Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 8.

behind Tantric practices is that the libido (*kama*) is the most powerful instinctual drive in human beings. Unless it is controlled and sublimated, it is impossible to transcend the world of senses. But the roots of the libido lie deep and ramified in the unknown chambers of the unconscious. Tantric practices are a way of creating certain external situations which bring out the contents of these chambers of the unconscious. Once we confront and understand the contents of the unconscious, they cease to haunt us and become integrated into the self as “knowledge” or “wisdom.” Tantric disciplines are thus only a way of making conscious what normally remains unconscious.

Through his Tantra practice, Ramakrishna helped revive this healthy core of the tradition minus the accretions: “magical power, strangeness, seediness, and sex.” If Kripal had focused his attention on the Tantra proper and not on these accretions, he wouldn’t have felt the need to distort the Bengali text of the *Kathamrita*.

The Mystical and the Erotic?

I could continue to marshal unending evidence about the mistranslations, deceptive documentations and cultural misreadings in *Kali’s Child*, but that still wouldn’t get to the crux of the book’s problem from the Hindu point of view. The book’s assumption that spiritual experience can be associated with sexual conflict—either conscious or subconscious—simply doesn’t work. While Kripal comes to this conclusion through what I consider to be a crude understanding of Western psychology, he utterly neglects Hinduism’s yoga psychology

¹¹ Narasingha Sil, “Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava?—An Examination,” *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 21, nos. 2-3 (November 1997), 220.

which would have given him a deeper understanding of not only Ramakrishna but also Hindu philosophy in general.

Kripal appreciatively quotes John Hawley's remark that *Kali's Child* is a challenge "to dive into the vortex that opens up when religious creativity is aligned with our deepest bodily desires, not pitted against them" (KC xviii).

This approach, however, completely mitigates against the basic thrust of Hindu philosophy. According to every school of Hinduism *including Tantra*, sexual attraction and sexual expression, when directed to another individual, pull the spiritual seeker away from the ultimate reality. Hinduism clearly states that you can't have it both ways: there's only one force that permeates the universe, and that force is internal as well as external. If that force or energy is diverted to sexual expression—even if it's only mentally—the energy required for attaining higher spiritual states is lost.

According to every school of Hinduism—again including Tantra—the goal of human life is to be free. In the Hindu tradition, "freedom" (*mukti* or *moksha*) means freedom from our limited individuality, which is confined to the body-mind complex. The more our physical and mental energies are directed toward catering to biological demands, the stronger becomes the bond that ties us to our limitedness and the less energy we have to transcend it to become free.

Again it must be emphasized that this is not just a physical phenomenon but a psychological one as well. In order to channel the energy available to us, every aspect of the human personality must be completely engaged. *By definition*, a person who is psychologically conflicted will not be able to attain enlightenment. Especially if the

nature of that conflict is sexual, since sexual desire is exceptionally powerful.

As we can see, since the issue here is the misdirection of energy, it doesn't matter whether that energy is directed in either a heterosexual or in a homosexual way. The only thing that matters is that it's being directed toward an object of sensual desire. To say, therefore, that those who reject Kripal's thesis are doing so from their own homophobia is to completely miss the point.

I find it interesting that Kripal became fascinated "with the relation between human sexuality and mystical experience ... partly through [his] reading of ... John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila" (KC xxxvi). I am an admirer of these great Spanish mystics and my reading of them has only served to reinforce my own Hindu beliefs in the necessity of sexual restraint when seeking higher spiritual experiences. I am not an expert in Christian mysticism, but these noted scholars are: Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B. and Gregory Elmer, O.S.B. To first quote Sr. Funk:

The mystical writings of John and Teresa are of a higher phase in illumination and there's not the physical senses engaged anymore. The purgative stage that deals with the eight thoughts purifies those inclinations and so there are more trials and tribulations, as in spiritual gluttony and fornication, but it's of a different order.

The tantric paths in all religions use sexual energies for various rituals and inner experiences, but the authentic ones are not actual physical sex even though the imagery and sometimes the rituals of consorts etc. are manifestly sexual. As you'd know from Hindu studies in energies it's all about raising the Kundalini energy very slowly in service of higher states of consciousness and if that same energy is not transmuted, but expressed sexually toward another or

toward the self, those energies are cooled and not helpful for the inner work.¹²

Regarding "erotic mysticism" in Christianity, Gregory Elmer, O.S.B. writes:

The erotic energies are resolved in Colossians, in that "in Christ is your completion." Practically this means an active, graced effort to surrender all known energies to Jesus. Once the impasse is solved, then erotic imagery can be used, because it will be understood as referring to "mystical marriage," a state like marriage, but infinitely transcending it and not requiring genitality. When St. Teresa speaks of it she is at pains to make sure her readers don't take this in a carnal way.¹³

The quotations given above mirror beautifully what Hinduism says about "erotic mysticism." Put simply, in the Hindu tradition the mystical and the sexual just don't mix. Yes, sometimes sexual imagery is used to make a point—but that point has nothing to do with sexuality *per se*. The intense longing of the soul to unite with God is sometimes expressed in erotic language—for example, the *rasa-lila* described in the *Bhagavata*. But those who see mere eroticism in it only see the finger instead of the moon to which the finger is pointing.

¹² E-mail of Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B. to Pravrajika Vrajaprana, 25 Oct. 2000. Sr. Funk is the author of *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of Spiritual Life*. In a second e-mail dated 31 Oct. 2000, Sr. Funk added the following regarding celibacy and married couples: "To married couples I teach that they, too, are celibate except when engaging with each other. All other thoughts, words and deeds are renounced for the sake of commitment to the one. This singleness of heart also leads to purity of heart as you are celibate most of the time for one reason or another. This channeling of energies toward the beloved brings great release of energy in love and children. Your witness in apostolic love is the fruit of your focus and chaste way of being in the world. There are great saints that experienced the same energies of the mystical monk because of their total zeal of well ordered love. You, too, transmute sexual energies towards higher states of consciousness and sometimes this is solemnized in a vow of celibacy and is blessed by the Church. To make your sexual energy work toward sanctification you need to focus entirely toward your spouse and restrain any other desire. This makes one self-less and the grace of God springs up in a felt presence beyond any known in sexual union.

"In Christianity there's no denigration of sexual expression but there is something promised beyond it that [a] married celibate or monastic celibate can experience not in the next lifetime, but here and now."

¹³ E-mail of Gregory Elmer, O.S.B. to Pravrajika Vrajaprana, 9 Nov. 2000.

Hated and Feared Women?

Providing the names of two scholars who believe Ramakrishna to be a misogynist (McLean and Sarkar), Kripal tells us that "scholars [have] ... usually sided with the misogynist reading" (KC 278). If we take Kripal's word for it, we must then assume that apart from the two scholars named, the weight of scholarly opinion concludes that Ramakrishna "hated and feared women." Since I doubt a significant number of South Asian scholars have even *addressed* Ramakrishna's attitude toward women, let's examine the issue without having to bear the burden of scholarly consensus.

Significantly, Kripal quotes Mozoomdar's letter decrying Ramakrishna's "almost barbarous treatment of his wife" (KC 278). What was the issue that provoked Mozoomdar's censure? That Ramakrishna and Sarada did not have a sexual relationship. Considering the two individuals concerned, that hardly constitutes barbarity. Kripal notes Ramakrishna's "often cruel treatment of his own wife" (KC 8) and it's obvious that Kripal feels *very* badly for poor Sarada. He mentions the sweets that were "given by visitors to his wife, working in the kitchen" (KC 273). Kripal also faults Ramakrishna for thinking of his old mother rather than his wife when he decided to return to Dakshineswar (KC 168).

It's touching that Kripal can evoke such sympathy for Sarada, but why didn't he ever bother to consult *her* for her opinion on the matter? The literature abounds, not only the many words of Sarada Devi concerning her loving relationship with Ramakrishna, but also Ramakrishna's women disciples who repeatedly spoke of his love, care

and concern for them. Unfortunately, since quoting these sources would destroy Kripal's argument for Ramakrishna being a misogynist, he simply ignores them altogether. While Kripal decries Nikhilananda for concealing "many of Ramakrishna's outrageously misogynous statements beneath polite English phrases" (KC 278), Kripal indulges in the outright suppression of information that would provide an entirely different perspective. Isn't this just a convenient form of "censorship"?

Had Kripal bothered to quote the literature concerning Sarada Devi and Ramakrishna's other women disciples, he would have had abundant information showing Ramakrishna's profound love and respect for them all.

For example, we read in *The Gospel of Holy Mother* (a translation of the definitive *Sri Sri Mayer Katha*) that once when Sarada entered Ramakrishna's room, he thought it was his niece Lakshmi who had entered and so casually asked her to shut the door, addressing her as "tui." ("Tui" is a pronoun that one uses for those younger or inferior. The pronoun "tumi" is used for one's equals and "apni" is used for superiors.) When Sarada responded to Ramakrishna's request he was embarrassed and said, "Ah! Is it you? I thought it was Lakshmi. Please pardon me." Sarada said that there was nothing wrong but Ramakrishna remained concerned. The next morning he went to Sarada's room and told her, "Well, I could not sleep all night. I was so worried that I spoke to you rudely." In later years she would often say—especially when dealing with her own ill-mannered relatives, "I was married to a husband who never

addressed me as '*tui.*' Ah! How he treated me! Not even once did he tell me a harsh word or wound my feelings."¹⁴

In fact, while Kripal pities the young wife in the kitchen, her own interpretation is quite different. During the time Ramakrishna was alive, she says, "I always felt as if a pitcher of bliss was kept in my heart. I cannot convey any idea of how much and in what manner my mind feasted on that steady, unchanging divine joy."¹⁵ I don't think she needs our sympathy on that account.

Further, it was Ramakrishna himself who insisted that Sarada give spiritual initiation to some of his own male disciples and it was Ramakrishna who insisted that after his death, she continue his ministry. The literature on Sarada Devi is significant and impressive; since she died in 1920 and many of her disciples were alive until relatively recently, the record of her words and her memories remains fresh. This literature is a wealth of information about not only Sarada but about Ramakrishna's other women disciples.

What about Ramakrishna's other women disciples? They are in universal agreement about the love and care that Ramakrishna gave them. In the *Lilaprasanga* we read what Yogin-Ma, one of Ramakrishna's women disciples, said about Ramakrishna:

Every one now says that he did not allow women to touch him or even come near him. We laugh when we hear this and think, "Ah we are not dead yet!" How will anyone understand how kind he was! He had the same attitude toward men and women. But it is true that if women stayed near him for long, he would say, "Please go now and

¹⁴ Her Devotee-Children, *The Gospel of The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984), xx.

¹⁵ Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother: Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), 33.

have darshan in the temples." We have heard him ask men also to do likewise (LP 3.1.32).¹⁶

While much has been made of *kamini-kancana*—"woman and gold"—as a misogynist mantra, what is repeatedly overlooked is that Ramakrishna, when speaking to women, warned them against *purusha-kancana*, "man and gold." We hear less of this because both the *Kathamrita* and the *Lilaprasanga* were written by men; had a woman been the main recorder of Ramakrishna's message we would today be hearing ad nauseum about "man and gold."

Gauri-Ma, another of Ramakrishna's prominent women disciples, had this to say about "woman and gold":

[Ramakrishna] has uttered this note of warning, against gold and sensuality, against a life of enjoyment, but surely not against women. Just as he advised the ascetic-minded men to guard themselves against women's charms, so also did he caution pious women against men's company. The Master's whole life abounds with proofs to show that he had not the slightest contempt or aversion for women; rather he had intense sympathy and profound regard for them.¹⁷

While Kripal makes much of Ramakrishna and the young males, he completely ignores Ramakrishna's relationship with his women disciples. Gauri-Ma was not only given *diksha*, mantra initiation, by Ramakrishna, he also initiated her into *sannyasa*, monastic life. Those who might be tempted to think of Ramakrishna as one who "hated and

¹⁶ See also Swami Chetanananda, *They Lived with God* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1989), 146-7.

¹⁷ *Gauri Mata* (Calcutta: Saradeswari Asram, 1944), 93.

feared women" should consider the following incident from Gauri-Ma's life:

One day in Dakshineswar, Gauri-Ma came upon Ramakrishna who was pouring water from a mug on the ground. "Look here, Gauri," he said, "I am pouring on water, you prepare the clay." Puzzled, Gauri replied: "From where shall I get the clay? It's all filled with gravel." Ramakrishna smiled and said, "I told you something, but you understood it differently. The women of this country are in a sorry plight; it is among them that your work must lie." Gauri-Ma didn't like the idea and so agreed only to take a select group of young girls to the Himalayas. But Ramakrishna was adamant: "No, no. You must stay in this city and work here. You have done enough *tapasya*. Now use this life for the service of women."¹⁸ If Ramakrishna were a misogynist, why would he tell Gauri to serve the women of Calcutta? Why would he even care about their condition?

Kripal tries to demonstrate that Ramakrishna felt hostility towards the wives of his disciples, but the texts don't support him. In fact, on occasion Ramakrishna *asked* his disciples to bring their wives to Dakshineswar so he could meet them. M's wife is a case in point; so overwhelming was her grief at the death of her son that Ramakrishna, out of deep concern for her, asked M to bring her to Dakshineswar where she could stay for several days. Since this point is mentioned quite clearly in the *Kathamrita*, we can only speculate why Kripal ignores it.

Finally, regarding Ramakrishna's thinking of his mother rather than his wife while in Vrindavan, we can quote Narasingha Sil on this subject: "Kripal betrays his ignorance of Bengali culture and social habits when

he considers Ramakrishna's hurrying back home from Vrindavan on learning of his mother['s] illness somewhat reprehensible because he never mentioned his wife Sarada left behind at home and concludes: 'Once again, it is the Mother not the Lover that occupies Ramakrishna's mind and heart' (KC 168). Anybody who is familiar with a Bengali household will know that it is quite common and even praiseworthy for a son to remember his mother more than his wife."¹⁹

Our Life Affects Our Interpretations

Kripal feels that it is essential for us to "place the disciples, and especially the writing disciples, in either the inner or outer circle" (KC 11). He wonders about M's status—to which circle did he belong? And how did his status affect the nature of his writing?

Three texts are most referenced in *Kali's Child*: two of these—M's *Kathamrita* and Dutta's *Jivanvrittanta*—Kripal classifies as "the householder texts," and Saradananda's *Lilaprasanga* as a "renouncer text." He believes each of these authors was conditioned to interpret Ramakrishna's words and actions in a particular way because all these texts "were created in a particular social context ... and were intended for a specific audience" (KC 171).

Kripal makes what I believe is an important observation: "...*the social place of a particular author determines in large part the nature of the teaching he received and the manner in which he interpreted them*" (KC 11, emphasis Kripal's). It is on this basis that he questions the

¹⁸ Ibid., 38-9. See also *They Lived with God*, 163.

¹⁹ Letter of Narasingha Sil to Swami Atmajnanananda, quoted earlier.

“historical accuracy and scholarly objectivity” of the “renouncer texts” of Vivekananda and Saradananda (KC 171).

Of course, this principle doesn't seem to apply to the “text” of *Kali's Child*, since Kripal assures us that he is offering “a historically accurate, psychologically nuanced reading” (KC 2). I find this interesting: How easy it is to be dismissive of *others'* texts by invoking the “social place of a particular author” as a factor in the kind of teaching received and the manner in which it is interpreted; but when it comes to one's *own*, one naively believes the text to be completely accurate and objective.

It's none of my business to determine the “social place” of the author of *Kali's Child*, but if Kripal's observation is true, then future historians might be interested in probing the forces which made the bizarre interpretations in *Kali's Child* possible.

We may wonder about the author's personal or religious background; we may wonder about the author's social or academic background. We may wonder about the larger intellectual and historical context that would produce a backdrop for such interpretations. In any case, our experiences in life necessarily shape the way we interpret texts and this is as much true in the case of Kripal as it is with those whom Kripal attempts to understand.

A Word in Closing

Kripal, in discussing the angry reaction his book received in India and among Ramakrishna devotees, views their outrage as an expression of their fear of homosexuality. Entreating these people to not reject the “homosexual roots of Ramakrishna's mysticism,” Kripal tells us that in doing so, they're rejecting “their own brothers and sisters, their own sons

and daughters, and ironically, their own saint." Now with pious admonitions rising like the full swell of a church choir, Kripal pleads: "I can only encourage them not to walk down this path, as so much of our humanity (and divinity) lies in a decidedly different direction" (KC xiv-xv).

Indeed it does. We therefore entreat Dr. Kripal: Please, don't walk down this path. You don't have to distort the texts or invent warped translations. The next time you think of deconstructing someone, learn his or her language and their culture first. It helps. And you need not look upon us—who would willingly be your well-wishers—as people who are trying to hide something from you. We encourage your spirit of inquiry, we appreciate your intelligence. Why not use these qualities in an honest and responsible way? *That's* where our humanity (and divinity) lies.

NOTES

Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna
by Jeffrey J. Kripal (Second Edition, 1998)

The notes below either quote or refer to what is discussed in *Kali's Child* (KC) at the specified page number. This is followed by a "response." The titles of books are usually abbreviated: *Kathamrita* (KA) and *Lilaprasanga* (LP).

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

(1) KC xi-xii: Kripal seems to have confused criticism with censorship, so what kind of "censorship" are we discussing? *Kali's Child* informs us that there were newspaper reports "on the central government's move to consider banning the book" (KC xii). We are told that this is part of a larger pattern of trying to keep the "secret" intact; "censorship" has been an integral part of the Ramakrishna Order's modus operandi, we're informed, since its inception.

The simple fact remains, however, that the government of India didn't ban the book nor was there ever a serious question of its doing so. And, to make this completely clear to all readers: The Ramakrishna Mission never suggested or requested that the book be banned. While Kripal asserts that the book has been "denied, wished away in an entire country" (KC xxiv), the more mundane truth is that the book remains largely unknown throughout India. While it has elicited praise from a number of Western academics, the vast majority of Indians know nothing about *Kali's Child*. It's not a question of censorship but of availability and exposure.

No doubt there was an outcry when Narasingha Sil's review appeared in the Calcutta edition of the *Statesman*. There were thirty-eight irate letters to the editor published, after which the newspaper decided to close the discussion. Thirty-eight letters from a population of one billion does not "an entire country" make. Surely *Time* and *Newsweek* receive that number of irate letters daily on any number of topics. While Kripal asserts that others haven't been allowed to speak in his defense in the *Statesman*, Kripal himself notes that the newspaper had wearied of the controversy and had closed the subject. I might add, however, that I have on my desk a not unfavorable discussion of *Kali's Child* which appeared in the *Statesman* on June 5, 2000 (Rajat Kanta Ray, "Psychohistory and Sri Ramakrishna"). Further, Kripal mentions the favorable review which T.G. Vaidyanathan published in *The Hindu*. (Vaidyanathan, by the way, shares with Kripal the editorship of *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader on Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*.) Obviously there hasn't been a news blackout regarding *Kali's Child* or its author.²⁰

Moreover, Western readers should keep in mind that the *Kali's Child* controversy was, for the most part, restricted to Calcutta and only to English-speaking readers. This has already narrowed the field to an extremely small group of people within a vast country. The Western reader should also keep in mind that the majority of people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission are not English

²⁰ In recent weeks, *Kali's Child* has resurfaced in the Indian press because of the prominence the book has received in the "related books" column of the "Ramakrishna" entry in the online edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In discussing the controversy, the *Times of India* (5 November 2000) quotes the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Smaranananda, as saying: "We requested the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to give priority to more authentic books like *Ramakrishna the Great Master*, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and the biographies by Romain Rolland, Christopher Isherwood and many other well-known writers." It doesn't seem unwarranted to request that the source books on Ramakrishna—the very books that Kripal references extensively—be given priority over his speculative interpretation. The closing paragraph of the newspaper article says, "The books are currently not available here but Oxford Bookstores said the few copies they had did not go down well with readers." Clearly *Kali's Child* has been available for sale in bookstores. The fact is, the readers didn't *like* the book and they made their displeasure known to bookstore owners.

readers. Sil's review appeared *only* in the Calcutta-based, English-language daily, the *Statesman*. Of those readers, how many would be able to purchase a scholarly book published by the University of Chicago Press? Anyone familiar with the realities of India knows that scholarly, relatively expensive (for the Indian market) books are not readily available, especially when there is no Indian edition in print. If the book isn't publicly known and read, the explanation is to be found in the marketplace, not in the furtive machinations of the Ramakrishna Order or the Indian government.

Further, books are not so easily banned in India. State governments such as West Bengal cannot ban a book. No government official can ban a book; a motion to ban a book must be passed in Parliament. In recent memory, only Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was banned and that was done only after a long debate with much agonizing.

It is quite true that some person, whoever he or she was, suggested that the book be banned. Nothing, of course, came of the request because it was absurd; it was a tiny tempest in a Calcutta teapot. I have it on record that the Union Government of India never requested a ban of the book. If this is how "censorship" is defined, we've got a problem. Outrage, yes; censorship, no.

(2) KC xiii: Kripal backs up his claim for Isherwood's "homosexual reading" of Ramakrishna by providing us with the following anecdote: A well-known scholar, having heard Kripal's talk on Ramakrishna and his homosexual orientation, informs the author and the audience, "Chris Isherwood was a close friend of mine, and I want you to know that, if he could have been here today, Chris would have been very pleased" (KC xiii).

That's easy to say since he *wasn't* there. Christopher Isherwood had many close friends in the Vedanta Societies—a number of whom are openly

homosexual—who would say with equal assurance that such a remark would have made Isherwood roll in his grave. But rather than speculate on what would or would not have pleased Isherwood, we can simply look at what he wrote in *My Guru and His Disciple* and then compare it to what Kripal tells us that he wrote.

Says *Kali's Child*, "Chris Isherwood was openly homosexual, and he was quite frank about his homosexual reading of Ramakrishna. . . . Still, for Isherwood, *there was not quite enough evidence* 'to honestly claim him as a homosexual, even a sublimated one'" (KC xiii-xiv, emphasis mine).

And what does Isherwood actually write about Ramakrishna in *My Guru*? "I couldn't honestly claim him as a homosexual, even a sublimated one, *much as I would have liked to be able to do so.*"²¹ We are thus stretched from Isherwood's clear dismissal of Ramakrishna's homosexuality to Kripal's "not quite enough evidence." Kripal backs up his claim by suggesting that an unnamed author whom Isherwood had mentioned in *My Guru* may have been Isherwood himself. This anonymous person had written that Ramakrishna was "a homosexual who had had . . . to overcome his lust for . . . Vivekananda."²²

Those who knew Isherwood find the surreptitious identity thesis laughable; he was radically honest about himself and would have been the first person to openly declare his beliefs, no matter how uncomfortable it made others or himself. Instead, Isherwood clearly writes: "Certainly, the author's statement about Ramakrishna and Vivekananda was irresponsible and unsupported by any convincing evidence."

Kripal's final sally is to paint Isherwood as a victim of censorship. In *My Guru and His Disciple*, Isherwood states that he wished that he could have discussed the question of Ramakrishna's sexuality in *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. "But that

²¹ *My Guru and His Disciple* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 249, emphasis mine.

²² *Ibid.*, 247.

was out of the question," he said. "For my book had now become an official project of the Ramakrishna Order. Each chapter was sent off to India as soon as it was finished, to be submitted to the approval of Swami Madhavananda, the present head of the Order. . . . Many of Madhavananda's comments and corrections were helpful. But, every so often, I was made aware that there were limits to his permissiveness."²³

In 1962, in America as well as in India, it was not considered decorous to discuss sexuality, period. Isherwood was never forbidden to write about Ramakrishna's sexuality; he himself chose to not bring it up because he knew the matter would be considered in poor taste. He understood that if the Ramakrishna Order were to use his book as part of its literary canon (which Isherwood obviously wanted or else he would have published his biography of Ramakrishna independently), he would need to follow the rules of American and Indian decorum, circa 1962. That certainly didn't prevent Isherwood from discussing the matter very frankly elsewhere, which is what he did later in *My Guru and His Disciple*. Again, I fail to see how this can be construed as "censorship" or a continuing legacy of the "secret."

INTRODUCTION

(3) KC 7-10: After saying that (1) the householders and renouncers “fought a great deal, disagreeing in almost everything,” (2) were hostile to each other, and (3) produced a “primordial split” in the community of disciples—tracing the cause of all this to Ramakrishna’s personality—the author backtracks, *denying* that there was any “clear-cut distinction” between the two groups. Kripal then says that the two traditions—householders and renouncers—were “constantly overlapping, responding to one another, fighting, *agreeing*, doubting, proclaiming, repressing.”

²³ Ibid., 249.

If they were “disagreeing on almost everything,” how were they also simultaneously “constantly ... agreeing”?

(4) KC 12: M’s *Kathamrita*, from this renouncer point of view, is little more than a collection of “Sunday notes” (endnote #16). This is a serious charge.

Response: Were it true it would indeed be a serious charge! In the endnote, Kripal gives the following reference: Dharam Pal Gupta, *Life of M and Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Chandigarh: Ma Trust, 1988), 288; see also pp. 308-11 for an insightful refutation of this view.

On p. 288 of the book that Kripal references above, we find this:

When the entire *Kathamrita* was published in Bengali and English, some well-meaning people also criticized it as M’s “Sunday notes” which do not contain all the teachings of Ramakrishna which he gave to the young renouncing disciples...

There is no reference whatsoever to what Kripal calls the “renouncer point of view.” Kripal doesn’t tell us how “some well-meaning people” automatically means those belonging to the “renouncer tradition.”

Interestingly, he asks us to see pp. 308-11 “for an insightful refutation of this view.” When we look up these pages, we do indeed see an insightful refutation. But refutation of what? Paradoxically, Kripal’s own view!

Whose words are quoted to dismiss the contention that the *Kathamrita* is nothing more than “Sunday notes”? Words of those belonging to the “renouncer tradition” beginning with Swami Vivekananda and other monks of the Ramakrishna Order down through the decades. Among the glowing tributes paid

by the “renouncer tradition” to the *Kathamrita* are the following: “I now understand why none of us attempted his life before. It has been reserved for you, this great work” (from Vivekananda’s letter to M, p. 308-9); “[M] was Ramakrishna’s own. It was, as it were, Ramakrishna who had brought him along with himself for getting this work done” (Shivananda, p. 311); “[*Kathamrita*] has been a perennial gospel for all mankind...” (Ananyananda, p. 311); “The mastery of the work [*Kathamrita*] is not simply due to M’s massive intellect, but more so because M loved the Master—that unflinching devotion made it possible” (Tathagatananda, p. 310); “[*Kathamrita*] contains a vast treasure of instruction on sadhana and practical wisdom and philosophy, profitable equally to householders and to monks” (Atmarupananda, p. 309).

Thus the reference Kripal provides in the endnote, paradoxically, refutes his own contention that the “renouncer tradition” dismissed the *Kathamrita* as nothing but “Sunday notes.” Far from dismissing the book, the first volume of the *Kathamrita* was in fact printed and published by Swami Trigunatitananda from the Udbodhan Press—that is, by one who, according to Kripal, is a part of the “renouncer tradition” and from a press that was started by the “renouncers.”

For a fuller treatment of this subject, see the Bengali book *Ramakrishna o tanr Kathamrita* (Howrah: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Ashrama, 1983), which contains glowing tributes paid to the *Kathamrita* by, among others, five monastic disciples of Ramakrishna and ten other monks and nuns of the Order in succeeding generations.

(5) KC p. 13: Kripal compares the *Kathamrita* and the *Lilaprasanga* as if they were similar texts, but they are not. The *Kathamrita* is a record of Ramakrishna’s conversations, not a biography. On the other hand, the *Lilaprasanga* is

Ramakrishna's biography (studied against the backdrop of Hindu philosophy and culture), not merely a record of his conversations.

(6) KC p. 15: the Tantric foundations of both the temple and the saint were always more basic, deeper, more secret.

Response: What was "secret" about it? Kripal delights in sprinkling the word "secret" throughout *Kali's Child*, but an examination of the cited texts shows that what Kripal refers to as "secret" wasn't secret at all. The author tells us that the "basic thesis" of the book revolves around the purported "secret teaching" of Ramakrishna; to give credence to this idea he repeatedly employs the word "secret." For a further discussion of "secret," "secret talk," and *guhya katha*, please see notes #59 and #107 below.

(7) KC p. 26: Kripal faults M for including in the *Kathamrita* scenes from the Baranagore Monastery. He complains that the "last scenes of the *Kathamrita*, dated in the months of 1887 and staged as appendixes in the different volumes," were used for "the appropriation of Ramakrishna as a Vedantin and the suppression of his troubling Tantric dimensions."

Response: This is an interesting complaint since Kripal, when it suits him, sees M's record as being honest and "revealing" as opposed to the descriptions of the "renouncers" who, according to Kripal's thesis, have a great deal invested in hiding the "secret." When it does *not* suit Kripal, M inexplicably becomes untrustworthy, and his book serves to suppress the truth.

(8) KC p. 26: Ramakrishna knew that Narendra did not accept Shakti (KA 4.121 plus endnote #38 which references LP 5.8.2.19). After Ramakrishna's death, this rejection of the goddess resulted in a radical transformation of the young movement.

Response: The reference Kripal gives to support his first sentence has absolutely nothing to do with the second sentence.

On August 3, 1884, Ramakrishna said that Narendra did not accept Shakti. Later Narendra *did accept* Shakti and this fact is amply documented in all the Ramakrishna literature. See for instance LP 5.8.2.20-23. Interestingly, in the endnote Kripal quotes LP 5.8.2.19, but he doesn't quote the *very next* paragraph which describes Narendra's acceptance of Shakti! It's obvious that the author has chosen to suppress it since it inconveniently conflicts with his thesis. The paragraph which Kripal chose to ignore says: "The Master's face was beaming with delight. . . . [Narendra] never accepted the Divine Mother before; it was only last night that he did so . . . Narendra has accepted Kali; it is very good, is that not so?" (LP 5.8.2.23)

Again, we can read Narendra's own words which appear in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*:

How I used to hate Kali . . . and all Her ways! That was the ground of my six years' fight—that I would not accept Her. But I had to accept Her at last! Ramakrishna Paramahansa dedicated me to Her, and now I believe that She guides me in everything I do, and does with me what She will. . . . Yet I fought so long! I loved him, you see, and that was what held me. I saw his marvelous purity. . . . I felt his wonderful love. . . . His greatness had not dawned on me then. . . . At that time I thought him a brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and the rest. I hated it. And then I, too, had to accept Her!²⁴

²⁴ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), 8.259.

Moreover, the movement's "rejection of the goddess" is a complete myth. Vivekananda and Ramakrishna's other monastic disciples were the first to initiate the worship of Kali and Durga in the monastery, and it has remained a regular feature in all the Ramakrishna centers both in India and abroad. Further, the daily *puja*, ritualistic worship, which is performed in the Ramakrishna centers is almost wholly based on elements derived from the Tantras. If by "rejection of the goddess" is meant that the practice of the Tantra does not find prominence in the movement, it is because Ramakrishna did not guide any of his disciples on an exclusive Tantric path.

What Kripal seems to be confused about is the worship of "the goddess" and its exclusive identification with Tantra. In Hinduism, "the goddess" is worshipped by all traditions, including those who worship Vishnu/Krishna/Narayana, Shiva, Ganapati and Surya—and, of course, by the Shaktas. Directly or indirectly, all these traditions derive their sustenance from the Vedic tradition and are therefore connected with Vedanta, the philosophic portion of the Vedas. It is thus possible to be a Vedantin and *simultaneously* be a worshipper of Vishnu/Krishna/Narayana, Shiva, Ganapati, Surya, or the Goddess (in any of her numerous forms).

(9) KC p. 26: Knowing full well that Ramakrishna had described himself as having a woman's nature and went so far as to dress like one, Narendra now confesses that he never believed all that "Krishna-fisna nonsense" (KA 3.269).

Response: The first half of the sentence has absolutely no textual connection with the second half. The reference Kripal gives reads as follows:

One day he (Ramakrishna) said to me, “If you want, you can see Krishna in your heart.” I said, “I don't believe in ‘Krishna-fisna.’”

Narendra's response is fully in keeping with the stage in his life when he did not accept a personal aspect of God. Narendra’s reply had nothing to do with Ramakrishna’s having described himself as having a “woman’s nature.” This is but one small instance of the kind of misleading documentation that abounds in *Kali's Child*.

(10) KC p. 26: Ramakrishna’s usual response to Narendra’s Sanskrit hymns and Vedanta talk was emphatic: “It’s all so boring!” (KA 3.253)

Response: “Usual” response? Kripal provides just one instance so we can hardly call this “usual.” Kripal does not tell the reader, although it's extensively documented throughout the Ramakrishna literature, that Ramakrishna himself gave Narendra an uncompromising Vedanta text, the *Ashtavakra Samhita*, to read. Even when Narendra refused to read it (since as a member of the Brahmo Samaj he was initially adverse to nondualistic thought), Ramakrishna would say, "Please read it to me for *my* sake." Kripal also neglects to inform the reader that in KA 2.235 Ramakrishna shows great appreciation for Narendra reciting some verses from this nondualistic Vedanta text. In the conversation which follows, Ramakrishna affirms one of the basic principles of Vedanta: “The attributes of matter (*jader satta*) are superimposed on Consciousness (*chaitanya*), and the attributes of Consciousness (*chaitanyer satta*) are superimposed on matter (*jada*). That is why when the body is ill, a person says, ‘I am ill’” (KA 2.237).

Why does Kripal neglect to provide this information to the reader? Because, first, it would sabotage his thesis that Ramakrishna was a Tantric and, second, it would sabotage his thesis that the Vedanta leanings of the movement were initiated by the “renouncers” after Ramakrishna’s death.

Further, nowhere in the reference KA 3.253 do we find Ramakrishna “emphatically” declaring the “Vedanta talk” to be “boring.” Ramakrishna instead said that such ideas are “very ordinary” (*ati samanya*). Ramakrishna consistently taught that approaching the Reality through the attitude of negation—“neti, neti”—is not enough: a higher view (which is sometimes called “iti, iti”) is also necessary.

Finally, what Kripal also neglects to mention is that after Ramakrishna expressed his displeasure of the Sanskrit hymn Narendra had begun to sing, Narendra *then* sang devotional songs describing the gopis’ love for Krishna. Narendra had no problem singing those songs, but Kripal again fails to mention it since it would call into question his “renouncer vs. Tantra” thesis.

(11) KC p. 26: Kripal describes as “luxuries” the “slick varnished slippers” and “black-bordered” cloth that Ramakrishna wore.

Response: First, “slick” is Kripal’s pejorative addition; it is not mentioned in KA 3.196-97. Second—and more interestingly—Kripal alters the words: KA 3.196-97 says “red”-bordered cloth. Now *why* would he do that? It’s easy enough to tell the difference between red and black—*lal* and *kalo*—in Bengali. The answer is found in Kripal’s reference to the English *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: “A cloth with black borders, bolster and so forth, regarded as articles of luxury, are used by householders. A paramahansa, on the other hand, is an all-renouncing monk

(p.1021, fn 3).” Ah, *now* we know why Kripal changed the words from red to black.

Moreover, by no stretch of the imagination could a red-bordered cloth and varnished slippers be considered “luxuries.” They were quite common in Bengal and certainly no luxury in the capital of British India.

(12) KC p. 26: One can imagine how upset poor Narendra must have been with Ramakrishna’s desire to call him Kamalaksha, one of those effeminate Vaishnava names meaning “Lotus Eyes.”

Response: Kamalaksha means “lotus eyes,” it is true, but it is by no means an “effeminate Vaishnava” name. This adjective is routinely applied to Vishnu, Rama and Krishna—all of whom are male deities in the Hindu tradition. In a general way, “lotus eyes” are considered a mark of spirituality.

There is no textual support to imagine that “poor Narendra” was “upset” by this remark.

(13) KC p. 27: The “I only eat, drink, and make merry” chant of Ramakrishna is replaced by an almost desperate “Renounce!” (KA 3.271)

Response: At KA 3.271 we see nothing “desperate” about the call for renunciation. Since the author has provided a reference from the Bengali *Kathamrita*, the reader assumes that there is something in the text to support the author's assertion. But there isn't.

(14) KC p. 27: The music also has changed. Narendra’s songs of manly renunciation, of Shiva, and of Shankara begin to replace those of Kali and

the milkmaids of Krishna, once so dear to Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna once sung of Kali triumphantly astride the pale Shiva. Now Narendra brags that, in the end, Shiva reclaimed his rightful dominance over Shakti and made her a servant, and that Krishna left the women of Vrindavana to become a mighty king in a distant city (KA 4.296).

Response: Wrong. There is no “change” in the music. Kripal presents a distorted picture of the kind of music being sung both pre- and post-Ramakrishna. Besides singing songs to Kali and Krishna, Ramakrishna also sang and made others sing songs to other deities including Shiva. And after his death, the same tradition continued. Narendra himself composed a song on the gopis of Vrindavan and was bathed in tears when he sang it. He also worshipped Kali, and Ramakrishna's disciples spent hours singing songs to Kali at the Baranagore monastery, the first monastery of the Ramakrishna Order. Vivekananda’s poems on the Goddess ("Kali the Mother," "How the Mother Shyama Plays," among others), as well as his life-transforming spiritual experience at the Kshir Bhavani temple in Kashmir, demonstrate his profound devotion to the Divine Mother. For more information on this topic, see Sister Nivedita’s *The Master as I Saw Him*.

(15) KC p. 27: And finally the texts have changed. Ramakrishna had prayed to Kali to teach him the contents of “the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Tantras.” But now Narendra, as Swami Vivekananda, rejects this sacred trilogy for another: “the Vedas, the Gita, and the Upanishads.”

Response: Wrong again. After Ramakrishna's death the Ramakrishna Order didn't change its focus in any way regarding the texts. The Vedas (which, by the way, *include* the Upanishads) and the Puranas continue to be studied.

Ramakrishna often referred to the Bhagavad Gita and held it in high esteem. What Kripal refers to as “Vivekananda’s trilogy” is in no way a departure from Ramakrishna’s teachings. The system of worship and meditation practices have continued to be influenced by the Tantric tradition.

(16) KC p. 27: M records Vivekananda’s categorical rejection of Tantra in an appendix in volume 5: “Give up this filthy Vamachara that is killing your country...”

Response: Kripal’s statement that “M records Vivekananda’s categorical rejection of Tantra...” is inaccurate. M prefaces Vivekananda’s statement with these words: “Swami Vivekananda gave a thoughtful (*sara-garbha*) lecture on Vedanta at the residence (*thakur-bari*) of Radhakanta Deb after he returned from abroad. There, after condemning the practice of using women for one’s sadhana, he said the following:...”

What must be carefully noted is that Vivekananda condemned “the filthy Vamachara.” The word Tantra appears twice in the quote recorded by M, and *both* the times Vivekananda qualifies the word with the adjective “Vamachara.” What Vivekananda condemned was *Vamachara* Tantra. Kripal’s prefatory statement is: “Vivekananda’s categorical rejection of Tantra...”

The author has therefore either suppressed the word to support his thesis *or*, for Dr. Kripal, Tantra is equivalent to “Vamachara.” Perhaps this is why, when the author associates Tantra with Ramakrishna, he focuses entirely on Vamachara practice.

(17) KC p. 27: Ramakrishna’s world, then, was a Tantric world.

Response: Although the author frequently invokes the phrase "Tantric world," he never really proves his point. Ramakrishna did Tantric sadhana (and this is no "secret" whatsoever), but he also practiced other sadhanas, such as Vaishnava, Vedanta, and also, in his own way, the Islamic and the Christian sadhanas. To say that Ramakrishna's world is a "Tantric world" is to overlook his other worlds. Considering the enormous amount of documented evidence available on the subject, to restrict his "world" to one sadhana is to ignore the weight of evidence documenting an extremely broad range of spiritual practice.

(18) KC p. 29: So, for example, we are asked to believe that ... all that is decadent in Tantra came from the Buddhists (LP 4.1.23-28).

Response: This is a misrepresentation. What the LP says is that the Buddhists were responsible for decadence *because* they ignored the Vedic idea of "competency" necessary for the various levels of practice. When those who were incapable of following rigorous spiritual disciplines attempted to do so, degeneration inevitably set in and eventually led to decadent practices. This is quite different from saying that decadence "came from the Buddhists."

(19) KC p. 36: Distrustful of such heroes and what they represent, Ramakrishna claimed that Kali's daunting iconographic form is only an external appearance ...

Response: It's interesting that what Ramakrishna experiences as a direct perception and experience becomes, in Kripal's eyes, only a "claim." Yet the author's "claims" regarding Ramakrishna's life are presented as facts, even though he lacks documented evidence to support his thesis.

(20) KC p. 40: For others in the texts, however, it does indeed point to a sexual conflict, for it is a perfect example of Ramakrishna’s “destroyed masculinity” (JV[5], 36).

Response: In JV[5] there is no reference whatsoever to “a sexual conflict.” What the Bengali text says is that many (*aneker*) felt that Ramakrishna had become impotent (*purushatva-hani*, the meaning of which Kripal distorts by creating a comically literal translation, “destroyed masculinity”) because of various nervous disorders (*nana-prakar snayaviya roga-vashatah*). Again we have another example of how the author inserts his own commentary and cloaks it with faulty documentation.

(21) KC p. 42: “There are two in here,” he would say simply: “There is she [the goddess], and there is [her] devotee” (KA 3.251).

Response: The Bengali word is *tini*, which is not gender specific. At KA 3.251 we see that Ramakrishna refers to Isvara (“God” or, more literally, “The Supreme Ruler”—and linguistically, in masculine gender) and then to Krishna and Chaitanya.

“There is she [the goddess]...” should therefore be considered interpretative. This may seem to be a minor matter, but it needs addressing since Kripal, when it suits him, resorts to either absurdly literal translations or biased interpretation.

(22) KC p. 44: According to the Paramahansa, mystical love awakens in the heart of the fourth, a still-speaking ecstasy is triggered in the throat of the fifth (KA 1.115), all words cease in the near-absorptive state that is the

sixth, and “complete absorption” (*samadhi*) in the mystico-erotic union of Shiva and Shakti (KA 4.116) defines the experience of that “very secret place” (KA 2.149-50), the thousand-petaled lotus in the head.

Response: This is a typical example of how Kripal distorts the text, making the words appear authentic (with all those references in parentheses) and making them appear to be Ramakrishna’s words: “According to the Paramahansa....”

But, astonishingly, the reference KA 1.115 leads nowhere. There is nothing there about mystical love awakening in the fourth or the ecstasy in the fifth. The KA 4.116 reference is correct, but the description (such as “mystico-erotic union”) is Kripal’s, not Ramakrishna’s. The last reference, KA 2.149-50, is actually from a traditional Bengali song which was being sung by Vaishnavacharan, not Ramakrishna.

And this long sentence, interrupted by three references, begins with the phrase “According to the Paramahansa.” As we have seen, what follows are neither fully the words nor even the ideas of Ramakrishna.

FIRST CHAPTER

(23) KC p. 50: The state of the corpse becomes the state of Shiva, the erotic ascetic, and death becomes the locus of the ultimate erotic experience—union with Kali.

Response: Kripal translates *shava* as “corpse”—a literal translation—but in the context given it simply means “a non-moving being.” We can see how little

Kripal understands the simple nuances inherent in Bengali: not only is the sentence bizarre; it also makes no sense philosophically to a Hindu.

(24) KC p. 51: Accordingly, Ramakrishna compares sexual abstinence to the act of sacrificing a spotless black goat to Kali (KA 4.96), symbolically connecting the goat's decapitation with the "cutting off" of the sexual powers embodied in the penis.

Response: At KA 4.96 we see Ramakrishna singing kirtan, and he pauses to appreciate one line from the song. I will quote from Nikhilananda's translation of the *Gospel*, p. 442. I've compared it with the original Bengali and have found it perfectly accurate, with the exception of the first part of the sentence which says: "The musician sang rightly." A more accurate translation would be: "The song says it rightly." I now quote the passage:

The song says it rightly: "A sannyasi must not look at a woman."

This is the sannyasi's dharma. What a lofty ideal!

Vijay: Yes, indeed, sir.

Master: Others learn from the sannyasi's example. That is why such strict rules are prescribed for him. A sannyasi must not look even at the portrait of a woman. What a strict rule! The slaughtering of a black goat is prescribed for the worship of the Divine Mother; but a goat with even a slight wound cannot be offered. A sannyasi must not only not have intercourse with woman; he must not even talk to her.

Now *where* in the above conversation is there even a hint of "symbolically connecting the goat's decapitation with the 'cutting off' of the sexual powers embodied in the penis"? Since it is obviously not there, how can Kripal declare: "Accordingly, Ramakrishna compares ..."?

(25) KC p. 51: ... Ramakrishna's reported technique for conquering the powers of lust: he would stand before a naked prostitute with a noose hung around his neck and tighten the rope when he became sexually excited.

Response: Kripal provides this example to establish that the head is a "symbolic phallus." Having made this point, he then admits in endnote #7 on p. 341 that he seriously doubts whether Ramakrishna ever practiced this technique.

For several reasons, this is a serious example of intellectual dishonesty. First, Kripal makes use of a source whose authenticity he himself doubts, but he nevertheless uses it to make a point to support his thesis. Second, when he finds that it also contradicts his theory (Ramakrishna's "fear of women and his pronounced homosexual tendencies"), he slyly dissociates himself from it in an obscure endnote which appears 300 pages later. Third, he defends his action by saying that it doesn't matter whether it *actually* happened or not because it is "recorded and preserved within the culture."

What this means is that Kripal wants to marshal his data from (1) incidents which probably never happened and were never recorded, and (2) what is recorded but which probably did not happen. The only condition for data to be "authentic" is that it conform to Kripal's thesis. Thus whatever does not conform to his thesis becomes automatically inauthentic.

Bipinchandra, whose book contains the above incident, never met Ramakrishna; he was only a popular orator. But Saradananda was Ramakrishna's own disciple; he knew him well, he lived with him, he served him. Saradananda was also closely associated with Ramakrishna's wife Sarada for over two decades. Moreover, Saradananda's book is also "recorded and preserved within the culture"

(the pretext Kripal gives for using the incident from Bipinchandra's book). So why doesn't Kripal accept the *Lilaprasanga* and its conclusions as authentic?

(26) KC p. 55: Then one day, her [Chandramani, Ramakrishna's mother] husband still away, the nocturnal visitor abandoned her dreams and entered her waking life: "On another day while I was talking to Dhani in front of the Shiva temple of the Yogis, I saw a divine light come out of the great limb of Shiva..." (LP 1.4.8)

(In the following paragraph, Kripal continues) ... Then Shiva, known for his erotic exploits, impregnates the aging woman as she walks by his "great limb," most likely a reference to the Shiva-lingam enshrined in the temple.

Response: Since Kripal makes such a fuss about the "great limb" I checked his source, LP 1.4.8, and found this: *Mahadever sri-anga hoite*, "from the holy image of Mahadeva (Shiva)." Thus it is the *sri-anga* that Kripal translates as the "great limb." Unfortunately, this is not so much a translation as a fabrication. From the context it is very clear that it is the *image* in the Shiva temple which is being referred to.

Later in the book (see note #144) the author inexplicably translates "Shiva-linga" as "Shiva's penis." Perhaps this is because Kripal views Shiva as one who is "known for his erotic exploits." All I can say on this point is that this is not the kind of image a practicing Hindu carries in his or her heart. I have worshipped Shiva my entire life and not once when I gazed upon the Shiva linga did "Shiva's penis" enter my mind. I can assure you that this is the same for millions of other practicing Hindus. And, by the way, in the Bengali original, it was the temple of the "Yugis" not "Yogis."

(27) KC p. 56: Kshudiram was in the habit of naming his sons after pilgrimages: earlier, he had named his second son Rameshwar, in honor of his pilgrimage to southern India (LP 1.3.13).

Response: First, one relatively small point: It's curious that Kripal can come up with only one example to show that Kshudiram was “in the habit of” naming his sons after pilgrimages. While this may seem to be a small slip, the book is awash in such “slips”—which often seem intentional and designed to create a cumulative effect of distortion.

A much more important point is Kripal’s reference from the *Lilaprasanga* as 1.3.13. Why would he use numbers for the *Lilaprasanga*? There is no numbering system of the paragraphs in the Bengali book. For that reason it is extremely difficult to trace the original reference from the numbers that Kripal cites. Since the *Lilaprasanga* uses no numbering system, why would Kripal quote numbers? Because the English translation of the *Lilaprasanga*, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, uses the numbering system.

If Kripal was referring to the original in Bengali, he should have given the appropriate page number—not a set of numbers (book, chapter, and section) which are found only in the English translation. The truth is, the Bengali in the *Lilaprasanga* is not very easy to read; it's filled with *tatsama*, Sanskritized words. What Kripal would prefer us not to know is that he lacks the proficiency to be able to read the *Lilaprasanga* in Bengali. What Kripal seems to have done is read the *Great Master* and from that he chose a few passages to scrutinize. He *then* looked these passages up in the *Lilaprasanga*, and with a Bengali dictionary and the *Great Master* by his side, created his own "translation."

(28) KC p. 57-58: Another passage referring to an ecstatic state at the age of ten, again minus the egrets and the storm clouds of the more classical account, suggests that the egret and the storm cloud vision may be apocryphal.

Response: Kripal is trying to discredit Saradananda's version in the *Lilaprasanga*. The "another passage" he refers to above occurs at KA 5.25 in which Ramakrishna refers to the state of samadhi after "I saw something." On this occasion he doesn't describe what he saw. Unless Kripal can convincingly show that Ramakrishna saw something *other* than "the egrets and the storm clouds," he cannot preclude that possibility.

But something more serious is at stake here. M's and Saradananda's are *both* firsthand accounts of Ramakrishna's words. On what basis can Kripal give greater authenticity to M's book and dismiss Saradananda's as apocryphal? The obvious reason is that if he acknowledged the authenticity of the *Lilaprasanga* and its "renouncer" author, Kripal could no longer maintain his thesis.

(29) KC p. 58: Jensen and Sil have noted one possible reason for the persistency of the trances: they were consistently rewarded by the women of the village. The texts agree.

Response: At the end of the first sentence, there is a reference to an endnote (#30, p.342) giving references to Sil's and Jensen's books. This is followed by a peculiar statement: "The texts agree." Kripal then refers to the *Lilaprasanga* and *Life* accounts where the women of village looked upon Ramakrishna as a spiritually gifted child who embodied something of the divine within him. Some of the women looked upon him as Gopala. When Kripal says:

“The texts agree,” the obvious question is: “Agree to *what*? That the *reason* for Ramakrishna’s trances was the reward he got from the women?” What “texts” agree with this? Is he referring to the source books he documents—the *Lilaprasanga* and the *Life*—or to the speculative ones written by contemporary writers such as Sil and Kakar? We do not know. However, should we take the trouble to look up the references in the *Lilaprasanga* and the *Life*, we quickly discover that the texts don't agree with Kripal's assertions.

(30) KC p. 58: ... the younger women looked upon him as Krishna, their divine lover, a troubling practice indeed considering the fact that Gadadhar was only a boy (endnote #32). Gadadhar, it seems, entered his trances at least partially to escape these women and their worship. The women, in other words, not only rewarded the trances: they caused them. Certainly the neighbors were suspicious, despite the women’s insistence that no harm was done (endnote #33).

Response: Kripal’s endnotes reference *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 27 and 29. On p.27 of the *Life* we read: “Aged women like Prasannamayi regarded him as the boy Gopala, younger ones thought he was endowed with some of the characteristics of Sri Krishna.” Note that there is not even a hint of “their divine lover” and the “troubling practice.”

The author’s penchant for scrambling his own commentary with what is supposed to be documented evidence *is* a troubling practice. The author’s interpretation cannot be legitimized by leading the unsuspecting reader to believe that what is being said has textual support.

When we go to the second reference—p. 29 of the *Life*—we find absolutely nothing there to support Kripal's claim. While he provides an endnote (#33) to give

us the assurance of scholarly authenticity, when we actually *read* the documentation we find nothing even remotely close to what Kripal asserts.

(31) KC p. 59: These paternal losses and maternal gains at some point began to manifest themselves in the boy’s behavior. He began, for example, to show signs that he was not completely comfortable with his apparent gender. He would dress up like the women of the village and mimic their mannerisms, their walk, their conversational habits, their vanities. Much later in his life he would describe in great detail how women walk with their left foot first (LP 2.14.9), how they gossip at the pond and the bathing ghat, and how they weep for their dead husbands (KA 4.272). All this he learned by close observation and, sometimes, by participation.

Response: The LP reference deals with only one sentence, not everything that precedes it. And even in that *one sentence*, what Kripal writes is only partially true. At LP 2.14.9 we see Hriday—*not Ramakrishna*—describing how he saw his uncle, during the *madhura bhava* sadhana, putting his left foot first like women do.

What I would like to know, though, is where Kripal got: “Much later in life he would describe in great detail...” since it is not in the LP reference that Kripal provides.

(32) KC p. 61: Almost immediately, Mathur tried to convince the young priest to take a position in the temple, but Gadadhar refused, allegedly on the grounds...

Response: *Allegedly?* Why “allegedly”? Does the author have any textual evidence to doubt the reasons for Gadadhar’s refusal? Or is Kripal's skeptical reaction simply due to the fact that Ramakrishna's actions don't fit his theory?

(33) KC p. 61: With Ramkumar gone, Gadadhar, known as “the little Chatterjee,” was appointed...

Response: Ramakrishna was known as “the little Bhattacharya” (the junior priest), never as “the little Chatterjee.”

(34) KC p. 64: The sound of Ramakrishna’s thrashing arms and frantic bubbles can almost be heard in the onomatopoeia of the Bengali. As he is pushed to the bottom, Ramakrishna is said to “eat” the mystical waters with the sound *habudubu* (LP 2.6.13).

Response: This passage above makes absolutely no sense: “Ramakrishna *is said* to “eat” the mystical waters...” But it's only Kripal who says it. No one else. In LP 2.6.13 we read: “I saw a boundless (*asim*), infinite (*ananta*) and effulgent ocean of consciousness (*chetan jyotihsamudra*). However far and in whatever direction I looked, I found a succession of its effulgent waves coming forward, raging and storming from all sides with great speed. Very soon they fell upon me and pushed me at once to the very bottom. I panted (*hampaiya*) and struggled (*habudubu khaiya*) and lost all outer consciousness.”

Several points need to be noted. First, it is an “ocean of consciousness”; I have no idea from where Kripal’s “mystical waters” appear. Second, there is no reference anywhere to Ramakrishna’s “thrashing arms.”

But the greatest wonder is the “frantic bubbles” that Kripal is able to hear and, he tells us, “Ramakrishna is said to ‘eat’ the mystical waters with the sound *habudubu*.” The Bengali expression is *habudubu khava*, which means “to struggle to keep afloat” and, figuratively, also means “to be deeply engrossed.”

Translated literally (which Kripal does), it means “to eat *habudubu*”—which makes no sense whatsoever. A comparable example will be the expression: “to kick the bucket.” If I take the Bengali words for “bucket” (*balti*) and for “to kick” (*lathi mara*), and put them together, they won’t mean in Bengali what the expression means in English.

(35) KC p. 65: The aspirant must identify completely with these feminine lovers of God. He must experience a love so great that it is capable of transforming his physical gender over time. Only then will he truly be able to love Krishna.

Response: In his effort to show Ramakrishna’s “psychological desire to become a woman and this theological necessity for a female body” (KC 65), Kripal mentions the incident of the thousand sages who saw Rama on his way to the forest. He quotes Ramakrishna (KA 2.213) as saying that it was these sages who became the gopis. Kripal then concludes: “Desire for God, in other words, can turn a man into a woman.”

What Kripal neglects to mention is that in this mythological example, the change from men to women occurred in a *different* lifetime, not the same one. Hinduism presumes that *everyone* has had both masculine and feminine incarnations. However, since the mention of this would have hurt the author’s argument for Ramakrishna’s “theological necessity for a female body,” it remains

unsaid. To reiterate: the transforming of “physical gender over time” does not occur in the same lifetime.

(36) KC p. 65: The same longing that was once directed to Kali and her sword is now directed to Narendra and his sweet singing voice.

Response: How does the author know that it is the “same longing”? Just because the same word *vyakul* is used? If I say “I’m eager for God’s vision” and “I’m eager for a cup of coffee”—that doesn’t mean the “same longing” that I directed this morning toward God is now directed to coffee, just because the same word “eager” is used. The eagerness for God and the eagerness for coffee are different qualitatively—and often also quantitatively.

(37) KC p. 66: Kripal describes “one particularly humorous scene” when Ramakrishna is taken to a zoo. Ramakrishna is reminded of the goddess when he sees a lion which “unfortunately for those who wanted to see the rest of the zoo” is a mount of the goddess Durga. Kripal says that Ramakrishna “falls over unconscious.” The party has to return home (KA 4.74).

Response: In KA 4.74 we see that, first of all, there is no mention that those who accompanied Ramakrishna “wanted to see the rest of the zoo” but “unfortunately” could not. Second, Kripal says that Ramakrishna “falls over unconscious” but in the reference he gives (KA 4.74), we find this very clear statement: “I entered into samadhi” (*samadhista hoye gelam*).

(38) KC p. 66: Again, when Ramakrishna sees a prostitute dressed in blue sitting under a tree, he becomes “completely enkindled” and is “reminded of Sita” (KA 2.49).

Response: First, the translation: In the original there is no word corresponding to Kripal’s “completely enkindled.” He translates *uddipana* as “enkindled”; even if that is granted, from where does “completely” come? Nikhilananda translates this portion accurately. Thus we read in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 231: “One day I saw a woman in blue standing near the bakul-tree. She was a prostitute. But she instantly kindled in me the vision of Sita. I forgot the woman. I saw that it was Sita herself on her way to meet Rama after her rescue from Ravana in Ceylon. For a long time I remained in samadhi, unconscious of the outer world.”

(39) KC pp. 66-67: All this leads M to ask himself troubling questions. In one such passage, Ramakrishna’s body hairs all stand on end when he looks at little Naren. M recalls one of his Master’s teachings and asks himself a question: “Where lust is not, there the Lord is present.... Was the Master all excited about the Lord?” (KA 3.263)

Response: First, we see in KA 3.263 that Ramakrishna’s hair stands on end not when “he looks at little Naren” but when he thinks (*mane koriya*) of the younger Naren’s pure mind totally devoid of lust (*kama*).

Second, describing M’s question as “troubling questions” is Kripal’s pejorative characterization. There is no hint of it anywhere in the *Kathamrita*, not even at KA 3.263.

Third, what is the rationale for introducing ellipses in this short quote? An ellipsis is a tool employed to skip the unnecessary portions, even without which the sense of the text is complete. But here Kripal uses ellipsis to actually *distort* the meaning. What Kripal omits is the phrase: “remembering this” (*ai katha mane koriya*). This phrase is important, because M was *not* voicing his own doubt or raising his own “troubling question.” He was only wondering whether Ramakrishna was charged by the thought of God (*isvarer uddipan*) after remembering the saying, “Where lust is not, there the Lord is present.” From the context we can easily see that it is a rhetorical question, not a doubt, and most certainly not a “troubling question.”

Here is my translation of the passage, which is faithful to the Bengali original:

Haldar: Sir, when that boy (pointing to younger Naren) came in you said he had controlled his senses (*jitendriya*).

Master: Yes, it is true. He is totally unaffected by worldliness. He says he doesn't know what lust is. (To M) Just feel my body. All the hair is standing on end (*romanca hocche*).

The Master's hair stood on end at the thought of a pure mind totally devoid of lust. Was he charged by the thought of God after remembering the saying, “Where lust is not, there the Lord is present”?

(40) KC p. 67: Again, when a boy of fifteen walks into a theatre box to see Ramakrishna, M tells us that the saint stroked the young boy with his hand and asked him to sit down: “With you here, I get all excited.” When the boy left, Ramakrishna told M that the boy's physical signs were very good and that “if he would have stayed a little longer, I would have stood up” (KA 2.121).

Response: At KA 2.121 we don't see any "boy of fifteen." We see a person "born in the holy family of Nityananda" and who is "aged thirty-four or thirty-five." Whereas Kripal says Ramakrishna "stroked the young boy with his hand," at KA 2.121 we merely find: "Ramakrishna was filled with delight at the sight of him. He held his hand and talked with him affectionately. Every now and then he said: 'Please sit down here. Your very presence awakens my spiritual feeling.' He played tenderly with the young man's hands and lovingly stroked his face."

Nikhilananda's translation on p. 555 is perfect, except for one inexplicable omission. I don't know why he omitted the young man's age: the *Kathamrita* puts it very clearly: "He was about 34 or 35."

Note in particular where the *Kathamrita* says that Ramakrishna "played tenderly with the young man's hands and lovingly stroked his face." Kripal intentionally distorts it to say instead: "stroked the young boy with his hand." Stroking someone's face with one's hand is a very common way of expressing affection in Bengal.

Ramakrishna says, "The young man has good traits" (*lakkhan bhalo*); but Kripal changes that to: "the boy's physical signs were very good," and then translates literally "I would have stood up (*ami dandiye podtum*)." Ramakrishna often used this expression to refer to the fact that he stood up upon entering into ecstasy. I would say, therefore, that Nikhilananda was wise to translate it as: "At the sight of him my spiritual mood is aroused. I should have been overwhelmed with ecstasy if he had stayed here a little longer" (*Gospel*, p. 556).

As in many other places before, Kripal's misuses the word *uddipana* to strengthen his homoerotic subtext.

(41) KC p. 67: Accordingly, he spoke of a “memory nerve” (*medha nadi*) that grew when the semen was held for seven years (KA 4.85).

Response: Kripal’s translation of *medha nadi* as “memory nerve” is incorrect; “wisdom nerve” would be a more accurate translation. *Medha* is a higher aspect of the intellect (*buddhi*), through which one develops the capacity to understand and experience deeper spiritual truths. The *medha nadi* is connected with “memory,” but not in the sense which Kripal chooses to use it in KC p. 67:

Ramakrishna’s uddipana was at once religious “enlightenment,” mythical “remembrance,” and sexual “excitement.” It was erotic that “lit up” the memory and sparked Ramakrishna’s mystical states. Accordingly he spoke of a “memory nerve”...

And by the way, KA 4.85 speaks of “twelve years,” not seven.

(42) KC p. 67: For example, instead of lusting after a woman, one must turn this lust “around the corner” and lust after the Absolute: “Have sex with Saccidananda,” Ramakrishna counseled (KA 1.215).

Response: At KA 1.215, there is no “instead of lusting after woman.” These words belong entirely to Kripal. At 1.125 we merely see: “Have desire (*kamana*) for God. Unite (*raman karo*) with Satchidananda.” Kripal’s “Have sex with Saccidananda” is not only crude but also misleading. When a Hindu hears or reads about *ramana* with God, there is no idea of sex involved. And this should be all the more obvious in the case of an impersonal, non-anthropomorphic concept such as Satchidananda.

(43) KC p. 68: There are exceptions to this passivity in the language and teachings of Ramakrishna—Ramakrishna, for example, “drags” Kali to him (KA 4.62) and “pulls” Saccidananda with the cord of desire (KA 4.119).

Response: At KA 4.119 we see the word “love” (*prema*), which Kripal translates as “desire,” a word loaded with sexual innuendo which *prema* conspicuously lacks. KA 4.119 says: “Love is the rope by which you can tether God, as it were. Whenever you want to see Him you have merely to pull the rope.”

(44) KC p. 68: This radical passivity is evident in the way Ramakrishna is powerfully attracted to different boy disciples and the manner in which they in turn are attracted to him. “Their natures are very pure,” Ramakrishna declares, “and so when they sing they attract me!”

Response: Unlike other places, this quote from the KA has the reference not in parentheses but in the endnote #65 on p. 343 which says: “Cf. KA 3.136.” When I read KA 3.136 I found nothing whatsoever about the alleged words of Ramakrishna which Kripal quotes.

(45) KC p. 68: As passive experiences of forces that overcome his own powers of control and understanding, these attractions often elicited doubt and confusion from Ramakrishna: “Why am I so attracted to them?” he often asked in a troubled tone (KA 5.145).

Response: This is a quintessential example of truly shoddy scholarship. At KA 5.145 we see neither “doubt” nor “confusion” in Ramakrishna, and the question was *not* asked “in a troubled tone.” Had there been confusion or doubt,

Ramakrishna could not have answered his own question—which he does—an answer which Kripal omits.

Moreover—and this is more serious—Kripal distorts the translation to support his own thesis of Ramakrishna’s “passivity.” According to Kripal, Ramakrishna asked: “Why am I so attracted to them?” In the Bengali original, the words are in the *active* voice: “Why do I attract them so much?” (*ami oder ato tani keno*). Ramakrishna continues, replying to his own question: “Because they are pure (*suddha adhar*), untouched by worldliness. One cannot assimilate instruction if one’s mind is stained with worldliness. Milk can be safely kept in a new pot; but it turns sour if kept in a pot in which curd has been made. You may wash a thousand times a cup that has held a solution of garlic, but still you cannot remove the garlic smell.” These are not the words of someone who, according to Kripal, is in “doubt and confusion.” That is why Kripal quotes only a section of this quote—and even that, he distorts.

(46) KC p. 68: The erotic nature of this magical attraction and its origin in the goddess are both evident in the following passage. Ramakrishna is talking to M about the coming of his disciples: “Lately I’ve been saying to Ma, ‘I’m done talking.’ And I’m saying, ‘O Ma, if you touch them but once, their consciousness will be awakened.’ Such is the greatness of the Magical Power (*yogamaya*)—she is able to cast a spell. In the play of Vrindavana the Magical Power cast a spell. By means of her, Subola united Krishna and Radha. The Magical Power—she who is the Primordial Power—she has an attracting power. I have assumed this power (KA 3.121-22).

Response: I would translate the passage in KA 3.121-22 as follows: “Just now I was saying to the Mother, ‘I cannot talk much.’ I also said to Her, ‘May people’s inner consciousness be awakened by only one touch!’ Such is the power of Yogamaya that She can cast a spell. She did so at the play in Vrindavan. With her power, Subol was able to unite Krishna and Radha. Yogamaya, the Primal Power, has a power of attraction. I had applied that power.”

Note the difference in the two translations. Kripal translates "Yogamaya" incorrectly as “Magical Power.” The word “Yogamaya” is synonymous with Shakti or “Divine Power.” Earlier in the same paragraph, Kripal has said: “Kali’s Shakti attracts the boys to Ramakrishna...”, and for that reason he inserts this phrase into his translation of this passage, “if *you* touch.” But the Bengali simply says: “by only *one* touch” (*ek bar chhunye dile*). Finally, Kripal’s use of present perfect tense, “I *have assumed* this power,” is incorrect. In Bengali the verb is in the past perfect tense: “I *had applied* (*arop korechhilam*) that power.”

This difference in tense is important because Kripal builds on it: “In this complicated passage,” he says, “Ramakrishna claims that he has assumed the same ‘attracting power’ that once joined Krishna and Radha in an erotic union.” But what Ramakrishna is clearly referring to here is the fact that he had once applied that power of Yogamaya to himself when he practiced the Vaishnava sadhanas. And, by the way, it’s not a “complicated passage.”

Finally, Kripal’s introductory sentence to this passage is incorrect: “Ramakrishna is talking to M about the coming of his disciples.” At KA 3.121-22 we see something entirely different: Ramakrishna is sharing with the devotees some of his spiritual experiences; there is no indication whatsoever that he is talking to M “about the coming of his disciples.”

(47) KC p. 69: On a more philosophical level, Ramakrishna believed that the disciples somehow shared the same essence with him. “Attraction” (*tana*) and desire flowed naturally from this essential union or ontological identity (*satta*) (KA 2.166).

Response: I found nothing at KA 2.166 to support Kripal’s claim. Nikhilananda’s translation on p. 613 of the *Gospel* is completely accurate: “God is your own Mother. Enforce your demand. If you are a part of a thing, you feel its attraction. Because of the element of the Divine Mother in me I feel attracted to Her. A true Shaiva has some of the characteristics of Shiva; he has in him some of the elements of Shiva. He who is a true Vaishnava is endowed with some of the elements of Narayana.”

From this passage, how does Kripal conclude: attraction and desire flowed naturally... ?

(48) KC p. 69: Like attracts like. Such a deep union can be detected in a dream. In one scene, for example, a young boy comes to Ramakrishna and reveals to the Paramahansa that he has seen him in his dreams, just sitting there saying nothing. An excited Ramakrishna breaks in: “That’s very good! ... You’re attracted to me, isn’t this so?” There is silence, followed by Ramakrishna’s request that the boy come again. But he will make no promises, for his family objects (KA 4.149).

Response: At 4.149 there is nothing even *remotely* close to what Kripal is saying and quoting.

(49) KC p. 69: Kripal shows that the same phrase “wrung like a wet towel” was used to describe Ramakrishna’s state before his first vision of the Divine Mother and also to see Narendra: *that is why*, Kripal concludes, “psychologically speaking, the First vision and Ramakrishna’s tortured ‘wring’ desire to see Narendra are very close, if not identical.”

Response: As we’ve seen before, simply because the same words were used in two different situations, this hardly indicates that the two situations were “psychologically speaking ... very close.” In note #36 we have already seen that the argument is untenable.

(50) KC p. 70: Indeed, Ramakrishna’s habit of threatening to cut his throat with a knife was so common and so well-known that, after he was dead, at least one disciple made fun of him by imitating his *vyakulata* and faking dramatic gestures...

Response: First, there are barely two instances in the *Kathamrita* when Ramakrishna thinks of cutting his throat, so this can hardly be called his “habit.” Kripal gives a reference in endnote #70 (p. 343), where he says: “Ramakrishna also threatened to drown himself (KA 1.168-69).” This is a misleading reference and not at all linked to what is being discussed. At KA 1.168-69 we see that Ramakrishna is describing how he was harassed and troubled by his nephew Hriday. When it became absolutely unbearable, Ramakrishna went to the river bank with the idea of drowning himself. He did not “threaten to drown himself,” as Kripal tells his readers.

Second, the replaying of the knife-incident in KA 2.248 is a lighthearted occasion; it is stunningly apparent from the text that the disciples are not “making

fun of him [Ramakrishna].” When the disciple asks for the knife, Narendra says in mock seriousness, “It is here. Stretch out your hand and take it.” But in Kripal's version, this becomes: “You need to stick out your arm here more.” Nikhilananda’s translation of this incident is completely accurate and can be found in the *Gospel*, p. 988.

Kripal ends the paragraph with the discerning remark: “Ramakrishna apparently was a melodramatic figure, a show to laugh at.” This is no doubt why Kripal doesn’t bother to inform his readers that soon after the knife incident, all the disciples joined in worship: ringing bells and waving lights (*arati*), standing reverently with folded hands before the picture of one who, according to Kripal, was “a show to laugh at.”

(51) KC p. 70-73: In this section Kripal discusses the “numerous textual variants of Ramakrishna’s attempted suicide with Kali’s sword.” He begins by saying that “it is possible that they all refer to the famous First Vision, but it would be difficult if not impossible to establish this with any degree of certainty.” He further says that “evidence is more suggestive than probative.”

Kripal doesn’t agree with Saradananda that Ramakrishna’s practice of Tantra was just one of the many different traditions he practiced; rather, according to Kripal, Ramakrishna’s Tantric practices were “omnipresent, defining virtually every point along Ramakrishna’s spiritual development.” Kripal also feels it “likely” that Ramakrishna’s memory wasn’t good enough to remember the exact order of events, hence “the chronological confusion” in the different accounts. The textual accounts, depending upon Ramakrishna’s memory, are “usually ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, and often vague.”

Response: Let us look at the four accounts that Kripal refers to: Kripal's version will be followed by what the texts actually say:

FIRST PASSAGE: (KA 4.65)

Kripal's version (KC p. 71)

The first passage is simple and short. It occurs in volume 4. Ramakrishna has just told the story of a son forcing his demands on his father by threatening to cut his throat with a knife. He then, almost casually, adds: "I used to do this when I called on Ma."

Comments

Like many other examples we've seen so far in *Kali's Child*, here we again have another case of deceptive scholarship. Nikhilananda's translation, p. 384 of the *Gospel*, is completely accurate and faithful to the original. We see that after recounting the story of the son demanding his share of the property, Ramakrishna continues by saying:

God will certainly listen to your prayers if you feel restless for Him. Since He has begotten us, surely we can claim our inheritance from Him. He is our own Father, our own Mother. We can force our demand on Him. We can say to Him, "Reveal Thyself to me or I shall cut my throat with a knife."

Sri Ramakrishna taught the devotees how to call on the Divine Mother.

Master: I used to pray to Her in this way: "O Mother! O Blissful One! Reveal Thyself to me. Thou must!" Again, I would say to Her: "O Lord of the lowly!..."

It is apparent from the above how Kripal has intentionally distorted the *Kathamrita* in order to provide fodder for his thesis. Kripal's translation, "I used to do this when I called on Ma," is radically different from what the Bengali original says, "I used to pray to Her in this way." This is the first part of a sentence *in another paragraph*—words that, Kripal would have us believe, were added "almost casually." These words preface how Ramakrishna prayed to the Mother; they clearly do not refer to his threat to the Mother to cut his own throat.

Conclusion

This incident does not refer to Ramakrishna's "attempted suicide" which Kripal would like to equate with the First Vision.

SECOND PASSAGE (KA 5.23)

Kripal's version (KC pp. 71-72)

Ramakrishna is talking about how his madness reached such a state that, again, he was going to cut his throat with a knife. It was then that he realized that he could do nothing of himself, that he was the "machine" (*yantra*) and Kali the "operator" (*yantri*) (KA 5.23). Again, the emotional conflict and pain is great, great enough to end in death.

Comments

At KA 5.23 we see that Ramakrishna is discussing “the knowledge that God does everything.” Whoever has that knowledge, he says, is a liberated soul (*jivanmukta*). Ramakrishna says that in reality there is no such thing as “free will.” Even an enlightened person like Tota Puri tried to end his life in order to free himself from excruciating stomach pain. Then Ramakrishna says that in his case also when *batik vridhhi hoyechilo*, he was about to cut his throat with a knife. But he couldn’t do it because he was only a machine and the Divine Mother was the Operator. Unless She willed something, it couldn’t happen.

Nikhilananda translates *batik vridhhi hoyechilo* as “At one time I was very ill.” The Bengali word *batik* has various shades of meaning. In the present context, it is very clear that some kind of illness is being referred to, the illness caused by the imbalance of *bata* (*vata*: one of the three humors in the human body according to Ayurveda, the science of Indian medicine).

Conclusion

This incident, quite obviously, does not deal with the First Vision, but refers to what happened during Ramakrishna’s early days of sadhana.

THIRD PASSAGE (KA 3.138)

Kripal’s version (p. 72)

In our third passage, this time in volume 3, Ramakrishna clearly associates the act with a specifically Tantric approach to Kali: “There is such a thing as dark (*tamasika*) mystical practice—practice which relies on the dark aspects of human nature. ‘Victory to Kali! What? You’ll not show yourself to me! If you don’t show yourself, I’ll cut my throat with a knife.’ In this type of mystical practice, as in Tantric practice, there’s no concern for purity.”

Comments

Kripal's translates *tamasika* as “dark,” but while “darkness” is certainly one of the literal meanings of the word *tamas*, it is by no means an accurate translation when the word *tamas* is used in a specialized sense, such as (in this case) one of the three attributes of prakriti. As an attribute of prakriti, *tamas* is the principle of inertia or dullness. I think Nikhilananda did well by retaining this technical term in the translation and providing the meaning in the glossary.

But what is most significant here is that nowhere in this passage does Ramakrishna say that this is what he *did* before he had the First Vision. Kripal himself admits: “Although Ramakrishna does not specify that he is talking about an actual event from his past, the passage is *most likely* autobiographical” (*emphasis mine*).

This kind of conjecture—when and if it is unsupported by any evidence, textual or otherwise—is completely out of place in a scholarly work. Interestingly, after saying that this is what *most likely* happened, Kripal begins to draw conclusions. With weak-link logic intact, he builds upon his thesis by showing how in some secondary texts the “dark aspects of human nature” (a truly perverse way of translating a simple technical term such as *tamo-guna*) are connected with Tantric practices.

Conclusion

The passage does not deal with Ramakrishna's First Vision.

FOURTH PASSAGE (KA 3.131)

Kripal's version (p. 72)

Ramakrishna is talking to his disciples about how he conquered “lust” (kama): “Even in my case, after six months I felt a strange sensation in the breast. Then I sat down beneath the tree and began to cry. I said, ‘O Ma! If this continues, I’ll cut my throat with a knife!’”

Comments

I find Nikhilananda’s translation (p. 739) more faithful to the original. The Bengali *buk ki kore esekhilo* is “felt a queer sensation in the heart.” Kripal, not surprisingly, translates the Bengali *buk* as “breast” rather than “heart.” In Bengali it is quite common to say *buke hath diye bolo*, “say it with your hand on your heart.”

Nikhilananda’s translation is appropriate: *gach-talay pode kandte laglam*, “I threw myself on the ground under a tree and wept bitterly.” (“Bitterly” is not in the original, by the way, and could have been avoided.) But Kripal’s is not accurate: “I sat down under a tree and began to cry.”

Conclusion

There is no indication whatsoever that this incident has anything to do with the First Vision.

We see, therefore, that Kripal mentions four passages from the *Kathamrita* as describing Ramakrishna’s “attempted suicide” which led to the First Vision. As we have seen, *none* of the passages he quotes can be linked to the First Vision. He nevertheless concludes:

If we read Saradananda’s passage alongside these other four, we might speculate that the threat announced under the tree was carried out in the temple and that Ramakrishna’s threatened suicide was

understood by the saint to be “Tantric” in the sense that it involved that “darkest” of the human passions—lust (KC p. 73).

In the paragraph which follows, Kripal asks: “Can we establish such a reading with the evidence in hand?” This question is patently rhetorical since he immediately proceeds to show how we *can* establish such a reading with what he calls “evidence in hand.” What he has in hand, however, is not “evidence” but rather four passages from the *Kathamrita* where there is a reference to the knife and cutting the throat. These passages (Kripal avers) “*perhaps* refer to the same event” or “*more probable*, to the same general period.” What “general period” he might have in mind the author fails to specify; further, with such powerful “evidence” in hand, why are “perhaps” and “more probable” necessary? Kripal presents his own speculation as documented fact; in assuring the readers that he is “revealing” information, he is actually concealing it.

(52) KC p. 73: From the context of the fourth passage, I conclude that Ramakrishna’s “strange sensation” had something to do with a form of sexual desire, with “lust,” but the precise nature of the “strange sensation” that led him to threaten suicide is still not clear. The fact that the expression “a strange sensation in the breast” (*buk ki kare*) is used more commonly by women than by men suggests much but proves little.

Response: It's hard not to smile when we read Kripal stating, “I conclude...” since from the context (KA 3.131) the meaning is glaringly obvious. Kripal misses the point when he reduces the cause of the “strange sensation” to “a form of sexual desire, with ‘lust.’” From Ramakrishna’s own words (KA 3.131) we know that he is referring to *kamini-kancana*, “lust and greed.” Not just lust.

Second, Kripal's claim that the expression *buk ki kare* is used more commonly by women by men is completely untrue. It is a *very* common expression used by men and women alike. Kripal prefers to translate this phrase as “a strange sensation in the breast”—in order to strengthen his thesis—rather than the accurate translation, “a strange sensation in the heart.”

In the very next sentence Kripal gives an example when the expression is used between two males (Chaitanya and Nitai) in a song, and *this* time Kripal translates it as “my heart feels a strange sensation.” This time Kripal says that the usage is “equally suggestive and equally inconclusive.”

(53) KC p. 73-74: Now in his late forties, he [Ramakrishna] is talking to M about Purna, a boy of fourteen who figures prominently in the saint's secret talk: “If I see Purna one more time, then my anxious desire might lessen! How clever he is! He feels a very great attraction for me. He says, ‘I also feel a strange sensation to see you.’ (to M) They've taken him from your school. Will this cause you any trouble?” (KA 3.182)

Response: Once again, we're faced with Kripal's highly sexualized definition of *vyakulata* as “anxious desire” instead of the appropriate word, “longing.” Kripal then makes a great fuss about the “strange sensation” (which, for some reason, he always encloses in quotation marks for heavy emphasis). But after all this, Kripal admits the nature of Ramakrishna's “anxious desire” is not fully revealed in this passage.

Kripal then adds: “We are told that it has resulted in a situation that might cause M, the schoolteacher, trouble at school, but that is all” (KC 74). What is the “it” that Kripal refers to? Ramakrishna's “anxious desire” for Purna? The truth is that Purna's visits to Dakshineswar had worried his parents (indeed, many other

parents as well whose children used to visit Dakshineswar). Purna's parents were concerned that these visits might affect his studies. (Kripal himself admits this later in KC 79.) M was a teacher in the school where Purna studied. M often took his students to Dakshineswar so they could get an opportunity to see Ramakrishna and benefit from his teachings. The “trouble at school” being referred to is the possibility of a complaint against M, who was Purna’s teacher.

(54) KC p. 74: Similarly other passages tease us with what they do not say and leave us reading between the lines.

Response: Kripal with his own burden of "anxious desire" gets needlessly “teased” by simple passages and innocuous words and phrases. He ends up by reading so much *between* the lines that what he writes in *Kali's Child* bears precious little connection with what the lines actually say in the text. Were the author's between-the-lines reading confined to his own personal study, there would not be a problem. But there *is* a problem when he references Bengali texts to which most of his readers have neither direct access nor firsthand knowledge. The reader will assume in good faith that the texts are being quoted accurately. Unfortunately, the reader will have no idea that the texts are being distorted beyond recognition.

(55) KC p. 74: In another passage, Ramakrishna explains that Purna possesses the “divine essence” of a god: “If you put a garland on his neck and sandal-paste on his body and then burn incense, he goes into samadhi!” (KA 4.212)

Response: In the endnote to this passage, Kripal refers to KA 4.232 in which Ramakrishna is seen telling M that he used to worship the *dhan* of boys.²⁵ (A fuller discussion of this topic is given later in note #141.) He then draws the conclusion that Ramakrishna applied sandal-paste on the *dhan* of Purna, and not “on his body” (*gaye chandan*) as Ramakrishna said.

Three points:

Kripal says in the endnote (#72, p. 343) that Ramakrishna told this to M “in secret.” That’s untrue. If we look up the passage in the *Kathamrita*, we see no sign whatsoever of anything being told “in secret.” The room was full of people and everyone heard what Ramakrishna said.

Second, Ramakrishna is describing at KA 4.232 his practices during the Tantric sadhana. “In that state,” he says, he used to worship the *dhan* of boys. This was long before Purna came to Dakshineswar.

Finally, at KA 4.212 the quote in question is in a separate paragraph—and both Kripal’s and Nikhilananda’s translations are interpretative. The Bengali original itself is quite neutral and is not necessarily referring to Purna’s case. I will present a quick look at the existing translations and then give my own:

Kripal’s: Ramakrishna explains that Purna possesses the “divine essence” of a god. If you put a garland on his neck and sandal-paste on his body and then burn incense, he goes into samadhi!

²⁵ *Dhan* is a playful, affectionate word for penis. Perhaps the best translation for something as untranslatable as this is “family jewels.” It is not a clinical term like “penis” nor is it the offensive, loaded word “cock” which Kripal used in the book’s first edition. It is a singularly unloaded word, appropriate for the simple village world which created it.

Nikhilananda's: Purna is in such an exalted state that either he will very soon give up his body—the body is useless after the realization of God—or his inner nature will within a few days burst forth.

He has a divine nature—the traits of a god. It makes a person less fearful of men. If you put a garland of flowers round his neck or smear his body with sandal-paste or burn incense before him, he will go into samadhi, for then he will know beyond the shadow of doubt that Narayana Himself dwells in his body, that it is Narayana who has assumed the body. I have come to know about it (*Gospel*, p. 796-97).

My Translation: Purna is in such an exalted state that either he will very soon give up his body—the body is useless after attaining God—or his inner nature will within a few days burst forth.

He has divine nature—the traits of a god. It makes a person less fearful of others. If a garland of flowers is put around the neck, the body is smeared with sandal-paste, and incense is burnt, such a person will go into samadhi. In that state one gets to know clearly that God Himself dwells in the body, that it is God who has assumed the body. I have understood this.

(56) KC p. 74: In yet another passage M tells us that Ramakrishna was so “anxious” to see Purna that he showed up at M’s house late one night and asked M to fetch the boy, which M did (KA 3.224).

Response: In an endnote (#73, p. 343) to this passage Kripal gives yet another reference: KA 4.217-18. I have no idea why he did this since there is

nothing in KA 4.217-18 about Ramakrishna going to M's house late one night; there is only one sentence saying that Ramakrishna was *vyakul* for Purna.

But what is more interesting is not what Kripal is “revealing” here (since it is there for all to see in the *Kathamrita* anyway), but what he is “concealing.” He mentions that Ramakrishna shows up at M's house late one night and wants to see the boy. Kripal tells us that M fetched the boy, but he does *not* tell us what happened afterward. In *the very next sentence* the *Kathamrita* says: “The Master gave the boy many instructions about prayer and afterward returned to Dakshineswar.”

(57) KC p. 74: In yet another scene, M gets nervous when Purna scoots closer to Ramakrishna—will the boy's family hear about this visit too (KA 3.149)?

Response: This is completely fallacious. M is *not* nervous because Purna is sitting near Ramakrishna, but because Girish inquires about the boy. M is worried lest he (since he is Purna's school teacher) be blamed for bringing the boy to Dakshineswar should the word spread.

Purna's family objected to his Dakshineswar visits not because they were suspicious of Ramakrishna's character, but because such visits were considered an unnecessary distraction from his studies. Such objections from parents are quite common in India and, I suspect, wouldn't be considered unnatural by parents even in other parts of the world.

But why did Kripal use the phrase “scoot closer”? There is nothing in the *Kathamrita* to warrant this description. Purna is merely sitting near Ramakrishna. In the endnote (#74, p. 344) Kripal says that “scoot closer” was a common request

of Ramakrishna. He gives two references: KA 3.99 and 3.209. I checked these and found nothing other than Ramakrishna inviting someone to come sit near him.

At KA 3.209 there are so many people in the room that there is simply no place to sit. It is customary in India, as a mark of respect, not to sit very close to a holy person unless he or she invites a person to do so. Seeing that there was no place for the musicians to sit, Ramakrishna invited them to sit near him so that the singing could begin.

(58) KC p. 74: Finally, Ramakrishna brags that even in his illness he is not deluded by *maya*. To prove his point, he notes that his mind no longer dwells on his wife or his home. Now he thinks only of Purna, the boy (KA 4.286).

Response: First, there is no mention of Ramakrishna “bragging” at KA 4.286—or anywhere else in the *Kathamrita*, for that matter. Second, he is discussing *vidyamaya* and *avidyamaya*. He defines *avidyamaya* as identification with only one’s own relatives and belongings; *vidyamaya*, in contrast, is identification with God and his devotees. Further, when the body is ill, it is often dragged into *avidyamaya*. It is in this context that Ramakrishna describes his own experience: namely, that *avidyamaya* couldn’t touch him in spite of his severe illness: there is no thought in his mind about “Ramlal (his nephew) or wife or home; but he is worrying about Purna, the kayastha boy.” It is amusing—and, by this time, perfectly understandable—why Kripal ignores the adjective “kayastha” and describes Purna as simply “the boy.”

The reference to Purna as “kayastha boy” is important. In the fiercely caste-conscious Hindu society of that period, a brahmin (the highest caste) caring for a kayastha (which is below the brahmin in the caste hierarchy) showed that caste

distinction was no barrier because Purna was a true devotee of God—and caring for him was a sign of *vidyamaya*.

When Ramakrishna says that he has no thought in his mind about his wife, it doesn't mean that he didn't care for her. The fact was that he didn't care for her *as his wife* or “simply because” she was his wife. That his love, concern, and respect for her were supreme is borne out by any number of incidents from their life together.

(59) KC p. 74: Kripal refers to the *Kathamrita* as “that record of secrets.”

Response: The word “secret” occurs throughout this book with such regularity that it is essential to understand what this “secret” is all about. Basically what Kripal refers to are, in his own words, “Ramakrishna’s ‘secret talks’ (*guhya katha*)—eighteen passages dealing with visions and confessions...” (KC 4-5). The appendix to *Kali's Child* (pp. 329-36) deals with the “historical and textual aspects” of the secret talks.

Kripal believes that these talks were “secret” because their contents were “too troubling or important to reveal to any but [Ramakrishna’s] most intimate disciples” (KC 4). Yet even a casual glance at these talks shows that there was nothing “troubling” about them. Moreover, most of these were given in the presence of a large number of visitors, men and women, with the doors of Ramakrishna’s room wide open.

These “secret talks” are identified by the author with the help of one determinant: the use of the Bengali phrase “secret talk” (*guhya katha*) in the *Kathamrita*. This is a rather mechanical and inadequate device, because many of the things included in the “secret talk” are also repeated on other occasions *without*

the “secret talk” tag. So what was a so-called “secret” on one day ceases to be “secret” on another day.

But the basic problem is the author’s misunderstanding of the term “secret talk” (*guhya katha*). The word “secret” (*guhya*) occurs with great frequency in Hindu religious texts, including the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. The deeper meaning of a scripture is known as *guhyaartha*. The word *guhya* is used mostly in the sense of “esoteric,” meaning: “something likely to be understood by only those with a special knowledge or interest.” In other words, “something likely to be *misunderstood* by the untrained.” It is “secret” because of the sacredness and the sanctity attached to it and the very real danger of it being misunderstood. *Kali’s Child* is a pertinent example of what happens when a person has no deep knowledge of the culture or language of his subject.

(60) KC p. 74: Ramakrishna is talking to M about Purna—

Sri Ramakrishna—“What I’m telling you—all this is not for others to hear—I want to kiss and embrace man (God) as a woman” (KA 4.271).

Response: In the endnote (#75, p. 344) Kripal points out that the afternoon portion of this day’s conversation was included by M in the first volume, but the morning portion, when (according to Kripal) “the confession” occurred, was kept for the fourth volume of the *Kathamrita*, producing what he has called the “cyclical effect.” As M never began with a comprehensive plan of publishing the material in five volumes, Kripal’s accusation and conclusion are without substance or merit.

But let us return to the main text. Kripal’s translation is both interpretative and incorrect. Interpretative because the “I want to...” portion is not in the original. I checked Nikhilananda’s translation (*Gospel*, p. 895), and found: “The devotee

likes to..." In the Bengali original there is no subject mentioned, and the following is, I think, a more accurate translation:

Ramakrishna: "I am telling this to you. Ordinary people should not hear these things. Looking on oneself as Prakriti one feels like embracing and kissing Purusha or God."

Kripal's "I want to..." is therefore unjustified. But Kripal needs the first person reference for his conclusion: "Ramakrishna ... is in love with Purna. He wants to kiss and embrace Purna as if he were a woman and Purna a man" (KC 75). Kripal speculates that M is "troubled by this revelation" and so M adds in parentheses after the word "man" the gloss "(God)." Kripal calls this a "flimsy set of parentheses" which is "invoked to hide a glaring secret" (KC 75).

I wonder if Kripal knows that "Prakriti" and "Purusha" are technical terms with slightly different connotations in different schools of Indian philosophy. It was precisely to prevent erroneous conclusions that M no doubt felt the need to put "Isvara" or God in parentheses after "Purusha."

Second, if M was so anxious to "hide a glaring secret" (as Kripal says) then all he had to do was omit this passage. No one would have known if he had omitted it. The fact that he included it is itself sufficient to show that he had no secrets to hide. Besides, at the time this was being said, there were several other people in the room as well. It was not a secret conversation between Ramakrishna and M.

(61) KC p. 77: Never mind Ramakrishna's comment that sexual abstinence is like the act of sacrificing (i.e., decapitating) a spotless, black goat to Kali

or his reported habit of slipping his noose around his neck to control the reactions of his penis.

Response: Both these “revelations” of Kripal have been shown to be fallacious (see notes #24 and #25). Kripal himself doubts the authenticity of the second revelation, yet he goes out of his way to offer the dubious reference yet again.

(62) KC p. 80: M describes “a critic” who walks into the room only to receive the whispered giggles of some of the boy disciples (KA 4.215).

Response: This is completely untrue. At KA 4.215 we see that a person wearing gerua [an ochre colored cloth, indicating *sannyasa*] enters the room and salutes Ramakrishna. Balaram sees this and, knowing that the person privately criticizes Ramakrishna, smiles at the hypocritical show of salutation. There are no “giggles”; only Balaram is smiling, and he—well into his forties—does not constitute “the boy disciples.”

(63) KC p. 80: Narayan was actually beaten up by his family when he returned home from visiting Ramakrishna on more than one occasion.

Response: Since Kripal says “on more than one occasion,” he probably felt compelled to give “more than one” reference. Thus in the endnote (#81, p. 345) he gives two references: KA 3.98 and KA 4.143. But if we actually read KA 4.143, we find nothing at all about Narayan.

(64) KC p. 80: In yet another passage, a piqued Ramakrishna scolds little Naren for abandoning his studies to visit him: “Your father will hurt you” (KA 3.196).

Response: At KA 3.196 we don’t find Ramakrishna scolding the younger Naren and we don’t see him saying: “Your father will hurt you.” Kripal manages to distort the situation as well as the context. It seems that his motivation is to create circumstances where he can say in the *following* sentence: “It was not an unreasonable fear: at one point, Naren stays three nights at Dakshineswar, apparently to escape his father’s anger.” Kripal provides no reference, no clue, nothing, so we have no idea where he unearthed this bit of information. He then continues:

Ramakrishna was also afraid of Naren’s father. In one passage he relates how he went to see Naren but then turned back in fear of Naren’s father. Everyone laughs (KA 3.182).

If we go to KA 3.182, we find something very different indeed. Ramakrishna asks the younger Naren to take him to his house. Naren responds with a cheerful: “Please do come,” but becomes nervous as they start moving toward the house, lest his father should know about it. It was *the younger Naren* who was afraid of his father, not Ramakrishna. And it is hearing about *Naren’s* dilemma that makes everyone laugh, not Ramakrishna’s fear. Nikhilananda’s translation of this passage, which is quite accurate, can be seen in the *Gospel*, p. 785.

(65) KC p. 80: Paltu is also in trouble for seeing Ramakrishna (KA 3.129), as are Tarak (KA 3.124-25) and Dvija.

Response: This sentence ends with an endnote reference (#82, p. 345) where we find two more references: KA 3.179 and KA 4.234. Why these two references, both dealing with Dvija, should be pushed to endnotes instead of the usual parentheses, I have no idea.

One of these references, however—the one at KA 4.234—has the incident when Dvija’s father comes to meet Ramakrishna. He is very respectful and quite impressed after meeting Ramakrishna and tells him: “I tell my children that they should attend to their studies. I don’t forbid them to come to you, but I don’t want them to waste their time in frivolities with the youngsters.” This, in fact, was *the* reason why most parents objected to their sons’ visits to Dakshineswar. Kripal, however, prefers not to mention this fact to the reader.

(66) KC p. 80: The families object to an unspecified crime. M fears for himself (KA 3.149).

Response: Which “families”? What “unspecified crime”? We find nothing at all at KA 3.149 about this. Kripal has earlier referred to the same passage on p. 74, where I have clarified what M’s “fear” was all about (see note #57). In his earlier citation Kripal did not find any hint of an “unspecified crime.”

(67) KC p. 81: And again: “You should be very devoted to your father and mother, but if they block your path to God, then grit your teeth and say, ‘That son-of-a-bitch of a father!’” (KA 3.152)

Response: Kripal translates the Bengali phrase *shalar baap* as “That son-of-a-bitch of a father!” This translation is astonishingly bad. It's little wonder that many people reading *Kali's Child* became incensed: those who don't understand Bengali and trust Kripal's translation are upset that Ramakrishna allegedly spoke such words, and those who *do* understand Bengali are furious because Ramakrishna did *not* say what Kripal wants his non-Bengali readers to believe.

One of the real problems with this book is the lack of consistency. When it suits the author, he translates “literally”—even at the expense of the correct meaning of the words. And when it suits him, he indulges in an interpretative translation—even if the interpretation has nothing to do with the actual words used. In the present case, however, Kripal's translation is true neither to the words nor to the meaning.

Nikhilananda's translation (*Gospel*, p. 755) is more accurate: “Show great devotion to your parents; but don't obey them if they stand in your way to God. You must gird your loins with great determination and say, ‘This rogue of a father.’”

Yet even in this translation the second sentence does, in a way, expand upon the idea contained in the original words. I would translate the passage as follows and, I believe, it would be the closest we can get to the original text: “Show great devotion to your parents; but don't obey them if they stand in your way to God. Be very stubborn. What a lousy father!”

There is nothing in the Bengali original to justify the words “...and say...” Nikhilananda does it and Kripal also does it. I have translated the Bengali *shalar baap* as “What a lousy father!” and I think this is most accurate. Had Ramakrishna been speaking English instead of Bengali, he would have said something very similar. When I read the Bengali passage, I did not feel that *shalar baap* was something Ramakrishna was asking younger Naren to tell his father, but it was

rather his own comment on the kind of parent who would put obstacles in their son's spiritual life. Had it been something he wanted the son to tell his father, he would have used a second-person pronoun ("you") and not a noun ("father"). In Bengali that would have been: *tumi shala!* or just *shala!* And, by the way, by no stretch of imagination can *shala* mean "son-of-a-bitch."

(68) KC p. 81: Ramakrishna asks M if he could go to M's school to look for boys. M suggests that instead Ramakrishna wait at his house and that he bring the boys to him (KA 3.101).

Response: Kripal is distorting the context here. We find at KA 3.101 that after talking about Narayan and Tejchandra, Ramakrishna expresses the wish to visit M's school. M assumes that Ramakrishna wants to meet Narayan; M therefore suggests that he can bring Narayan home himself and Ramakrishna can wait there. Ramakrishna then tells M that he wants to see if there are other boys in the school. I think Nikhilananda does well by adding the adjective "worthwhile" to "boys" (*Gospel*, p. 662), because that is the only way the sentence makes sense. M was teaching in a boys' school and, of course, besides Narayan and Tejchandra there *were* many other boys. Basically Ramakrishna wanted to know if there were other boys as spiritually inclined as were Narayan and Tejchandra. M immediately agrees and invites Ramakrishna.

Kripal's version that Ramakrishna wants to go to M's school "to look for boys" is mischievous and misleading. The use of loaded language is unmistakable.

(69) KC p. 82: Just as water is water, but only some water is appropriate for drinking and washing, so some people are more spiritually fit, more

mystically “powerful” (*shakti*) than others—all men are *not* created equal (KA 3.181).

Response: At KA 3.181 there is only the example regarding water meant for drinking and washing. The rest of the material written above is entirely Kripal’s personal creation and not to be found at KA 3.181.

(70) KC p. 82: Boys are particularly lucent bearers of God’s light and power, for their breasts have not yet been covered over by the feces of worldly concerns and that most damaging of worldly realities—a job.

Response: After the word “concerns,” Kripal provides an endnote (#86, p. 345) in which he gives a reference from KA 4.230. In the endnote Ramakrishna says that Kedar was all knotted up inside; it would have been like entering a room filled with feces. *That is why*, in contrast, Kripal concludes “boys are ... for their breasts ... ”

Notice how Kripal uses the word “breasts” again; it is not the word Ramakrishna used. Notice also the general noun “boys.” When Ramakrishna uses the word at KA 4.230 we can easily see that he was referring to those spiritually inclined boys who are his disciples, not just any “boy.” We know Ramakrishna didn’t care for the friends—who were *boys*—that Naren and others brought to meet him because they had no spiritual inclinations. Notice also the last phrase regarding “a job”—again, these are not Ramakrishna’s words. The words belong to Kripal alone but the unsuspecting reader wouldn’t be aware of this fact.

(71) KC p. 82: In another passage he explains why he is so “excited” (*uddipana*) in the presence of the boys: unlike the common man, they contain the sweet pudding of devotion (KA 2.50).

Response: Here we have Kripal forcing together two distant and completely unconnected passages from the *Kathamrita*, but the quote is deceptively referenced to make it appear as if he's quoting one or two related phrases. At KA 2.50 we see Ramakrishna saying how he would be “enkindled by the thought of God” (*isvarer uddipan*) when he saw Rakhai doing japa. Some more discussion followed, then Ramakrishna had lunch and rested. After his rest, he said that though outwardly there might not be much difference in people, inwardly they might be quite different. In that context, Ramakrishna gives the example of a Bengali sweet preparation which looks the same from the outside, but is basically different depending on the kind of "filling" it has. It is the same with people, he says.

(72) KC p. 83: The pot had gone bad, its pure milk wasted on a mere woman.

Response: This is the case of Haramohan who as a young man had good spiritual tendencies. But later his life underwent a change and he developed worldly tendencies. He once came to meet Ramakrishna with his wife. Seeing those worldly tendencies, Ramakrishna told him that he could not even touch him.

In Kripal’s version Ramakrishna was vexed because, as he says, “the pot had gone bad, its pure milk wasted on a mere woman.” But nowhere in KA 4.109 (from which Kripal is supposedly quoting) do we find Ramakrishna upset because of Haramohan’s marriage per se. In fact Ramakrishna opens the subject of

Haramohan with these words: “Attachment to lust and greed make a person narrow-minded (*hina-buddhi*).” It was this *attachment* that Ramakrishna saw in Haramohan and which made him tell the boy to leave. It was not because of “a mere woman.”

CHAPTER TWO

(73) KC p. 85: This is the meaning of Tantric ritual. The Mother is the Lover (KA 3.230) .

Response: The second chapter has Dr. Sarkar’s quotation before the actual text begins. And it is a gross mistranslation. If we go to the Bengali original, we see Ramakrishna narrating the story of Bilvamangala who renounces the world after saluting his prostitute-lover as his mother. Hearing this story, Dr. Sarkar comments: “This is Tantrik worship (*upasana*): looking upon a woman as mother (*janani ramani*).” Kripal makes precisely the opposite equation: the mother is the lover! Sadly, the entire chapter is nothing but an attempt to prove a fallacious, mistranslated equation.

(74) KC p. 87: Ramakrishna once explained that the blackness of midnight is enjoined in the Tantras as the most appropriate time for meditation, when the Dark Mother “naked and black, shines in the lotus of the heart” (KA 5.136).

Response: At KA 5.136 we see Ramakrishna praising the song “In dense darkness, O Mother, Thy formless beauty sparkles” which Narendra had sung

earlier in the day (Feb. 22, 1885). He says that the song has a deep meaning. “Meditation in darkness is prescribed in the Tantra.” (Kripal changes this to “the blackness of midnight” and adds his own “most appropriate time” segment.) Kripal’s quote “naked and black...” is from a song and not an “explanation” that Ramakrishna gave.

(75) KC p. 87: In another passage, the saint adds a specifically erotic dimension to this brilliant blackness by associating it with the love-play of Kali and Shiva (KA 2.25).

Response: This is completely wrong. At KA 2.25 the description of the new moon night as *raman* between Mahakali and Mahakala is M’s, *not* Ramakrishna’s. In fact, on the entire page (KA 2.25) Ramakrishna does not speak one word.

(76) KC p. 87: As “secret” visions, they spoke of a past that he did not, could not remember.

Response: An endnote (#5, p. 346) at the end of this sentence says: “In KA 2.141, when the subject of Tantra is raised, Ramakrishna began to ‘make fun’ (*rahasya kare*) of it. The ‘secret’ (*rahasya*) thus became a nervous ‘joke’ (*rahasya*).”

As Kripal did in the first chapter, here also he is identifying Vamachara with the whole of the tradition. At KA 2.141 Bhavanath comes in dressed as a brahmachari. That becomes an occasion for much fun—both Ramakrishna and devotees smile while looking at Bhavanath’s apparel. Narendra joins in the fun, saying, “Bhavanath has dressed as a *brahmachari*; I shall dress as a *vamachari*!”

That adds to the laughter. Then Hazra brings up the subject of the rituals connected with Vamachara. Not wanting to encourage a discussion on the subject, Ramakrishna made fun of it and changed the subject.

The important point here is: Vamachara does *not* equal Tantra. It is only one aspect of the practice.

(77) KC p 87: Invoking the narrative context of the doctor's comment and a certain poetic license, I translate them literally as "mother" and "lover" and capitalize them to make a theoretical point: in Tantric culture, the goddess is understood to be gentle, consoling Mother *and* a wild, uncontrollable Lover.

Response: It is in order to come to this conclusion that Kripal mistranslates Sarkar's words as: "The Mother is the Lover." Kripal's invoking of "a certain poetic license" has unfortunately resulted in a bizarre mistranslation and the conclusion which flows from it. Kripal also includes an endnote (#6, p. 346) in which he says:

It could also mean "The Lover is (actually one's own) Mother," as Ramakrishna's story, which immediately precedes the comment, seems to suggest. Is Sarkar agreeing with the saint's story? Or is he gently disagreeing with it?

In the endnote Kripal hopes to deflect the charge that he is mistranslating but—even while he offers an alternative translation—he *again* mistranslates. Ramakrishna's story does not suggest that "The Lover is (actually one's own) Mother."

Bilvamangala (a character in the story) learns an important lesson from his lover, hence he looks upon her as his teacher; addressing her as "mother," he then

goes forth in search of God. After hearing this story, Sarkar says that this approach—of looking upon a woman as one’s mother—is a Tantrik practice.

How different this is from both of Kripal’s translations: (1) “The Mother is the Lover.” (2) “The Lover is (actually one’s own) Mother.” The accurate translation of Dr. Sarkar’s words, in my opinion, would be: “This is Tantrik worship: looking upon a woman as mother.” Kripal’s questions about whether Sarkar is agreeing with the story are disingenuous. There is nothing in the text to even suggest that Sarkar might be disagreeing.

(78) KC p. 88: I agree with the doctor. “The Mother is the Lover.” This *is* one of the most basic meanings of Tantric ritual.

Response: After confessing in the fine print of the endnote that the translation of Dr. Sarkar’s words may not be definitive, Kripal now feels free to reiterate it. “The Mother is the Lover” is, he says, “one of the most basic meanings of ritual.” I don’t know what “ritual” he is referring to, but this certainly is news to me.

(79) KC pp. 91-94: In this section Kripal discusses the account of the sadhana period of Ramakrishna's life from three texts: the *Kathamrita*, *Jivanavrittanta*, and the *Lilaprasanga*.

Response: In what he calls the "Kathamrita version," Kripal refers to only two quotes: KA 4.175 and KA 2.132-33. On the basis of these two quotes he concludes: “Such a version is defined by a set of three textual traditions (the Puranas, the Tantras, and the Vedas), which are in turn associated with three types of practitioners (the Vaishnavas, the Shaktas, and

the Vedantins) and with three places (the Panchavati, the bel tree, and the portico)” (KC 94).

Identifying the Puranas with the Vaishnavas, the Tantras with the Shaktas, and the Vedas with the Vedantins is not just an oversimplification; it is incorrect. This is yet another example of Kripal's lack of understanding of both Hindu texts and Hindu traditions.

Kripal's clear intention here is to demonstrate that Ramakrishna's words do not indicate his Vedanta practice to be a kind of culmination of his earlier spiritual practices. In order to run down Vedanta, Kripal concludes on the basis of one quote (KA 4.175) that: “The Vedic/Vedantic period is associated with little, except the fact that Ramakrishna became a renouncer and ate his rice in the portico.” Incomprehensibly, Kripal associates the “portico” as the place connected with Ramakrishna's Vedanta sadhana.

(80) KC p. 91: "She performed sadhanas of many types in me..." (KA 4.175)

Response: At KA 4.175, we read: *tini amay nanarupe sadhan koriyechhen*, "He made me do different types of sadhanas." Kripal translates *tini* as "she." As we have seen earlier, the Bengali word *tini* is not gender-specific. Thus the English equivalent could as well be "He." Ramakrishna is basically referring to the divine being through whose grace he did various spiritual practices.

(81) KC p. 91-92: "At that time, while I performed the worship, I would wear silk garments [like a woman] and would experience such bliss--the bliss of worship" (KA 4.175).

Response: In the sentence quoted from KA 4.175 we find reference to "silk cloth" (*garader kapad*), but Kripal adds to it his own gloss in parentheses: "[like a woman]." Earlier (KC 75) he had criticized M for adding in parentheses *isvara* after the word Purusha, because Kripal wanted to translate it as "man" (see note #60). Now Kripal does the same thing himself: he adds an interpretative gloss of his own: "[like a woman]." The original has no such thing.

Having inserted his own words into the translation, Kripal now feels free to make this comment: "Granted, he does refer to this period as one in which he dressed up as a woman" (KC 92). However, Ramakrishna makes no such reference in KA 4.175. It is a common practice for men to wear a silk cloth at the time of worship. Wealthy people in India wore silk clothes at other times as well. It is by no means a practice associated only with women.

(82) KC p. 96: "From a metaphysical perspective" (*tattvapakse*), Datta tells us, Muhammad's promise of heavenly maidens to the man who kills a heretic constitutes a promise of "intellectual sex" (*vidyar sahas*) with the "energy of wisdom" (*vidyasakti*) to the man who can kill the emotional and mental enemies within (JV[5], 55).

Response: What Datta actually says in this passage is something entirely different. He briefly describes Ramakrishna's Islam sadhana and says that Ramakrishna discovered the essence of religious disciplines (*sadhan pranalir abhipray*) in Islam and Hinduism to be identical. Datta then explains the deeper meaning of the Islamic practice of killing kafirs. Datta says that Muhammad had promised that whoever killed kafirs would live happily with a beautiful celestial

maiden in the hereafter. What Muhammad meant by the word “kafir” (Datta continues) was only the enemies *within* oneself (*sharirer madhye ripugana-i*); when they are destroyed, one “manifests the power of knowledge” (*vidya-shaktir prakash*). Without having knowledge (*vidyar sahavas vyatit*), what other means exist for a person to acquire joy and freedom? (*sukha-svachhander dvitiya upay kothay*).

The Bengali word *sahavas* means literally “living together” and in special contexts it can also mean “having sex.” When Datta says: *vidyar sahavas*, it simply means “having knowledge.” How Kripal can see in this context the possibility of “intellectual sex” is beyond my comprehension. This translation is unjustified both linguistically and contextually.

(83) KC p. 102: “If the rich landlords respect me,” he would say to himself, “then my experiences must be true” (KA 2.47).

Response: At KA 2.47 there is absolutely nothing about this.

(84) KC p. 103: It is said that his coccyx even lengthened an inch to resemble that of a monkey!

Response: Kripal provides an endnote (#28, p. 346) in which he says that KA notes simply that Ramakrishna used a piece of cloth as a tail (KA 2.193, KA 3.111, KA 4.175). Of these three references, only the last one is genuine. The first two (KA 2.193, 3.111) are spurious.

(85) KC p. 103: Despite Ramakrishna’s association of this state with madness (KA 4.175)...

Response: Kripal translates *unmada* as simply “madness.” From the context it is clear that it is “spiritual madness” or “madness for God.”

(86) KC p. 103: Haladhari refuses to ennoble Ramakrishna’s madness by comparing it to a classical bhava. Rather, he sees only his crazy cousin peeing from the trees of the Panchavati (LP 2.8.14). For Haladhari, wearing a cloth tail, jumping around on all fours, and peeing from trees has nothing to do with devotion. It is madness, pure and simple.

Response: At LP 2.8.14 there is no indication whatsoever that what Haladhari saw is connected with the Hanuman bhava episode of Ramakrishna’s life. Kripal’s sentence beginning with “For Haladhari...” is completely his own invention; *nowhere* in the *Lilaprasanga* is there any passage connecting Haladhari with Ramakrishna “wearing a cloth tail, jumping around on all fours.” Unfortunately, unless the reader can check the *Lilaprasanga*, he or she won't know that the documentation is deceptive.

(87) KC pp. 103-4: Kripal transposes two passages which have no connection with one another. He makes two assumptions, unsupported by any text: (1) By wearing a silk cloth for worship, Ramakrishna is wearing women’s clothes and this constitutes cross-dressing, and (2) this happened when he was practicing *sakhi-bhava* in Mathur’s household.

Response: Kripal quotes from KA 2.154-55 about Ramakrishna’s sakhi-bhava sadhana and provides an endnote (#30, p. 347), in which he says:

The tone of KA 3.83 suggests a certain anxious necessity in Ramakrishna’s becoming a Handmaid: “I used to say over and over, ‘I am a Female Servant of the Blissful Mother!’”

At KA 3.83 we see nothing equivalent to Kripal’s “over and over.” There we simply have, *ami boltam*, “I used to say.” Kripal deliberately inserts “over and over” to support the “anxious necessity” theory.

(88) KC p. 104: Here we see the same worship context and the same silken clothes, but here Ramakrishna becomes a “Handmaid of the Mother,” not to live with Mathur and his household but to conquer his sexual desire for his wife back at the temple (KA 5.140).

Response: At KA 5.140 we merely see this: “I spent one year as handmaid—the handmaid of the Divine Mother, the Embodiment of Brahman (*brahmamayi*). I used to dress myself as a woman. I put on a nose-ring. One can conquer lust by assuming the attitude of a woman.”

These words of Ramakrishna are preceded by his teaching that as long as one has the ego, one must establish a definite relationship with God. Then he describes his own practice and the benefit such practice can bring.

There is no mention whatsoever here about his practicing this discipline, as Kripal would have us believe, “to conquer his sexual desire for his wife back at the temple.” But by placing the KA reference in parentheses

after the quotation, Kripal misleads the reader into thinking that there is a valid documentation for his statement.

(89) KC p. 106: He then goes on to describe such a Woman: “I had a vision of Sita’s image. I saw that her whole mind dwelt only on Rama. She paid no attention to her vagina, hands, feet, dress, or ornaments. It was as if her life was filled with Rama—if Rama were not, if she could not have Rama, she would die!” (KA 4.36)

Response: Kripal translates the Bengali word *yoni* as “vagina.” This is no doubt one meaning of the word among several others, such as "source" and "birth" or "family lineage." When a Bengali reads the word *yoni* in the above passage, he or she is not thinking of Sita’s vagina, I can assure you. “Family lineage” is the correct meaning for the given context. Ramakrishna is describing how Sita’s entire mind was centered on Rama: she was completely oblivious of her own family lineage, her body, her clothes and her ornaments.

(90) KC p. 106: He explicitly identifies Sita as one of the figures who, driven by a passionate love to “know” God in man, practiced asceticism to win a female body.

Response: There is no documentation in parentheses and the idea has no textual support of any kind. In endnote # 36 Kripal directs us to pp. 232-36 of *Kali's Child*, but there is nothing in those pages to support his

claim that Ramakrishna identifies Sita as one who practiced ascetism to win a female body.

(91) KC p. 107: M records a similar scene: “I was almost always unconscious. Mathur would take me to Janbajar and keep me there for days. I began to see that I had actually become the Female Servant of the Mother. The women of the house would feel no shame in regards to etiquette, as one feels no shame when looking at a small boy or girl. With Mathur’s wife I used to lay Mathur’s girls down near him” (KA 2.49-50).

Response: This is another case of faulty translation. I would translate the passage this way: “I was almost always unconscious. Mathur kept me (*niye rakhle*) at his Janbazar mansion for a few days. I began to see that I had actually become the Female Servant of the Mother. The ladies of the house did not feel at all bashful with me, as one feels no shame when looking at a small boy or girl. I used to escort Mathur’s daughter to her husband’s chamber with the maidservant.”

If we compare the two translations, we can see how the author has distorted the text. Kripal writes: “Mathur would take me to Janbajar,” which suggests that it was a regular practice. But there is no such evidence in the Bengali text. There is also nothing there to correspond to Kripal’s “in regards to etiquette.”

How, given the text, Kripal could translate the last sentence—“With Mathur’s wife I used to lay Mathur’s girls down near him”—is a complete mystery to me. Because of this mistranslation, the endnote (#38, p. 348)

pondering whether Mathur's daughter (*meye*) is really a reference to an "adult, sexually active woman" is comical.

"The word *meye*," Kripal informs his readers in the endnote, "is often used in the texts to refer to adult, sexually active women." That's completely untrue. Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of Bengali knows that *meye* means a girl or a daughter. The question of sexual activity is not a factor in the use of the term *meye*.

In the first edition of *Kali's Child*, Kripal was more forthcoming when he openly expressed his doubt about whether "they" were really Mathur's "daughters" (though God alone knows how he got a plural number!) or Mathur's "well-known lovers" who lay down near him along with his wife. In the second edition, he has concealed his opinion but not changed it. Expressed or concealed, his version has no textual support.

(92) KC p. 107: Ramakrishna, who could never tell a lie and always offered information to all who asked, was a valuable informant for Mathur's prying wife, who would ask Ramakrishna about Mathur's adulterous affairs. Ramakrishna always offered her plenty of information, angering Mathur and winning for himself the reputation of a fink (KA 4.72).

Response: This gives the idea of a recurring practice. There is nothing at KA 4.72 to support that Ramakrishna "always" offered Mathur's wife "plenty of information." We see, in fact, Ramakrishna reporting to her just one incident. Further, Ramakrishna didn't "offer" information; he was closely questioned by Mathur's wife and had no choice but to tell the truth. Perhaps Dr. Kripal thinks that Ramakrishna should have lied to cover for the

"temple boss"? The latter part of the sentence: "angering Mathur and winning for himself the reputation of a fink" is not only untrue, it's also needlessly contemptuous.

We have here again the same problem: Kripal interposes his own speculation and conclusions before giving a reference in parentheses. If a reference is given, one expects the author to either present the quotation accurately or to offer an honest summary of the passage being quoted. Kripal does neither and this is a consistent practice throughout *Kali's Child*. The author's interpretation or commentary should come *after* the reference in parentheses, not *before*.

(93) KC p. 109: Kripal takes up for discussion "Ramakrishna's worship of the goddess in a cat." Kripal informs us that while Saradananda and Datta only mention it, "the *Kathamrita*, on the other hand, records at least four accounts of the incident."

Response: In endnote #44, p. 348, Kripal gives four references from the KA where the cat incident is mentioned: KA 3.68, 4.35, 4.77, 4.144.

When I checked the originals, however, I found the cat incident to be mentioned in *only one* of the four references: 4.35. Where are the other three? While this point may seem minor, it clearly demonstrates that Kripal doesn't hesitate to make erroneous statements then back them up with false documentation.

(94) KC p. 109: In another passage, Ramakrishna relates this same incident, describing how, like one mad, he began to worship everything with flowers.

Response: Kripal is referring to KA 3.68. There is no evidence in the text that it is the “same incident.” There is no mention here of the feeding of the cat.

(95) KC pp. 109-10: This then reminds him of another time when, just as he was about to worship the Shiva-lingam, he was shown that “this universe is the very form of Shiva,” that is, he was shown that the entire cosmos was a Shiva-lingam (KA 3.68).

Response: This is quite interesting. At KA 3.68 there is no mention whatsoever of a Shiva-“lingam.” What we find instead is the mention of “Shiva.” We can see how Kripal has deliberately inserted the word “lingam” twice into the sentence above when it does not exist in the text. Why Kripal would do so becomes apparent when we read his concluding sentence: “The phallic dimensions of this experience are significant.”

Phallic dimensions? As a lifelong worshipper of Shiva I can testify that never in my life has thought of a phallus entered into my mind while worshipping Shiva. Again, this is characteristic of every practicing Hindu. “The phallic dimension of this experience” might be “significant” to Kripal, but they are not a part of the experience of those *within* the tradition.

(96) KC p. 111: Marked or not, Ramakrishna’s family had to pay a fee of three hundred rupees to convince the Mukherjees to marry their daughter off to such a character.

Response: Kripal makes it appear as though no one wanted to marry Ramakrishna and that Ramakrishna’s family had to bribe the Mukherjees to marry their daughter to “such a character.” This is a willful distortion of facts; there is absolutely no textual ground anywhere for making such a claim. If this is his conjecture, as the texts make apparent, Kripal should clearly indicate that this is the case. Paying a bridal fee was a customary practice in that part of India in the 19th century.

(97) KC p. 112: Hriday, Ramakrishna’s nephew, paid an especially heavy price for his Tantric practices. He was expelled from the temple for worshipping the feet of Mathur’s young granddaughter in some unspecified immoral way (LP 2.APP.26).

Response: When we check the Bengali original, we merely see the following: “Hriday foolishly (*buddhi-hina-vashatah*) worshiped the feet of Mathurbabu’s granddaughter of tender age.” One can easily see that there is *nothing* here to indicate that the worship was done, as Kripal says, “in some unspecified immoral way.” Yet whatever the original text lacks in sexual interest, Kripal more than makes up for with his imagination. Further, once again, the author has placed his scenario *before* the reference in parentheses. Worshiping young girls as embodiments of the divine is not an exclusively Tantric practice; it is a part of the Shakta tradition as well.

Moreover, from the way Kripal discusses the incident, it might appear as if Hriday was expelled because of “the unspecified immoral” nature of his act. The LP, however, is quite clear about why Hriday was expelled. In the very next sentence of the LP we read: “Her father, apprehending that evil might befall the child, became much annoyed and dismissed Hriday from the

service in the Kali temple.” Trailokyanath, the child’s father, was apprehensive because Hriday was a brahmin whereas he belonged to a lower caste: a brahmin worshiping one belonging to a lower caste is not a part of the tradition and is believed to bring some calamity.

(98) KC p. 112: Haladhari and Hriday were by no means alone in their secret practices.

Response: There is no evidence to indicate that Hriday’s worship of Trailokya’s young daughter was done in secret.

(99) KC p. 113: Regardless of their traditional allegiances during the day, almost everyone, including Ramakrishna’s own wife (LP 5.11.9), seems to have led secret midnight lives. Dakshineswar was a very secret place.

Response: At LP 5.11.9 there is an incident where one woman who had received a mantra from the Kartabhaja tradition visits Ramakrishna. He knew about her initiation even though he hadn’t been told about it. Later when the woman mentioned it to Sarada Devi, Sarada told her that she, too, had received that mantra before coming to Dakshineswar. Sarada had told Ramakrishna about it and he had advised her to offer the mantra at the feet of her *Ishta*, chosen ideal.

Some points need to be mentioned here: (1) Receiving a mantra from the Kartabhaja tradition does not necessarily imply actively participating in their way of life; (2) Sarada had received the mantra *before* she came to Dakshineswar and, having reached there, had offered it at the feet of her

Ishta; (3) there is no textual evidence indicating any kind of “midnight lives” led by Sarada and others in Dakshineswar; (4) there was no “secret” about Sarada receiving the mantra: were it so, Saradananda wouldn’t have known about it and wouldn’t have mentioned it in the *Lilaprasanga*.

(100) KC p. 114: The term [*milan*] is commonly used to mean sexual union.

Response: No, *milan* is commonly used to mean “meeting.” It means “sexual union” only in a specialized sense, and this can be understood easily from the context.

(101) KC p. 116: A disciple’s bitter comment is pertinent here: he saw no use for such songs expressing this “love-dovey stuff” (*prema-trema*) unless one wanted to get married (KA 4.287).

Response: The disciple Kripal refers to is Mahimacharan and the quote is misleading. Mahimacharan does say at KA 4.287 that he doesn’t care for “love and all that stuff.” What he says next is entirely different, however, from what Kripal would like us to believe was said: “Besides, I live here with my wife and children. Why all these songs here?”

Mahimacharan did *not* say that the songs were useful only if one wanted to get married; in fact, his condition seemed to be just the opposite. Being a married man, he was uncomfortable with those songs.

(102) KC p. 116: For his part, while Ramakrishna did not hesitate to sing such songs to his young disciples, he found it very disturbing when a woman sung them to him.

Response: Ramakrishna did *not* sing those “to his young disciples.” When he sang, he sang out of his love and devotion to God (in the form of Krishna or Kali). There is no textual evidence to show that Ramakrishna sang songs “to his young disciples.”

(103) KC p. 117: ... after four years of sometimes “bizarre” and “grave” (KA 3.24) rituals with her.

Response: At KA 3.24 I found the Bengali phrase *bhari utkat*, which simply means “extremely difficult” or “extremely severe.” How Kripal was able to construe “bizarre” and “grave” from *bhari utkat* serves to demonstrate yet again his amazing creativity.

(104) KC p. 120: The fourth M. *mudra* or “parched grain” does not appear explicitly.

Response: In an endnote (#63, p. 348) Kripal says: “There are passages in which a mudra-like grain or dish is consumed (KA 3.141), but it is difficult to tell whether the ritual of the Five M’s is implied in such cases.”

First, Kripal begins by saying that “There are passages...” and he can refer to only one; that one passage does *not* refer to the consumption of any “mudra-like grain or dish” at all.

At KA 3.141 we see Ramakrishna describing one of his visions when he saw a Mussalman feeding others with rice, and he also offered a few grains to Ramakrishna. This was seen in a vision and it is very clearly mentioned in KA 3.141. Why, then, did Kripal find it so “difficult to tell whether the ritual of the Five M’s is implied in such cases”? He admits that the fourth M does not appear in the text “explicitly”—but it doesn’t appear “implicitly” either. That is why the author has to allude to visions seen in meditation without mentioning the fact. Witness his statement: “There are passages in which a mudra-like grain or dish is consumed...” We see in KA 3.141 that what was consumed was rice (*bhat*), but in order to connect it to the fourth M, Kripal calls rice “a mudra-like grain or dish”!

(105) KC p. 124: Kripal quotes a passage from KA 2.89 when Ramakrishna visited the Kartabhaja sect:

There is one opinion that holds that one should take a woman in one’s mystical practice. Once someone took me into a group of Kartabhaja bitches. They all came and sat down near me. When I began to address them all as “Ma,” they began to talk among themselves. “This one is just a beginner, he’s still not aware of his own shortcomings.” According to their view, the undeveloped state is called the beginner; after that comes the striver and after that the perfect of the perfect. A young woman sat down near Vaishnavacharan. Vaishnavacharan said, “Hers is the nature of a little girl!” In the state of the Lover one quickly falls. The state of the Child is the pure state.

Response: My translation of the passage would be as follows:

There is one sect which prescribes spiritual practice in the company of women. I was once taken to the women belonging to the Kartabhaja sect. They all came and sat down near me. When I addressed them as “mother,” they began talking among themselves: “He is still a *pravartaka*, he doesn’t know the way.” According to their view, *pravartaka* is a beginner; then

comes the *sadhaka*, the struggling seeker; then comes the *siddha's siddha*, the supremely perfect. A young woman sat down near Vaishnavacharan. When asked, Vaishnavacharan said, "Her nature is that of a young girl." One quickly strays from the religious path by looking on woman as wife. But to regard her as mother is a pure attitude.

Kripal's deviations from the Bengali text are clear. But note particularly three: First, Kripal's "into a group of Kartabhaja bitches." In the Bengali text we read: *kartabhaja magider bhitar*, "women belonging to the Kartabhaja sect." The word *magi* is a colloquial usage for "woman"; the word is not as plain as two other Bengali words for "woman," *stri* or *mahila*, but neither does it carry the connotation that "bitch" does in English.

Second, where the original says *ghat chinen nai*, "He doesn't know the way," Kripal twists into: "He is still not aware of his shortcomings." He later emphasizes this point about "shortcomings."

Finally, where the original speaks about regarding woman as mother (*matribhav shuddhabhav*), Kripal inexplicably changes it to regarding oneself as the Child. There is no justification for this change.

(106) KC p. 124: Kripal wrongly translates *magi* as "bitches" whereas it is a term that is commonly used in rural Bengal to refer to "women." It is not an urban term, it is true, but neither does it carry the baggage that the English word "bitch" does. Kripal's translation is in keeping with his general technique of using loaded words to create a cumulative effect.

(107) KC p. 126: Another of Ramakrishna's secret visions might provide us...

Response: Kripal then goes on to translate the “secret talk” that occurs in KA 4.238 when Ramakrishna describes his mystic vision of a young man and the blooming lotuses. Interestingly, in the endnote (p. 349, #69) he mentions two other places in KA where the same description occurs (3.138 and 4.283).

What must be noted is that in these two places (KA 3.138 and KA 4.283), what Kripal calls “secret visions” are *not* a “secret talk.” Even in places where Ramakrishna expressly uses the phrase *guhya katha*, which Kripal translates as “secret talk,” it is seldom “secret.” The conversation is held in a room in which many others, besides M, are present. In KA 3.138 for instance, there are many devotees (*anek bhakta*) in the room, both older men and young disciples. There are also women devotees (*meye bhaktera*) present. Kripal envisions that surrounded by this crowd, Ramakrishna is secretly narrating his "secret visions."

(108) KC p. 127: Granted, the fact that Ramakrishna was horrified at the thought of actual intercourse, indeed, that he seemed incapable of it (his penis was said to pull back up into its sheath, like the limbs of a tortoise, at the touch of a sexy woman [LP 4.APP]),...

Response: At the end of this reference from LP, Kripal provides in an endnote (#70, p. 349) another reference: KA 4.8. There we see that Ramakrishna is referring to the Bhagavad Gita verse regarding withdrawing the senses as a tortoise withdraws its limbs. The KA text does *not* refer to Ramakrishna’s own reaction “at the touch of a sexy woman.” The only thing that is common to the two references is a tortoise!

(109) KC p. 127: Ramakrishna once compared men attached to lover-and-gold to the jackals and dogs who “wet their faces” in their mates’ behinds (KA 5.215),...

Response: In an endnote (#72, p. 349) Kripal makes this accusation: “Nikhilananda tones this down considerably by translating ‘wet their faces in’ (*mukha jubare thake*) as ‘revel in’ (GSR, 1013).”

If Nikhilananda merely “tones this down,” Kripal distorts it completely. If *mukha jubare thake* is to be translated as “wet their faces in,” the question is “where?” Or, “in what?” Ramakrishna says (in the KA passage which Kripal is apparently quoting): *kamini-kanchane*, “in *kamini-kanchana*.” Does *kamini-kanchana* mean “in their mates’ behinds”? On the next page (KC 128) Kripal adds another adjective “disgusting” (“...resonate quite well with Ramakrishna’s jackals wetting their faces in their mates’ disgusting behinds.”)

To my mind, *mukha jubare thake* is best translated as “remain immersed in.” If a person is “immersed” in something, that person’s face is likely to be touched with whatever he or she is immersed in. I would therefore translate the phrase as: “remain immersed in sex and money.” Nikhilananda’s translation catches this idea fairly well. Kripal’s, as usual, is inaccurate and is designed to mislead.

(110) KC p. 127-128: The association between the vagina and flowers is common enough in Indian culture.... [Kripal then goes on to give references from select Tantra texts to prove his point. And then ends up by saying:] The Kathamrita is just as rich in symbolic equations between the vagina and flowers.

Response: At the end of the above sentence, he provides an endnote (#76, p. 349). Cleverly enough, in the endnote he prefaces the KA references with: “For lotuses and their symbolic associations, see...” Just “symbolic association”? In the main body of the text he promised his readers that the “Kathamrita is just as rich in symbolic *equations between the vagina and flowers*” (endnote #76).

In the six references from the KA which Kripal provides, *not even one* deals with the vagina and flowers.

KA 2.16 has *hrt-padma*, “lotus of the heart”; KA 2.37 mentions the difference between a bee and a housefly, how the former drinks only the honey of the flowers, but the latter sometimes sits on the flowers and other times on garbage; KA 2.54 has a song in which Kali’s feet are compared to a blue lotus; KA 4.192 and KA 5.83 compare the relationship between God and the devotee as that between a flower and the bee, and KA 4.147 has no mention *whatsoever* of flowers.

Thus we see that none of the references which Kripal provides has anything to do with what he promises the readers they contain.

(111) KC p. 128: In the very next sentence, Kripal continues: “In it, Ramakrishna compares the Kartabhaja practice of *coitus reservatus* with the bee who sits on the flower without sipping the honey.”

Response: There is no reference to this whatsoever. Not even the references he provides along with the earlier sentence deal with this.

(112) KC p. 130: As a householder, the Hero is the husband who takes the goddess in the form of a woman in order to cut the bonds of illusion (KA 3.24).

Response: In KA 3.24 we see that Ramakrishna is describing one of the rituals in a marriage ceremony. So “the goddess in the form of a woman” is really the bride, not just any “woman.”

(113) KC p. 131: The Hero’s sadhana ends when he can live with his sexy spouse and yet refrain from sex (KA 4.134).

Response: The word in Bengali is *ramani*, which can simply be translated as “woman” or “spouse”—depending on the context. Kripal’s adjective “sexy” is unnecessary and unjustified.

(114) KC p. 132: “Have you attained [a] Krishna?” their guru would ask them. “Yes, I have attained,” they would answer, uniting religious achievement and sexual pleasure in a single ambivalent phrase (KA 4.164).

Response: This is yet another example of how Kripal slips in his own commentary and interpretation into the cited text. For accuracy’s sake, the reference in parentheses should have come before the final phrase: “uniting religious achievement...” This phrase belongs to Kripal, not Ramakrishna.

(115) KC p. 132: It was Achalananda who claimed to have drunk [sic] wine mixed with menstrual blood (KA 3.51).

Response: At KA 3.51 we find nothing whatsoever to substantiate this. There is of course a reference to Achalananda. In the next paragraph, Ramakrishna

denounces the practice of the 5 M's which people perform to achieve worldly ends, and in that context does refer to the practice of drinking ritual wine (*karanbari*). In the *Kathamrita* there is no mention of “wine mixed with menstrual blood”—this is Kripal’s commentary and it shouldn’t be legitimized by placing it before the KA reference in parentheses. Not only is there no mention of “menstrual blood,” there is nothing in KA 3.51 to substantiate that Achalananda claimed to have drunk it.

(116) KC p. 134: Of course, Ramakrishna knew that no disciple could ever match such a feat—“If I piss standing, you sons-of-bitches will do it spinning around”—but at least they could accomplish “one-sixteenth” of it (LP 3.4.21).

Response: The Bengali word which Kripal translates as “sons-of-bitches” is *shalara*. This word carries different shades of meaning depending on the context: it could mean “fellows” or an indulgent “rascals.” But never, *ever* can it mean “sons-of-bitches.”

Further, since Kripal has used the more benign verb “pee” on earlier occasions, it’s interesting that he has chosen the word “piss” here with its angry, crude undertones. We can see below the usage in the *Lilaprasanga*:

LP 3.4.21 *jadi dandiye muti...* “If I urinate standing...”

LP 2.8.14 *mutratyag koritecchi...* “passing urine...”

In the first case, the word is used as a verb—*mota*, “to urinate.” In the second case, it is a noun—*mutra*, “urine”—which is common in the usage: *mutra-tyag kora*, “to pass urine.”

Mutra is a Sanskrit term and *mota* is the Bengalicized version of it. This version is common in other Indian languages also. It is this non-Sanskrit version that is popularly used, not the Sanskrit one.

As regards translating the two versions in English, I don't see any special reason why two different words should be used. Considering the two contexts and the Bengali usage, there doesn't seem to be any justification for using the loaded word "piss."

(117) KC p. 134: For Saradananda, Ramakrishna is thus the model householder, the ideal husband who enacted "a strange, never-before-seen play of love" (endnote #97, which refers us to LP 3.4.14, *Great Master* 3.4.23) with his wife and yet never engaged, not even once, in that "wretched physical union" (endnote #98, which refers us to LP 3.4.13 *Great Master* 3.4.22).

Response: The material does not exist in the referenced text.

(118) KC p. 138: Consequently, when his discourse concentrates on woman as Lover, he ridicules their breasts as embodied symbols of excessive lust. They are a "bad sign."

Response: There is no reference given. Ramakrishna does speak of "bad signs" in KA 4.206-7. According to him, among the several physical signs which indicate that a person may not make spiritual progress is: *una-panjure lakkhan*, "having a rickety condition." Because of Kripal's limited acquaintance with Bengali, it is possible that he looked up Nikhilananda's translation, where this term is translated as "[having a] pigeon breast" (*Gospel*, 597). Seeing the word "breast,"

Kripal has taken the ball and run with it, creating the false image of misogyny in order to bolster his own thesis. Nowhere in the *Kathamrita* do we find Ramakrishna ridiculing "breasts as embodied symbols of excessive lust."

(119) KC p. 138: And he frankly confesses that he is terrified of women, that they remind him of female demons with their huge vaginal and mammary "holes" (*chidra*) (KA 4.201).

Response: We find in the Bengali: *aar anga, pratyanga, chidra sab khoob bado bado dekhi. Sab rakshasir mato dekhi*, "I find that their bodies, their limbs, and even their pores are very large. This makes me look upon them as she-monsters." (*Gospel*, 593: Nikhilananda's translation is true to the original). Compare this with the loaded words Kripal uses: ... huge vaginal and mammary "holes." Even if *chidra* is translated as "holes," one would like to know why Kripal mentions only "vaginal and mammary" holes? There are references in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads which refer to the openings in the human body and they include, among other "holes," eyes, nostrils, ears as well (but not "mammary" holes).

(120) KC p. 138: In numerous places, for example, Ramakrishna slams his disciples' desires to build "hospitals and dispensaries" and found communities as so many pacifiers (i.e. fake breasts), mere distractions that offer no real nourishment or joy. The toys and dolls of society are fine until the Child becomes really hungry, throws down its pacifier, and begins to cry... (KA 5.35).

Response: There is no mention in the text of a “pacifier.” (And in case the reader doesn’t know what a pacifier is, Kripal informs us: “i.e. fake breasts.”) At KA 5.35 the word Ramakrishna uses is *putul*, which simply means “doll.” But since Kripal is dealing with “breasts” in this section, he slips a pacifier into the discussion. Of course he is free to do so, but Kripal shouldn’t attribute it to Ramakrishna and then attempt to legitimize it by providing a KA reference after the phrase.

By the way, Kripal begins by saying “In numerous places...” but offers just one reference (KA 5.35).

Further, the example of the child playing with a doll (KA 5.35) is given in an entirely different context. It is not given to “slam the disciples’ desires to build hospitals and dispensaries and found communities” but to show that detachment (*vairagya*) does not come until the desire for enjoyment (*bhoga*) has run its course.

Thus we see that Kripal manages to: (1) misquote Ramakrishna, and (2) use Ramakrishna’s illustration in the wrong place.

(121) KC p. 138: In a similar vein, Ramakrishna’s metaphors equate “analytic reason” with the Child’s cry. When the Mother comes and offers her breast, that too will stop (KA 2.35). Unlike the Mother’s breast, reason is “dry” (KA 5.131).

Response: This is another example of how Kripal connects two separate passages, inserts his own comment, and then provides a reference number in parentheses. Here for instance in KA 5.131, we merely see Ramakrishna telling Hazra that he is “dry” because he only resorts to reason. Kripal’s version? “Unlike the Mother’s breast, reason is dry.” But this is not what we find in KA 5.131. There is no reference whatsoever to a breast.

(122) KC p. 138: As a Tantric reality, the Lover's lap was a "place of disgust" (KA 3.51).

Response: Kripal seems to have a difficult time making up his mind. On p. 132 he gives the *same* reference and there, according to him, the "place of disgust" is the female genitals (this is how he arrives at the interpretation of "wine mixed with menstrual blood"); and now, six pages later, he uses the reference again, and this time the "place of disgust" has miraculously become "the Lover's lap."

(123) KC p. 138: And when it did appear in his visions, it purified itself by appearing as the beautiful lotus (KA 4.238), that pure flower to which even water cannot stick.

Response: There is no reference whatsoever in KA 4.238 to any "lap." Kripal is merely referring the reader to the same vision of the young man and the blooming lotuses. What puzzles me is how does this fit into what he is discussing in this paragraph (viz. "the lap" symbol in "Ramakrishna's discourse")?

(124) KC p. 138: The Mother's lap, on the other hand, is a place of refuge, a place to which one flees from the world: "In childhood one fears the world. One only thinks of how to get close to Ma" (KA 2.21).

Response: Here again there is no reference to "lap" in the text which Kripal quotes. Let us remember, though, that in the present section Kripal is trying to establish the use of "in the womb," "in the lap," and "at the breast" in

Ramakrishna's discourse. Since he evidently cannot find material for the "in the lap" segment, he inserts his *own* material and then cites a reference from the *Kathamrita*. But when we go to the referenced material, we find no mention of the lap at all.

The example in KA 2.21 actually deals with the Homa bird: how the fledglings fly upward toward their mother when they discover they are falling down due to gravity. *Then* Ramakrishna says: "These children [meaning Rakhai and others] are exactly like that. They are wary of the world from their childhood itself. They have only one goal: how to go to mother, how to attain God."

(125) KC p. 138: For Ramakrishna, this maternal intimacy is likened to the attainment of God.

Response: Kripal suppresses the fact that Ramakrishna's quote relates back to the example of the Homa bird given above. This example clearly indicates that going to the mother is compared to the attainment of God.

In other places, Ramakrishna has used other imagery to convey the same idea. For instance in KA 2.57, he compares the attainment of God to the preparation of *makara-dhvaja*; once this ayurvedic medicine is prepared, it doesn't matter whether the mud pot in which it is prepared remains or is destroyed; similarly, once God is attained, it doesn't matter whether the body remains or is destroyed.

(126) KC p. 139: In the saint's mind, the issue was not who was acting like a child or an infant. Everyone was. After all, the scholars and the social workers had their own dolls and pacifiers. The issue rather was who had the real breasts. Ramakrishna was convinced that social and intellectual

activity are nothing more than painted red pacifiers, paltry imitations of the real thing.

Response: As seen above in note #120, Kripal completely fabricates the quote about “pacifiers.” Now on the basis of this totally false reference, he feels free to make a point about fake breasts and real breasts.

(127) KC p. 140: But because the goddess did not always cooperate, Ramakrishna the Child had to resort to other means of coercion. No longer able to win her over with childlike love and devotion, he sometimes had to embarrass her: “My state is that of the Child. When the goddess of illusion sees this state, she becomes embarrassed and steps aside to let one pass” (KA 5.105; also endnote #120).

Response: Kripal is quoting out of context here. The word in Bengali is *maya-devi*, which Kripal translates as “goddess of illusion.” This is *not* a reference to Kali or the Divine Mother. Therefore Kripal’s statement: “No longer able to win her over with childlike love and devotion, he sometimes had to embarrass her: . . .” is misleading. No one ever seeks to win over maya “with childlike love and devotion.” Certainly Ramakrishna never did.

Oddly enough, in endnote #120 Kripal refers the reader to KA 2.88 and LP 3.8.35. In both these texts there is no “goddess of illusion”; there is simply “maya.” One wonders why he gave these references at all since they don’t support his theory of embarrassing the “mother.” In fact, they clearly negate the point he is trying to make.

(128) KC p. 140: The prostitutes, once embodiments of the goddess of illusion (i.e. the Lover), found themselves transformed into mothers, and as mothers they could only be ashamed of trying to seduce their own child.

Response: Throughout *Kali's Child*, Kripal dwells endlessly upon Kali as Mother and Lover (this is also the title of the chapter in which the above passage occurs). But now he equates the Lover with “maya”—not Kali. It appears that the author is unfamiliar with the ontological status of maya in Indian philosophy.

(129) KC p. 140: “Beware of the Gopala state!” he would shout (KA 2.154).

Response: We don’t see Ramakrishna “shouting” and, what’s more, we don’t even see him saying, “Beware of the Gopala state!” Yes, there is a discussion about this in KA 2.154, but neither the words quoted nor the description (“he would shout”) can be found in KA 2.154.

(130) KC p. 141: “Haripad and the boys know nothing,” Ramakrishna complained (KA 4.164).

Response: This is not a serious error, but nevertheless one worth mentioning since it reveals yet again the author's ignorance of Bengali. *Haripad chelemanush, kichu bojhe na* would be correctly translated as: “Haripad is an innocent boy, he doesn’t understand.”

Notice that “Haripad is an innocent boy” has become in Kripal’s translation, “Haripad *and* the boys”!

(131) KC p. 141: Again, the motherly Paramahansa puts the boy in his lap and tries to nurse him with his strangely full breasts (KA 5.31).

Response: Again we see the author's habitual ploy of placing his own words, nonexistent in the citation, before the reference in parentheses. In KA 5.31 we read: *thakurer rakhaler sambandhe gopal bhab. Jemon ma'r kole choto chele giya bose, rakhal o thakurer koler upar bhar diya basiten. Jeno mai khachhen,* "The Master looked upon Rakhal as his child. Rakhal would sit leaning on the Master's lap as a young child leans on its mother while sucking her breast."

One can easily see how skewed and misleading Kripal's version is.

(132) KC p. 142: "This is the meaning of Tantric ritual. The Mother is the Lover." Dr. Sarkar's insight, focused through the curved surface of my own cultural lenses, has functioned as the thesis of the present chapter.

Response: But it's an erroneous thesis because Kripal quotes Sarkar incorrectly. Sarkar's words were: *E Tantrik upasana. Janani ramani,* "This is Tantrik worship: looking upon a woman as mother" (KA 3.230). Kripal distorts the phrase into the bizarre "The Mother is the Lover" and then identifies the passages dealing with maya as the Lover-Kali.

(133) KC p. 142: On the contrary, he insisted, to the utter horror of those around him, that, since the goddess incarnates in every woman, sex with *any* woman is a "raping of the mother," an act of incest.

Response: This is a powerful image: the insisting Ramakrishna, the horrified looks of those around him, and the shocking words: sex with *any* woman

is a “raping of the mother” (since these are in quotes, we must assume Kripal is quoting from some text). This dramatic description and quotation need a reference. But alas, none is given. The reason no reference is given is because there is none to give. The image and the words exist only in the author's imagination, not in any source book on Ramakrishna.

(134) KC p. 142: Ramakrishna the Child remained a child. As he had counselled his tempted disciples to do, the saint had successfully “cleaved” the goddess in two: “You bitch! You’re going to ruin my ideals! I’ll cleave your body in two!” (KA 3.86)

Response: This is a cleverly worded sentence which is designed to mislead. The quoted words are *not* addressed to the goddess. At KA 3.86 we see that Ramakrishna tells Mani Mallik and others that a person should not remain quiet in the face of untruth and injustice. He gives the example of a lewd woman (*nashta stri*) who is trying to drag a man from his highest goal. At such times, one should be strong (*vireer bhab*) and say, “You wretch (*shali*)!.....”

As he has done in other places, Kripal uses Ramakrishna’s words out of context.

CHAPTER THREE

(135) KC p. 148: Samkhya is an ancient “philosophical vision” (*darshana*) in India that posited two distinct but related aspects of reality, an inactive transcendent male principle called *purusha* and an active immanent principle called *prakriti*.

Response: Kripal isn't quoting anyone here, so we must assume that what he is writing comes from his own understanding. In Samkhya philosophy, *purusha* is indeed “an inactive, transcendent” principle, but Kripal is incorrect when he adds to it the adjective “male”. There is no gender involved in the Samkhyan categories of *purusha* and *prakriti*, although grammatically the “word” (not the “principle”) *purusha* is masculine and the “word” (again, not the “principle”) *prakriti* is feminine.

(136) KC p. 148: [Tantra] also, again much like Samkhya, identified the feminine principle as the active agent....

Response: Again, it must be mentioned that in Samkhya, *prakriti* is not the “feminine principle,” although the “word” *prakriti* is in the feminine gender.

(137) KC p. 153: Having realized the (essentially Tantric) identity of *brahman* and *shakti*, Tota bowed his head to Kali and took his leave (LP 3.3.31).

Response: I could not find any reference at LP 3.3.31 about Tota. Wherever the reference may occur, it is good to remember that (1) the parenthetical remark is Kripal's own, and (2) Vedanta does *not* say that *brahman* and *shakti* are different.

(138) KC p. 155: Kripal gives here the *Kathamrita* version of the Bhavamukha command:

...Ma came to me dressed as Rati's mother and said, "Remain in existence, my child." I also told Haladhari this. Occasionally I forgot these words and suffered for it. Not remaining in existence, I broke a tooth. And so, when I don't hear divine words or see things, I'll remain in existence—with devotion I'll remain!" (KA 4.2-3)

Response: I found Kripal's translation, "Remain in existence," really very entertaining. What *ever* does this translation mean? The author obviously realizes that it's incomprehensible, so he decodes the meaning for the reader. Kripal explains (KC 156): "Remain as you are, on this side of the dialectic. Go on worshipping forms. You are fine." In other places, Kripal translates *bhava* differently. At KC 189, he translates *bhava* as "identity."

In Bengali we find: *tui bhabei thak*, "Continue to remain in *bhava*." An understanding of the concept of *bhava* as developed in Bengal (Gaudiya) Vaishnavism is necessary to correctly understand the term *bhavamukha*.

The *bhava* as used in this context has nothing to do with "existence." The word is not the opposite of *abhava*, "nonexistence" or "absence." I would translate the sentence as: "Continue to maintain your *bhava*" (*tui bhabei thak*). What this command means is: "Do not merge your identity with the Absolute, but continue to do good to people while you live in the direct knowledge that your real nature is one with the Absolute."

(139) KC p. 158: It was only after the six-month samadhi, Saradananda tells us, that Ramakrishna began to awaken fully to the realization that resulted in such a "liberal doctrine," namely, the realization that all religions meet in Vedanta. And it was only after the six-month samadhi that he became convinced that it was his destiny to be the divinely ordained teacher of this truth to the world and move away from thinking of himself as "the humblest of the humble" (endnote #15 which references LP 3.4.1; 3.3).

Response: This is not an honest summary of the references that Kripal provides. The sarcastic tone and language are quite apparent. To mention only two important points: (1) Nowhere does Saradananda say that Ramakrishna had the realization “that all religions meet in Vedanta.” (2) Saradananda mentions the identification with the Cosmic “I” as opposed to the little “I” which is identified with a person's psychophysical personality. This is a far cry from Kripal’s “[moving] away from thinking of himself as ‘the humblest of the humble.’”

While the author is free to make these comments he should at least take the responsibility for making them himself. He shouldn't mislead the reader into believing that what is being said has textual support.

(140) KC p. 159: This is a long way from Saradananda’s belief that the six-month samadhi and its famous command taught Ramakrishna that the goal of all states is a formless brahman and that Vedanta is the highest truth!

Response: This is Kripal’s summary of his own ideas. There is no reference given. Nowhere in the *Lilaprasanga* do we find this “Saradananda’s belief” expressed.

(141) KC p. 160: Ramakrishna is describing a vision he used to have of another naked paramahansa: “A naked person used to stay around—I would play with his little penis with my hand. Then I would laugh a lot. This naked form used to come out of me. It was in the form of a paramahansa—like a boy” (KA 4.231).

Response: In the second edition of *Kali's Child*, Kripal translates the Bengali word *dhan* as “little penis”—a marked improvement over “little cock,”

which is what he wrote in the first edition. By now we're familiar with Kripal's "troubled by his desire for the boys" subtext and his practice of using loaded words to promote his thesis. Literally, *dhan* means "treasure," and rather than having a provocative connotation ("little cock" or "little penis"), it is on the contrary a word which is euphemistic and not at all vulgar. In KC endnote #18, p. 351, Kripal says that "it is a crude word" and that his Bengali tutor had to whisper its meaning to him. By the time the second edition was printed, Kripal has changed the word from "cock" to "penis" but not the story that his Bengali tutor had to "whisper" its meaning. We are left wondering whether his tutor whispered the 1st edition version or the 2nd edition version! I am not happy with either version.

In any case, in the endnote to the second edition, Kripal has at least confessed: "But it is also meant to be affectionate and funny, something a mother might jokingly say when talking to or about her little boy." That gives us a simple test to find out if "little penis" is an appropriate translation of the Bengali word *dhan*. Is "little penis" an affectionate and funny usage, something a mother might jokingly say when talking to or about her little boy?

(142) KC p. 160: This vision, however, does more than hark back to the memories of the hut in the trees: it also answers those memories by reversing the relationship that no doubt existed between Tota and the young Ramakrishna, for here the paramahansa, not the saint, appears as the sexual object, as the boy.

Response: What makes Kripal so certain that "the relationship no doubt existed between Tota and the young Ramakrishna"? He hasn't shown any textual evidence to prove his point. Are his own theories enough to count as "evidence"?

(143) KC p. 160-61: Just a few lines down, Ramakrishna reveals another secret. After telling his audience how he used to perform Tantric rituals with the Bhairavi, Ramakrishna becomes excited and turns to a disciple: “In that state I couldn’t help but worship the little penises of boys with sandal-paste and flowers” (KA 4.232).

Response: The Bengali word used is the same as earlier: *dhan* (see note #141). In endnote #19, p. 351, Kripal quotes a ritual from the *Yoni-Tantra* and speculates that Ramakrishna might have been in fact “rubbing” sandal-paste, not “worshipping” with it. Having made this speculation, it now becomes a “fact” in Kripal’s mind and he now feels free to say in the main body of the text:

The vision has entered waking life: the boyish penis he once fondled in a dream-like vision he now rubs with sandal-paste in the light of the day; and the laughter of the dream has been replaced by the seriousness and compulsion of the ritual act.

We can see that what was merely “touching” (*hat diye*) in the original, “playing with hand” in Kripal’s earlier version, has now become “fondling” just a few lines later. To add to this troubling atmosphere, thick with pederastic insinuations, Kripal further adds “the seriousness and compulsion of the ritual act.” One certainly can’t accuse him of subtlety. But one *can* accuse him of willfully distorting the texts to create a scene fetid with sexual abuse, a scene which does not exist anywhere, either historically or in any text. It is solely a product of the author's imagination.

(144) KC p. 161: In volume 4, that book of secrets, the saint speaks of this “worship of the living lingam”: “The paramahansa’s state of madness also used to come [upon me]. I would become mad and worship my own penis

with the awareness that it was Shiva's penis. This is called the worship of the living *lingam* [*jivantalingapuja*]. And it became adorned with a little pearl! Now I'm not able to do that" (KA 4.106).

Response: There is quite a bit of mistranslation here:

- (1) In this entire section, Ramakrishna is describing the nature of a paramahansa. *Paramahamser abar unmader avastha hoy*, "A state of [divine] madness can, again, come upon a paramahansa." There is nothing in the text or the context to support Kripal's words "...used to come [upon me]."
- (2) *Jokhon unmad holo, shiva-linga bodhe nijer linga puja kortam*, "When that madness came upon me, I used to worship my genitals looking upon them as a *shiva-linga*."

In Bengali and other Indian languages, *linga* doesn't carry the kind of loaded meaning which "penis" does in English. Moreover, Shiva-linga by no stretch of imagination can be translated as "Shiva's penis." Even if the phallic origin of the symbol is granted (for argument's sake), the "penis" itself is the symbol of Shiva. It cannot be called "Shiva's penis." In reality, however, when a Hindu worships a Shiva-linga, he or she has in mind neither a "penis" nor "Shiva's penis," but just the presence of the Lord or the Divine. Thus Kripal's translation is not only inaccurate but also culturally insensitive.

- (3) *ekta abar mukta parano hoto*, "A pearl used to be put on it." Inexplicably, Kripal's translation goes way off the mark. It's odd that someone who is ostensibly a stickler for literal accuracy (read some of his sarcastic comments about Nikhilananda's translation) should do this. When we read his endnote #21 (p. 352) we understand why he translated it the way he did. He says: "I am indebted to Narasingha Sil for his interpretation of the pearl as a ball of seminal

fluid.” The actual explanation is much simpler. It’s customary in India to decorate the Shivalinga with garlands and ornaments such as necklaces.

(145) KC p. 162: In another passage, yet again in volume 4, we learn that Ramakrishna’s habit of garlanding Purna with flowers and rubbing sandal-paste on his “body” would send the boy into samadhi (KA 4.212).

Response: I have already discussed this passage elaborately in note #55. What is interesting is that on that page, Kripal translates this same passage as:

If you put a garland on his neck and sandal-paste on his body and then burn incense, he goes into samadhi!

Now, after almost 90 pages, “putting” sandal-paste on Purna’s body is transformed into “rubbing” sandal-paste, and Kripal puts the word “body” within quotation marks. His implication is clear.

This is typical of Kripal's methodology: first, mistranslate a passage or make a speculation, then build on it as if it were a proven “fact.”

(146) KC p. 162: No wonder that Purna’s parents, like Gadadhar’s own mother, worried about such practices and suspected more than religion in this worship (KA 3.149).

Response: This entire sentence is Kripal’s speculation; I searched KA 3.149 in vain in the attempt to verify what Kripal is saying. The passage in KA 3.149 has already been discussed in note #57.

(147) KC p. 163-64: And the suffering continued. Saradananda notes that Vedantic paramahamsas began coming now, filling Ramakrishna’s room with their philosophical debates. Ramakrishna acted as umpire as he took refuge again and again in a chamber pot kept in the corner of the room for him (LP 2.16.1).

Response: I don’t know whether Kripal is trying to be humorous, but there is no reference whatsoever to a “chamber pot” in LP 2.16.1.

(148) KC p. 165: The vision of the bearded Muslim, for example, occurs in at least two other places, both in the *Kathamrita*. In both passages, one of them listed as secret talk (KA 3.141), the vision clearly carries a Tantric message: the bearded Muslim (a defiled source of food for any good brahmin) distributes grains of rice ...

Response: The vision occurs in two places and only one of them is listed as “secret talk”—which shows just how “secret” that secret talk was. Another point that should be remembered is that during the so-called “secret talks” which Kripal incessantly dwells upon, the doors of Ramakrishna’s room were wide open and the room was almost always full of people. If we check the “secret talk” reference that Kripal gives (KA 3.141), we see that many devotees (*anek bhakta*) were present—both older men (Girish, Balaram, Trailokya, Jaygopal, M, et al) as well as younger ones (Paltu, Dvija, Purna, younger Naren), plus women devotees (*meye bhaktera*).

(149) KC p. 165: In one of the visions (KA 3.46), Ramakrishna takes this lesson of the bearded Muslim to his usual Tantric extremes and tastes the

disgusting substances of feces and pee with a flaming visionary tongue. Purity is transcended in a typically Tantric fashion. In the end, whether Ramakrishna saw Vedanta or Tantra in the “Muslim” teachings of Govinda is difficult to say. The textual record is ambiguous at best.

Response: There is nothing “ambiguous” in the “textual record.” Why didn't Kripal quote the passage? Because if he had done so, it would indicate that there wasn't any ambiguity at all. The vision Kripal quotes ends with these words of Ramakrishna: *dekhale je sab ek*, “I was shown that everything is one.”

The vision was not about “transcending purity in a typical Tantric fashion” but realizing the unity and oneness of existence. The vision of the bearded Muslim begins with this sentence KA 3.46: *ami ek din dekhlam, ek chaitanya—abhed*, “One day I saw that consciousness is one—undivided.” There is clearly no ambiguity about the nature of Ramakrishna’s vision.

(150) KC p. 166: When challenged by the women of the village with the simple fact that Ramakrishna wished to be with his wife, the Bhairavi would snap back with the retort: “What can he say? It was I who opened his eyes!” (LP 2.17.10)

Response: Misquoted. When we go to LP 2.17.10 we see this: “If anyone raised a question before her [Bhairavi] on any spiritual matter and said that he would ask Ramakrishna and have his opinion on it, she would flare up and say, ‘What can he say? It is I who opened his eyes.’”

Bhairavi’s words were spoken in a context entirely different from what Kripal says.

(151) KC p. 166: Finally, when the Bhairavi broke a village custom, a verbal battle ensued that led to her eventual defeat and humiliation. She apologized to Ramakrishna, rubbed his body with sandal-paste, and left for Benares.

Response: This is clearly a deliberate distortion. Note the phrase: “rubbed his body with sandal-paste.” Kripal provides no reference, but I checked in LP 2.17.14: *tini bhakti-sahakare vividh pushpamala svahaste rachana o chandana-charchit koriya sri-gauranga-jnane thakurke mahohar-beshe bhushita korilen evam sarvantahkarane kshama-prarthana korilen*, “with devotion she made garlands of various flowers and smeared them with sandal-paste, and having beautifully adorned the Master as Sri Gauranga, asked his forgiveness with all her heart.”

The Bhairavi smeared the *garlands of flowers* with sandal-paste; in Kripal’s version she “rubbed his *body* with sandal-paste.”

(152) KC p. 166: Once the party finally arrived at the holy city, Ramakrishna found that it was not at all what he had expected. Because he did not dress like a holy man and wore no sectarian marks on his body, no one recognized Ramakrishna as the paramahansa he thought he was (JV[5], 66).

Response: This is not a summary of what is found in the reference that Kripal gives. Dutta doesn’t say anything even remotely close to: “...no one recognized Ramakrishna *as the paramahansa he thought he was.*” Kripal is inserting his own comments and making it appear as if it’s in the documented material.

(153) KC p. 167: It was in this holy city that Ramakrishna ran into his old Tantric guru, the Bhairavi. She somehow managed to take him to another of her Tantric circles, this one held under the cover of darkness on the bank of the Ganges... (KA 2.142)

Response: This is completely false. In KA 2.142 there is no mention of the Bhairavi escorting Ramakrishna to the circle and, again, the circle being held “under the cover of darkness” is Kripal’s speculation. It may well have been held in the dark; we don’t know. But the text to which Kripal refers us says nothing about the time.

In Bengali we read: *ek din bhairavichakre amay niye gelo*, “One day I was taken to a *bhairavichakra* (meaning “a circle of bhairavas and bhairavis”).” Kripal probably—and wrongly—split the word into two: *bhairavi chakre*, and thus managed to say that it was the Bhairavi that took Ramakrishna to the circle. Further, Ramakrishna usually referred to the Bhairavi as “Bamni” (from Sanskrit “Brahmani”).

To give credence to his thesis, Kripal provides an endnote #29 (p. 352) in which we are asked to “see also LP 4.4.39”. When we look it up, we find only this statement: “...The sadhakas’ improper conduct at Kashi due to excessive drinking after performing the divine Mother’s nominal worship, to witness which they had invited Ramakrishna...” There is no mention of the Bhairavi and no mention of the time of the day when the circle was held. We can also see that “they had invited Ramakrishna.” There is no mention at all of the Bhairavi taking Ramakrishna there.

(154) KC p. 169: Saradananda tells us, Ramakrishna saw a man of fair complexion coming toward him. He knew that it was a foreigner because “his nose was flat.” The foreigner spoke: “Jesus—he who gave his heart’s blood in order to save humanity from suffering and pain and who endured death at the hands of men, he is one with the Lord, the greatest yogi, the loving Jesus Christ!” (LP 2.21.3)

Response: Kripal’s summary is inaccurate. In LP 2.21.3 we don’t see that Ramakrishna could identify the foreigner as Jesus *because* “his nose was flat.” He simply said that the foreigner’s tip of the nose was flat. It was not a factor that helped Ramakrishna recognize Jesus. Moreover, it is not the “foreigner” who speaks those words in quotes; Saradananda tells us very clearly that the words arose “with a ringing sound from the depths of Ramakrishna’s pure heart” (*thakurer poot hridayer antasthal hoite dhvanita hoite lagilo*).

(155) KC p. 181: Ramakrishna turns toward the Panchavati or “Place of Five Trees” and says to M: ‘I used to sit in this Panchavati. In time I became mad! O what happened! Kali is brahman. She who has sex with Shiva is Kali, the Primordial Power! She arouses the Unmoving There is the Self of Consciousness and the Power of Consciousness. The Self of Consciousness is a man, the Power of Consciousness is a woman. The Self of Consciousness is Krishna, the Power of Consciousness is Radha. The devotee is a particular form of this Power of Consciousness” (KA 4.60).

Response: This passage abounds in egregious mistranslations.

- (1) *kalai brahma* means: “Kala is Brahman.” Kripal's translation: “Kali is brahman.”

- (2) *jini kaler sahit raman koren, tini-i kali—adyashakti* means: “That which sports with Kala is Kali, the primal energy.” Kripal’s translation: “She who has sex with Shiva is Kali, the Primordial Power!”
- (3) *atalke taliye den* means: “She moves the Immovable.” Kripal’s version: “She arouses the Unmoving.”
- (4) *chidatma purush, chitshakti prakriti* means: “Chidatma is Purusha, Chitshakti is Prakriti.” Kripal’s version: “The Self of Consciousness is a man, the Power of Consciousness is a woman.” As he has done earlier, Kripal ignores the technical categories of Purusha and Prakriti, and replaces them with man and woman.

(156) KC p. 189: For Ramakrishna, the nature of the mystical experience varies according to psychological temperament and the consequent bhava or “identity” that the aspirant takes on to approach the divine (endnote #57).

Response: When I saw endnote #57 I understood why Kripal translated *bhava* as “identity” here—as opposed to his earlier translation of the same word as “existence” (“You remain in existence” KC 155). In the endnote, Kripal says:

Interestingly, the word *bhava* can also be used to refer to a person’s sexual orientation or intention. For example, in JV(5), 49, Ramakrishna’s implied intention to join Mathur and his wife in bed and Mathur’s desire to lie down with Ramakrishna are both described as *bhavas*.

I checked the *Jivanavrittanta* and marveled to see how much the original text had been distorted. The problem lies in the Bengali word *bhava*, which can be used in a great variety of ways. In JV[5], 49 we find:

Whenever Paramahamsadeva wished to go some place, he would go there without bothering about the appropriateness of the place, the time or the people. He would immediately retreat after entering the room if Mathur and his wife were sleeping on the bed. Mathur and his wife would become dismayed and say, “Father! Why do you go away after seeing us? Do you have any different intention (*bhava*)? You don’t even have the ‘knowledge’ that children have.” When on some day Mathur’s mind felt uplifted by the divine (*mane kono prakar bhaboday hoito*), he invited Ramakrishna to sleep near (*nikat*) him. Paramahamsadeva did not object to that.

The points to be noted are:

- (1) Ramakrishna did not enter the room with (as Kripal says) the intention of joining Mathur and his wife in bed;
- (2) Inviting Ramakrishna to sleep “near” is different from “lying down *with* Ramakrishna.” In KA 4.72 we read: "I used to sleep in the same room in which Mathurbabu and his wife slept. They cared for me as if I was their child. In those days I was in a state of divine madness (*unmada avastha*). Mathurbabu would ask: 'Father, are you able to hear our conversation?' I would say yes."
- (3) The word *bhava* has many meanings, depending on the context.
- (4) Finally, we are dealing with a cultural issue here. It is not at all unusual for people in India to share the same room for sleeping. It is more common than uncommon.

(157) KC p. 191: The milkmaids’ love was free from lust, he says repeatedly, as if to reassure himself (endnote #61 which references KA 2.110; 5.52).

Response: “As if to reassure himself” is Kripal’s comment and should not be included in the referenced matter.

(158) KC p. 192: It would not be too much to say that Ramakrishna's metaphors are somewhat confused.... Somehow devotional love is lustful, and somehow it is not. Or in Ramakrishna's words, "the lust of devotional love is not within lust" (KA 3.246).

Response: First of all, a technicality. In KA 3.246, the words are not Ramakrishna's but M's. Since Ramakrishna agrees, however, with them, we can let that pass.

In the *Kathamrita* we read: *bhakti-kamana bujhi kamanar madhye noy*, "The desire for devotion, I suppose, is not a 'desire'?"

M asks this question to Ramakrishna because he had earlier said to another person: "I have a desire for devotion."

Like *bhava*, *kamana* is another word that can have different shades of meaning such as lust or desire, depending on the context. Kripal understands this, and he does translate the same word differently in different places, but he frequently translates the word simply to suit his thesis, without regard to the context of the source material from which he quotes.

CHAPTER FOUR

(159) **KC pp. 202-4** have several references from a mysterious source called RJS. Nowhere in the book are we told what RJS refers to.

(160) KC p. 203: In other songs, the poet is more explicit about the sexual dimensions of his Mother's feet: "She is immersed in sexual delight on top

of her husband. He trembles as he tries to hold the weight of her feet” (KA 1.196).

Response: This is a very misleading translation. The Bengali song runs like this:

*Shiva sange sada range anande magana,
Sudhapane dhala dhala tale kintu pade na (ma).
Viparita ratatura, padabhare kampe dhara,
Ubhaye pagale para, lajja bhaya ar mane na (ma).*

My Translation:

Behold my Mother playing with Shiva, immersed in joy!

Drunk with celestial wine, She reels but she does not fall.

Filled with love she stands on top [of Shiva], and the earth trembles under
Her feet:

Both are mad with frenzy, unmindful of fear and shame!

The points to be noted are: It is not Shiva who trembles but the earth (*dhara*). The word *rati* has various shades of meaning, Kripal translates *ratatura* as “immersed in sexual delight on top of her husband.” To me it seems that a more accurate translation—one that comes closer to reflecting the song's context—would be: “filled with love she stands on top [of Shiva].”

(161) KC p .220: "Now I'm telling you something very secret—why I love Purna, Narendra, and all the others so much. I broke my arm while embracing Lord Jagannath in the erotic state. Then it was made

known to me: 'You have taken a body. Now remain in the different states—the Friend, the Mother, and the rest—in relation to other forms of man'" (KA 4.227-28). There is something secret, even scandalous, about this incident.

Response: When we go to KA 4.227-28 we don't find anything even remotely secretive and scandalous. Kripal's translation: "while embracing Lord Jagannath in the erotic state" is in Bengali, *jagannather sange madhur-bhabe alingan korte giye*, which I would translate as: "while embracing Jagannath in a state of *madhur-bhava*." The *madhur-bhava* is one of the states in Indian devotional schools in which the Supreme Being is perceived as one's beloved.

Kripal defines "the erotic" as "a dimension of human experience that is simultaneously related both to the physical and emotional experience of sexuality and to the deepest ontological levels of religious experience" (KC 23). If *this* is what Kripal means by "erotic," then his translation of *madhur-bhava* as "the erotic state" is completely erroneous. In Hindu devotional tradition, *madhur-bhava* is characterized by the intimacy, trust and total selflessness that is present in the relationship with one's beloved. The "physical and emotional experience of sexuality" is not a fundamental feature of *madhur-bhava*.

Having thus mistranslated the text as "embracing Lord Jagannath in the erotic state," Kripal raises a doubt: "What precisely was Ramakrishna doing in the vision...?" Two pages later (KC 223), "embracing" has mysteriously evolved into an "erotic encounter." Some sixty pages later (KC 291), the "embracing" reference returns with: "... he tried to embrace a *male* god in an erotic state" (emphasis mine).

If only Kripal had known the tradition connected with Lord Jagannath, he wouldn't have had to struggle so much to "interpret" the vision. The explanation is simple: Every year there is a Chariot Festival (*ratha-yatra*) in Puri, where Lord Jagannath's ancient temple stands. During this festival, it is customary for devotees to "embrace" the Lord. What this essentially means is an opportunity to *touch* the image that is taken out of the temple in a chariot which is pulled by thousands of devotees. This act of "embracing" is a sacred ritual in which every devotee is free to participate. No Hindu considers this as an act "to engage Lord Jagannath in an erotic encounter" (KC 223)! In fact, I know Hindus who have performed this rite over a hundred times. They would find the term "erotic encounter" either mystifying or hilarious.

(162) KC p. 224: For Vaishnavacharan, such a faith certainly carried homoerotic dimensions. Ramakrishna, for example, points out that Vaishnavacharan liked to look at pictures of men (*manusha*), for they aroused in him feelings of "tenderness" (*komala*) and "love" (*prema*) (KA 4.75).

Response: Again, more mistranslation. At KA 4.75 we see Ramakrishna saying: *Vaishnavacharan manusher chhabi dekhe komal bhab—premer bhab—pachhand karato*, "Vaishnavacharan liked pictures of persons expressing tenderness and love."

Kripal has mistranslated *manusher chhabi* as "pictures of men." *Manush* in this context doesn't specifically refer to "men" but to "human beings" in general.

Then Kripal adds:

Ramakrishna, we might recall, sexually aroused himself with a very similar practice (KA 5.108).

This misleading translation and assertion have been dealt with in the introductory essay preceding these notes (see pp. 9-10). We should also observe Kripal's use of the mischievous phrase: "a very similar practice."

(163) KC p. 224: More to the point, Datta records a rhyme of Ramakrishna's that explicitly connects Vaishnavacharan's "depraved" Kartabhajas with the Hijras, a religious community of castrated men known for their homosexual practices: "When the woman is a Hijra and the man is a khoja (eunuch), then you will be a Kartabhaja" (*Tattvasara*, 99).

Response: I checked the Bengali original of Datta's *Tattvasara* and found a number of inaccuracies.

- (1) This is *not* a "rhyme of Ramakrishna." Datta very clearly says:
Kartabhajadiger mate o ullekhita achhe, "it is also said in the traditions of the Kartabhajas and others."
- (2) The Hijras are *not* a "religious community."
- (3) In the endnote (#34, p. 355) Kripal comments: "Datta misreads the passage as referring to the desexualized nature of the 'final state.'" There is no reason to believe that Datta "misreads" the passage, unless Kripal can show from an independent source what—according to him—is the "real meaning" of the passage. Kripal has no other source to support his "reading" of the text. One must ask, then: On whose authority should we reject Datta and accept Kripal? Unfortunately, this is a pattern throughout *Kali's Child*. The source books become authentic when they suit his thesis, and when they

don't, either he doesn't quote them, or he skips the passages that interfere with his interpretation, or he declares the authors' understanding to be imperfect. From the context, Datta's reading makes perfect sense, and Datta should know because he is describing a contemporary movement and its practices.

(164) KC p. 225: Sharada would later recall how she feared Ramakrishna's reaction but was relieved to discover that he did not become angry upon learning of her Tantric past (LP 5.11.9).

Response: This gross distortion has already been addressed in note #99. In the above sentence, Kripal speculates: "Sharada would later recall how she feared Ramakrishna's reaction..." There is no mention in LP 5.11.9 of Sharada's fearing Ramakrishna's reaction.

(165) KC p. 226: "Now I only like God's play as man," the Paramahansa noted calmly, as if it were now a self-evident truth instead of a detested Tantric practice (KA 4.75).

Response: KA 4.75 refers only to the quoted words, and the parenthesis should have been put immediately after "God's play as man," (*naralila*, "play as a human" would be an accurate translation, because the Bengali *nara* in this context does not refer specifically to "man"); what comes after the quote is Kripal's own comment. Unless the reference is put in the correct location, how will the reader know whether what is written are M's words or Kripal's commentary?

There is, of course, a particular reason why Kripal wants to continue to use the word "man." In the following paragraph, he develops the idea of how when

Ramakrishna's disciples started coming, he "finally had a man, indeed, young attractive boys, to desire."

Second, seeing God's play in human forms is neither a "detested practice" nor specifically a "Tantric practice."

(166) KC p. 228: In one such passage, Ramakrishna is caressing the body and mouth of Narendra. "Why?" M asks himself and his readers. "Is it because he sees Narayana himself in Narendra? Is he having a vision of God in man?" M's question is not answered as Ramakrishna rubs and presses Narendra's body and feet in an ecstatic state. M asks again, not at all sure of himself: "Is he transmitting his Shakti?" (KA 1.204). M still receives no answer.

Response: This is a fine example of a both a stunning mistranslation as well as a misleading interpretation. In KA 1.204 the Bengali phrase used is the same: *gaye hat bulaitechhen*, but Kripal renders it in two different ways: "caressing the body" and "rubs and presses Narendra's body." In actuality what this phrase implies, given the context, is simply "patting the back."

Second, Kripal says "M's question is not answered" and "M still receives no answer." M is not *asking* the question to anyone. These are purely rhetorical questions and their answer is obvious in the *Kathamrita*. I fail to understand how Kripal could postulate that M was "not at all sure of himself." What I *do* understand is that it is not mentioned in KA 1.204 and the remark should have been put outside the parentheses.

(167) KC p. 230: The renouncers, after all, like to quote a passage in which Ramakrishna refers to his penis as "all dead and gone."

Response: No reference is given. We have no idea what passage Kripal is referring to—if indeed any such passage exists.

(168) KC p. 230: In a strikingly translucent passage, Ramakrishna explains that it is this love, likened to a mystical phallus, that the incarnation shares with his disciples (KA 4.193).

Response: What Kripal calls “mystical phallus” is in KA 4.193 *svayambhu linga*, meaning “the Shivalinga which is found in a natural state” (*svayam+bhu*=self-made); in other words, it is a Shivalinga that is not sculpted by hand.

KA 4.193 says that Raga-bhakti, a higher form of devotion (as opposed to Vaidhi-bhakti), is practiced by the incarnation and his apostles/disciples (*sangopanga*). In Kripal’s version, this gets mystically transformed into the “love, likened to a mystical phallus, that the incarnation shares with his disciples.”

(169) KC p. 231: Perhaps, but such was certainly not the case for Ramakrishna, who, we must remember,... prayed to the “place of the father” (*lingam*) and the “place of the mother” (*yoni*) not to be born again (KA 2.155)...

Response: This is completely incorrect. In KA 2.155 we see that Ramakrishna is explaining the essence of the worship of Shiva (*shivapujar bhab*): he says that the worship of the Shivalinga is really the worship of the “place of the father” (*pitri-sthan*) and the “place of the mother” (*matri-sthan*); the devotee

worships with the prayer not to be born again. Note that the KA does *not* say that Ramakrishna prayed thus.

(170) KC p. 232: Sometimes the boys would dance naked (KA 3.99).

At KA 3.99 there is no reference whatsoever to boys dancing naked. We read there about a group of devotees (the group which Kripal calls the “householders”—as opposed to the “boys” who belong to the group of “renouncers”) who dance along with Ramakrishna. Vijaya Krishna Goswami (a householder and an adult, not a “boy”) *nritya korite korite digambar hoiya padiyachhen; hunsh nai*, “was not even aware that his clothes had slipped while he was dancing.”

Note that “dancing naked” is different from “clothes slipping unawares while dancing.” Only the instance of Vijaya Krishna Goswami is mentioned in KA 3.99 and he was not a “boy.” He was born in 1841 and, at the time of this incident, he was 43.

Kripal continues:

Such practices did not always sit well with the locals. One scholar, after visiting the saint and witnessing a show of dancing and singing, was supposed to have commented curtly: “Yes, a paramahamsa indeed.”

In an endnote (#50, p. 356) Kripal tells us: “Quoted in Sil, *Ramakrishna Paramahamsa*, 108.” We go to Sil’s book and he tells us that he got the quote from the *Gospel*, p. 1023. So we go back to the *Gospel* and find that it is in fact a letter that Ashwini Kumar Dutta wrote to M, giving his reminiscences of Ramakrishna.

(1) Kripal's statement: “Such practices did not always sit well with the locals” is completely unsupported by any evidence. If he thinks he is

substantiating it with what follows, it must be pointed out that Ashwini Kumar Dutta was not a “local.”

- (2) Ashwini Kumar Dutta’s account of Ramakrishna is very respectful and it is obvious that his words: “Yes, a paramahansa indeed” were said in a very positive sense. No one knows how Kripal got the idea that the scholar “commented curtly.” Ashwini Kumar Dutta, who made the comment, doesn’t say it; Sil (from whom Kripal is ostensibly quoting) doesn’t say it; and the *Gospel* and the *Kathamrita*, the original sources of this text, don’t say it. Thus we have again more of the author’s personal speculations, which are cloaked under the guise of “documentation.”

(171) KC p. 232: For Ramakrishna, nudity was a natural expression of the mystical state. . . . Nakedness was also seen as an instrument to loosen the bond of shame (LP 3.8.29).

Response: In LP 3.8.29 we see that Ramakrishna is merely narrating what he had heard from Tota Puri regarding the traditions among the Naga sannyasins.

(172) KC p. 232: Sometimes, he would go further: one day, for example, he asked the boy Prasanna to strip for him, whereupon Ramakrishna exclaimed: “What a boy!” (KA 3.124)

Response: The Bengali expression is: *ki chhelemanush*, “How innocent!” But Kripal erroneously translates it as, “What a boy!”

(173) KC p. 234: True, he became a woman when he lived with his wife, Sharada, in order to conquer his desire for her. And he succeeded: “I’m not able to call you a he,” she confessed (KA 2.154-55).

Response: The Bengali original of KA 2.154-55 translates as: *Ami apanake pu (purush) bolte pari na*, “I cannot speak of myself as man.” In Kripal’s version this mysteriously becomes transfigured into Sharada’s confession: “I’m not able to call you a he”—obviously at great variance with what is in the *Kathamrita*.

Kripal continues: “But he also took on the nature of a woman to live with and lie down with Mathur...” (KC 234). In note #156 this point has already been answered.

(174) KC p. 235: Narendra in particular has a man’s nature and so naturally tends to a “very high state,” to a formless state (KA 4.228).

Response: In KA 4.228 these are two entirely different sentences. To connect disparate sentences with “and so” is to intentionally distort the text.

(175) KC p. 235: It is interesting to note that, although many men are said to have feminine souls, the saint never speaks of women as having masculine souls. Indeed, when women show masculine marks, at least in their bodies, the saint rejects them as malformed.

Response: Kripal provides no reference. In any case, Ramakrishna never referred to any masculine or feminine “souls.” Second, although he did refer to the masculine or feminine *natures* of some of his visitors, in the *Kathamrita* we have on record what Ramakrishna said to the male visitors because that was the only time M was present. So to phrase that “the saint never speaks of women...” must be qualified by the understanding: “in the *Kathamrita*, the primary text on which Kripal has supposedly tried to build his thesis.”

(176) KC p. 237: But Narendra, Ramakrishna reports with an excited exclamation point, was in the middle of the thousand-petaled lotus in the head, where Shiva sits waiting for his lover, the goddess Shakti (KA 4.228).

Response: In KA 4.228 we merely find this: *anya padma karu dasha-dal, karu shodasha-dal, karu shata-dal kintu padma-madhye Narendra sahasra-dal!*—“some are ten-petaled lotuses, some are sixteen-petaled, some hundred-petaled, but Narendra is a thousand-petaled lotus.”

Everything other than this is Kripal’s commentary alone and not in KA 4.228.

CHAPTER FIVE

(177) KC p. 243: But there is still more, for there is something essentially shameful about a woman—even if she happens to be a goddess—standing on top of a man. Bengali wives, after all, do not

normally stand on top of their husbands. Only whores and illicit lovers dare to stand on top of their men (endnote #1).

Response: The endnote says: “It is no accident this passage occurs in volume 4.” Perhaps it is an accident that Kripal does not tell us volume 4 of *which* book and on *which* page of it. We must assume he is referring to the *Kathamrita*. I don’t remember having read this passage in any of the 5 volumes. And yes, why “Bengali wives”?

(178) KC p. 247: Perhaps one of Ramakrishna’s disciples summed up this troubling history best when he capitalized on Kali’s popularity among the Sonthal tribes and jokingly referred to her as “that Sonthal bitch” (endnote #6).

Response: In the endnote, Kripal gives three references from the KA (1.235, 1.236, 4.267). While the first and the last can be located, the middle reference leads nowhere.

Two points: (1) the statement is made by Dr. Sarkar, who was by no means Ramakrishna’s “disciple.” Interestingly, Kripal himself admits as much a few pages later (p. 256): “[Dr. Sarkar] remains to the end a friend, but certainly not a disciple.”

(2) the Bengali words were: *santhali magi*, “Santhali woman.” The word *magi* is a colloquial, rural term for a more sedate *mahila* or *stri*. But *magi* does not carry the kind of connotation that the word “bitch” carries in English.

(179) KC p. 252: The shy housewife, biting her tongue in a public act of restraint, controls by that act an immense reservoir of power capable, at any moment, of dissolving what Ramakrishna called the “bonds of shame, disgust, and fear” and returning the culture to that Tantric midnight “where all jackals howl in the same way” (LP 4.4.30).

Response: Kripal has the extraordinary capacity of selecting stray passages and quoting them entirely out of context. LP 4.4.30 is an example of this: The phrase referring to jackals howling alike concerns the shared highest experience of all enlightened beings. Since their “experience” of the truth is identical, their essential “teaching” is also identical. Kripal's ability to segue from jackals howling alike to a " midnight" is perfectly breathtaking.

(180) KC p. 258: According to Saradananda, only twelve stayed until the very end and completed their “vow of service” (GM 5.13.2.6).

Response: This is a *very* interesting citation. Kripal quotes from the English version of the *Lilaprasanga—Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*—a very rare occurrence. But what is even more interesting is endnote #18 which he has affixed to the quotation given above. The endnote says: “LP lists 5.13.1-3 as appendixes and does not provide paragraph numbers. I am thus following the numbering system from the GM [*Great Master*] but translating from the Bengali of the LP [*Lilaprasanga*].”

(1) The only portion Kripal has “translated” in the text is “vow of service”—and this is Jagadananda’s translation. Kripal need not have

taken the trouble to “translate” it independently and arrive at the same result.

- (2) Nothing else in that paragraph is “translated”—but Kripal provides what we must assume is a “summary” since he gives the reference number in parentheses. Unfortunately, however, the summary is distorted. To translate from LP 5.13.1-3:

The pure, selfless love of the Master on the one hand, and the wonderful spirit of friendship of Narendra and his noble company on the other, united together to bind them in such a sweet and tender, yet hard and unbreakable, bond that they actually began to consider one another to be much more intimately related than the people of the same family, so much so that if any one had unluckily to go home on some very urgent business on a certain day, he would invariably come back the same evening or the next morning. *Although not more than twelve in number, all of them remained there to the end* of the Master’s mortal life and completed their vow of service by renouncing the world (emphasis mine).

We can see that the text says something quite different from what Kripal insinuates above. The *Lilaprasanga* clearly indicates that the number was never more than twelve but all of them stayed to the end. Contrast this with Kripal’s summary (or what he calls his “translation” from the Bengali): “According to Saradananda, only twelve stayed until the very end...” This suggests that there were many more who gradually dropped out and finally, “only twelve stayed until the very end....”

- (3) Finally, Kripal’s endnote itself is misleading. He says that: “The LP lists 5.13.1-3 as appendixes and does not provide paragraph numbers....” It’s not just here that the LP does not provide paragraph

numbers. It does not provide them *anywhere!* "...I am thus following the numbering system from the GM but translating from the Bengali of the LP." If he is translating from the Bengali, what is the compulsion to provide the numbering system from the English *Great Master?* The Bengali book does have page numbers. I am not aware of any other scholar who quotes from a Bengali book but uses the reference-numbers from its English translation.

(181) KC p. 259: Everyone present in the garden at Kashipur received a special awakening on that day, everyone except poor Haramohan. Peeved, no doubt, that the boy had married a woman (KA 4.109), Ramakrishna would not touch him.

Response: There is no mention anywhere of a specific reason why Ramakrishna did not touch Haramohan. Kripal's phrase "no doubt" indicates that Kripal himself has no doubt about the reason. While this is his privilege, he nevertheless goes on to say:

One can imagine the disappointment the left-out disciple must have felt as he watched all of his friends enter ecstatic states. Marrying a woman apparently had made him an unfit object for the saint's homoerotic energies. Haramohan, after all, was now engaged in explicit heterosexual activity. He had dared to defile himself with lover-and-gold.

What Kripal neglects to mention here is the fact that probably *all* the people who received spiritual awakening that day were "married to a woman." In fact, none of the so-called "renouncers," as Kripal calls them, were present for the occasion. It would seem obvious, then, that being "married to a woman" was not the issue at stake here.

(182) KC p. 262: Narendra’s presence and words, like the peacock’s display, would indeed be very colorful, a delight for many, just as they had once “lighted the fire” of his peahen, Ramakrishna (KA 5.133).

Response: As he has done in other places, Kripal legitimizes his interpretation by providing a reference in parentheses at the end of the sentence. KA 5.133 only has the phrase “lighted the fire,” and it is uttered in an entirely different context. It has nothing to do with peacocks and peahens.

(183) KC p. 266: Such taunts were so pointed (and convincing) that Ramakrishna walked to the bank of the river and almost jumped in at high tide to escape their truths (KA 1.168-69).

Response: We have here again the same deceptive referencing as the note given above. The citation here relates *only* to the fact that Ramakrishna was going to the river to drown himself to escape Hriday’s harassment. The rest of the sentence is Kripal’s own commentary.

(184) KC p. 272: Ramakrishna describes frankly the four types of people whose food he will not eat: lawyers, thieves, doctors, and rich kids (KA 5.135).

Response: This is another shining example of either Kripal’s ignorance of Bengali or his penchant for distorting the original texts. At KA 5.135 we read: “I don’t eat anything offered by miserly people (*kripan*).

Their wealth is squandered in these ways: first, litigation; second, thieves and robbers; third, physicians; fourth, their wicked children's extravagance."

(185) KC p. 274: But those who remained celibate won both Ramakrishna's favor and his food. Hence an ecstatic Ramakrishna feeds the little Nityagopal by grabbing both of his hands and intimately putting them to his mouth (KA 5.129).

Response: At KA 5.129 we see only this: "Seeing Nityagopal in an ecstatic state, the Master put a morsel or two into his mouth."

Note the distortions in Kripal's version: Ramakrishna feeds the "little" Nityagopal (who at the age of 23 or 24 was hardly "little") by "grabbing both of his hands" (not in the text at all) and "intimately" (not in the text at all) putting them to his mouth. And all of this, he wants the reader to presume, is to be found in KA 5.129.

(186) KC p. 282: The rich are especially hounded, for they lose their money from four sides: lawyers, thieves, doctors, and bad boys (KA 5.135).

Response: See Kripal's quote on p. 273 along with my note (#184) discussing it. Kripal here manages to use the same text in two places with two different versions to make two different points.

(187) KC p. 282: The Captain, a disciple of Ramakrishna, praises his wife as if he were possessed by some ghost and did not know it (endnote #46).

Response: Endnote #46 gives these references: KA 1.178 and 2.61-62. There is nothing in KA 1.178 to warrant reference to the quoted sentence. The endnote further says: “Hari is possessed but by an actual witch who lives in a tree” (KA 3.30). There is nothing at all at KA 3.30 about Hari or about a witch.

(188) KC p. 282: Another disciple, this time unnamed, is described as a “slave of a black hag” (KA 3.30). The saint, it seems, thought very little of his disciples’ wives.

Response: There is nothing whatsoever at KA 3.30 to suggest that the person was a “disciple” of Ramakrishna. Interestingly, Kripal now translates *mag* as “hag.” Perhaps he finally wearied of the term “bitch.”

(189) KC p. 284: Why sleep in seven beds when you can sleep in one? (KA 1.73 plus endnote #5 which says: Cf. KA 1.153)

Response: Neither at KA 1.73 nor at KA 1.153 do we find anything at all to justify these references.

(190) KC p. 291: In another unusual passage, this time in volume 1, Ramakrishna relates the day he went to visit one of his disciples he called “the Captain” and fell into an unconscious state in, among all places, his host’s latrine: “One day I became unconscious in the latrine of his house. He’s so concerned about purity, and yet he sat

down with his foot in the hole [of the latrine] and pulled me out” (KA 1.178).

Response: This is a complete distortion based upon mistranslation. Since Kripal builds his interpretation upon this faulty translation, it is good to know what KA 1.178 actually contains: “Once at his house I became unconscious in the latrine (*ami ek din or badite paikhanay behunsh hoye gechhi*). He is so particular about his orthodox habits (*o to ato achari*), but he helped me sit in the latrine with my legs apart (*paikhanar bhitar amar kachhe giye pa phak kore bosiyey*). He is so concerned about ritual purity (*ato achari*), but he did not show any disgust (*ghrina korle na*).”

Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna became unconscious *while defecating* and the Captain had to help him get up. Whereas the Bengali text says that Ramakrishna became unconscious and the Captain had to help him sit properly for defecating—which makes it clear that he became unconscious *in* the latrine but *before* defecating. When we see how diametrically opposed to the original text Kripal’s “translation” is, we can only laugh at his commentary which follows:

The fact that the Captain had to put his foot in the hole of the latrine to lift the saint out suggests that Ramakrishna was frozen in a defecating posture, squatting over the hole. He “became unconscious,” in other words, in the very act of defecation.”

(191) KC p. 324: He has become, as he claimed, a mystical phallus aroused into ecstasy “by the slightest things” (KA 2.49).

Response: There is nothing whatsoever at KA 2.49 corresponding to the first part of Kripal’s sentence: “He has become, as he claimed, a mystical phallus...”

The notes given above are not by any means an exhaustive or even a comprehensive list of the problems inherent in *Kali's Child*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that to prepare a comprehensive list would be to create a book every bit as large as *Kali's Child* itself. The notes above are skeletal at best; the essay and notes are simply my own brief response to *Kali's Child*. There are many more issues to be addressed but this would require more depth and length than the scope of this paper permits. I look forward to having scholars examine some of these issues in greater length—and with greater depth—than I was able to do in this paper.—S.T.

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