

Tenali Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna was born in a village called Garlapadu in Andhra State during the early part of the sixteenth century. (Some people say that he was born in Tenali.) His father Ramaiah died when Ramakrishna was very young. The boy was deprived of his father's love. His mother Lakshamma returned to her native place Tenali to live with her brother. Ramakrishna grew up in his uncle's town and so came to be known as Tenali Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna's mother was very anxious to educate her son. Those were days when the Vaishnavas were powerful. They thought one caste was superior and another inferior; they treated people according to their caste. There were many Vaishnava teachers in the place; they refused to teach Ramakrishna because he was a Shaiva.

Ramakrishna was not at all grieved by this. He became carefree. From morning till night he was in the company of naughty boys; he was quite happy eating the mango, apple and tamarind he stole from gardens.

Ramakrishna's mother was miserable because her son was utterly illiterate. She did odd jobs in many houses and fed herself and her boy.

By the time he was ten, Ramakrishna grew a little more sensible. In those days education meant the study of the Vedas, the Upanishads and religious texts. He was ashamed and sorrow-stricken because, let alone reading the books, he could not even read the letters. He realized he was illiterate.

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Ramakrishna went to a many pundits and begged them humbly: "Please accept me as your disciple. I will repay you by rendering service." But he was called names and thrown out of ashrams and schools.

There were only a few Shaivite Brahmins in Tenali. They were themselves poor. When Ramakrishna approached them, he was turned away with the despairing words, "Get away; why should you struggle for this education? Make a living by begging."

'I Shall Get Education'

Ramakrishna became very angry with them. He had nothing but disgust and contempt for them. He thought: 'What a selfish lot! What is the use of their scholarship when they refuse to impart education? No more will I beg any one for my education. I shall get enough education for everyday affairs.'

Ramakrishna fell at his mother's feet and said: "Bless me, mother! I am going out to secure education". The innocent mother rejoiced at this and thought that some good teacher had agreed, to teach him. She blessed him and said, "Son, try to become a great scholar and master all branches of knowledge."

But Ramakrishna did not approach any teacher. The village school wall was his teacher! Every day he would stand by the wall and attentively listen to the lessons taught in the classroom. He would return home to repeat before his mother the lessons he had learnt. This was his daily practice.

All good things are short-lived! One-day a- pupil saw Ramakrishna standing near the wall and shouted: "A thief! A thief!" The teacher and the pupils rushed out of the school and surrounded Ramakrishna.

In great anger the teacher questioned him: "Have you nothing else to do? Why do you loaf here?" Ramakrishna touched the teacher's feet and said humbly: I came here to learn." Weeping, he narrated his story.

When the teacher understood how the boy was yearning for education and how much he was suffering, he felt proud of him and was full of sympathy.

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But he could do nothing. He was also a prisoner of foolish religious prejudices.

He said: "My child, any teacher should be lucky to have a student like you. But if I accept you, the people of my caste will throw me out! Do not come near the school; they may harm you... My mind tells me that one day you will be a great scholar. You have my sincere blessings. That is all I can give you!" So saying, the teacher placed his hands on Ramakrishna's head and then went away.

Ramakrishna did not know what to do next. He wandered aimlessly and cursed his misfortune. He entered a thick forest. The boy walked and walked, and grew very tired. He sat before an old mansion and began to weep. At that moment a Sadhu came there. He asked the boy, "Who are you? Why have you come to this fearful forest? Why are you weeping? What is your difficulty? Do not hesitate to tell me. I will try to help you if possible."

Ramakrishna replied: "Honored sir, I have no father. I am the only support of my poor mother. She keeps telling me that one who has no education is better than a crow or an eagle. But no one in my village is prepared to teach me. I beg of you, sir, accept me as your disciple and be so kind as to educate me." So saying, Ramakrishna held the sadhu's feet firmly.

Then the sage said: "My child, it is not possible for you to begin your education now and become a very learned man. I will tell you what to do. That will fulfil your desires.

"See, there is a temple. It is the temple of the great Mother, Kalika Devi; She will be pleased with those who pray devoutly and grant boons. I will teach you the important holy words, with which you can please the Mother. If you repeat the mantra a hundred and ten million times with great devotion, she will appear before you. But do not be frightened by her terrible appearance.

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'By Kali's blessings you will become a great scholar. May she grant all your wishes!" So saying the sadhu whispered the sacred words into Ramakrishna's ears and went away.

Ramakrishna bathed in a nearby lake, collected leaves and flowers and entered the temple. He chanted the words "Jai Mahakali! Jai Jai Kalika Matha! He devoutly offered the leaves and the flowers at the feet of the deity and prostrated before her. Then he sat before the image of Kali in padmasana posture, closed his eyes and began to chant the, mantra.

After all it was a temple in ruins where snakes, birds, bats and various other creatures abounded. Was it really possible to chant the mantra eleven crore times? Snakes freely moved on his body. Birds pecked at him and insects bit him. But Ramakrishna sat motionless! As soon as Ramakrishna completed the repetition of the mantra eleven crore and eleven times, Mother Kalika appeared. She had a thousand faces and looked terrifying. She said to him: "Ramakrishna! I am pleased with your devotion. Open your eyes and ask for whatever you desire." Ramakrishna slowly opened his eyes and looked at the figure standing before him. He asked her: "Mother! Who are you?"

"I am Kalika Devi, the goddess to whom you have been praying for eleven days. I am pleased with your devotion and I have appeared before you." When the Great mother said these words Ramakrishna closed his eyes and prostrated at her feet. Then he opened his eyes and gazed.

She was the Goddess of Shakthi (Power) seated on a lion! She had a thousand fierce faces! A thousand flaming tongues and a thousand pairs of burning eye!

The goddess was very much surprised. She had expected that the boy would be terrified when he saw her. But Ramakrishna was intently gazing at her and the lion!

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All of a sudden Ramakrishna began to laugh! Surprised at his queer behavior, Kali asked him, "Rama Krishna, what are you doing? Even the mighty giants shudder when they see me. How dare you laugh at me?"

Ramakrishna replied: "Mother, when I saw you with a thousand faces but only two hands, I remembered something and burst into laughter. Pray forgive me, Mother."

Kalika Devi's curiosity was roused. She ordered him to explain what he had remembered to make him laugh.

"Divine Mother! When we catch cold, we feel that two hands are insufficient to wipe our only nose. If, you catch cold will your two hands be enough to wipe your thousand noses? The thought made me laugh forgive me, I have been impudent." So saying, Ramakrishna again fell at her feet and stood up.

The smile and the sense of humor of the boy pleased Kalika Devi. The boy had performed tapas but had now completely forgotten the very object of his tapas, and had spoken in such a light vein. The Goddess valid her fierce form and smiled.

"Ramakrishna, you have made even me laugh! So you will master all learning. You will speak so as to suit the situation, attain fame as a great jester and make people laugh. You will be famous as the great humorist, the comic poet Ramakrishna" So spoke Kali and blessed him.

This did not satisfy Ramakrishna. Doubts began to trouble him. 'Can the people of Tenali be made to enjoy humor? If I try, would that not be like casting pearls before swine? How can I, living in their midst, catch the king's eye?' These thoughts troubled him.

Kali understood his doubts. She said with a smile: "My child, do not be worried. Go to the famous Vijayanagar Empire in the South. You will please the king and you will be appointed as the court poet. You have my blessings." So saying she disappeared.

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This is a popular story about Ramakrishna. This story is an answer to the question - how could a boy without formal schooling become a scholar? Who knows what truth there is in it? Later, in the king's court two gifts of Ramakrishna, namely his sense of humor and his courage, were amply exhibited. He could see the comic side of any situation. So he was able to see every situation from a new angle. The second quality was his courage.

Accompanied by his mother Ramakrishna came to Vijayanagar. The comfort, the prosperity and the grandeur of the capital filled him with wonder. He made inquiries and taught that artist, men of letters, scholars and experts enjoyed royal patronage. Krishnadevaraya (who ascended the throne in 1509) was most generous to men of genius.

But how was Ramakrishna to catch the king's eye? Who would introduce a total stranger to the king?

Ramakrishna realized that only his talent had to open the doors of the court to him. He waited every day near the main gate of the palace waiting for an opportunity.

Many days passed, and every day he returned home disappointed.

At last he got an opportunity. A famous 'Bhagavatha Mela' troupe (a troupe of actors in a folk-play) from Tanjore came to Vijayanagar to give a performance before the king. Ramakrishna learnt that this troupe would stage a play called 'Krishna Leela'. Members of this troupe carried with them the special costumes required for the play. On seeing this troupe, Rama Krishna thought of a plan. He returned home and dressed himself like a cowherd boy. Carrying a big churning stick on his shoulder he returned to the main gate of the palace.

There was a guard sporting big moustaches, near the main gate. He stopped Ramakrishna who was striding in and shouted at him, "You there! Who are you? You seem to think you're a big man, you don't have to ask for a permission to enter!"

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Ramakrishna replied, I belong to the drama troupe, which just went in. You know they are staging a play before the king; I am a cowherd boy in it. Look at my churning stick."

Ramakrishna was trying to slip in -but the guard stopped him and said, "You have come so late. I will allow you only if you pay the penalty."

What could Ramakrishna offer? His ingenuity came to his rescue. Giving a display of a comic role before the guard, Ramakrishna said: "Look, I am a great jester. The king will appreciate my performance and give me a special prize. I will share it with you, and then leave the palace. Agreed?"

The guard asked: "Will you give half of what the king grants you?"

"Yes. Yes certainly", replied Ramakrishna.

"Then, get in." So saying the guard let him in.

Full of joy Ramakrishna ran forward. But at the entrance to the Durbar Hall there was another enemy! Another whiskered guard! And again an obstacle in Ramakrishna's way.

Like the first guard, this guard, too, let in Ramakrishna after getting a promise from him to share half of what he got from the king!

The play 'Krishna Leela' was in progress in the presence of the king himself. Krishna in the company of the cowherds, Krishna's plunder of milk and butter, Krishna over coming Kalinga, the slaying of the evil enemies Shakatasura, Dhenuka'sura, Aghasura and Puthani, and finally killing Kamsa himself, all these the actors had presented. With Krishna before them the other characters were singing songs in praise of Lord Krishna's valor.

At that moment Ramakrishna struck the actor who was playing the role of Krishna on the back. The actor sank to the ground in agony. Tenali Ramakrishna, imitating the Bhagavathas, began to sing and dance keeping time: "What sort of valor is yours? They say you slew Kaleeya and Kamsa.

"But you could not withstand a single blow with the churning stick!

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'What a valiant hero! Are you Krishna or a worthless sinner?'

Krishnadevaraya and the courtiers had been bored with the play and sleepy; but they went into peals of laughter at the comic role of Ramakrishna. Encouraged by this Ramakrishna raised the churning stick at Krishna once again! Krishna fell at the feet of Ramakrishna and prayed to be spared! At this all burst into laughter again.

Raising the actor, Ramakrishna said to him: "Don't boast of your valor; and don't let others praise you. Pray for the grace of Mother Kali, who protects all living creatures." The frightened actor began to sing hymns in praise of Mother Kali!

Krishnadevaraya who laughed to his hearts content said: "I am giving a special prize to the cowherd boy who entertained us with his humor today."

The leader of the troupe was aghast at this announcement. With folded hands, he said to the king: "Your Highness! That jester does not belong to our troupe. I thought he was a member of the audience. There is some sort of deception."

Then with folded hands Ramakrishna said humbly, "Your Highness! It is true that I do not belong to this troupe. But I tried to relieve your boredom. I seek your forgiveness." At this Krishnadevaraya became angry and ordered, "Give this impostor a hundred lashes! That is his reward!"

Ramakrishna begged of the king "Please wait for a while, Your Highness. The palace guards -have to be summoned." The king thought this was strange but yet ordered the guards to be brought to his presence. When they were ushered in, Ramakrishna asked them: "Did I not promise to give each of you half of whatever the king gave me?"

"Yes," said the two guards.

Then Ramakrishna said to the king: "Did you hear, Your Highness? They are to share the hundred lashes!" The two guards were shocked. The others roared with laughter, the shrewd king suspected there was a background to this

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drama enacted by Ramakrishna and said, "Tell me the true reason for your behavior. I have excused you, as you have made me laugh." Then Ramakrishna narrated the entire story of his life.

On hearing his story, Krishnadevaraya said "Ramakrishna, there are seven mighty scholars in my court. But there is yet a place for one who can provide mirth and laughter. Accept the place, be our Comic Poet and one of the eight famous Poets." So saying, the king honored Ramakrishna with the special robes of his court.

Tenali Ramakrishna has attained fame as a great jester. He was equally a great scholar and a poet. He was the author of one of the five great Telugu classics 'Panduranga Mahathme' (The Greatness of Panduranga). A man who composed poetry in the king's court and won such fame must indeed have been a great scholar. He was also the author of 'Ghatikachala Mahathme'. It is said he wrote 'Linga Purana', too. Ramakrishna was one of the advisers to Krishnadevaraya. The king used to discuss problems with him. Thus Ramakrishna had learning and sound common sense, and could also consider a problem seriously.

But by nature Ramakrishna was a jester. He knew that laughter is a powerful weapon and could be used to expose foolish pride and stupidity. That is why many stories which highlight his love of humor have gained currency. Some of them are of cheap and crude humor. It is difficult to believe either that a king like Krishnadevaraya would encourage a buffoon of crude and vulgar tricks or that the people would admire such a man. People who thought some stories were humorous have connected Tenali Ramakrishna with them.

But there are several stories, which illustrate his resourcefulness, his daring and his methods of teaching proud people a lesson. Some of them are narrated below.

The Scholar from Kashi Humbled

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Once a great scholar of Kashi came to Vijayanagar along with his disciples. He had toured North India and had defeated famous scholars in debates related to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Shasthras. In Vijayanagar the king welcomed him as his guest.

The scholar entered the court with an air of importance. He said to the king, "Your Highness, I have heard that there are eminent scholars in your court. Let them argue with me. If I am defeated, I will surrender my titles to them. If they are defeated, they must accept me as their master and must admit it in writing."

The challenger's air of supreme confidence, the documents of victory he flaunted and his ringing tones filled the court scholars with dismay. Krishnadevaraya said to the scholar from Kashi, "Learned sir, let us have the contest tomorrow," and sent the scholar to the guesthouse. Then he sent for his scholars. He said, "Which of you is ready for this debate?"

The scholars were frightened by the man's airs and his titles and testimonials they bent down their heads in silence.

The king was furious. "So this is the worth of the scholars in my court!" he exclaimed and walked away. Then Ramakrishna said, "Why should we be alive if we cannot save the prestige of the king? I am ready for this task." At this, the other seven scholars gladly offered their titles to him and agreed to be the disciples of Ramakrishna.

Krishnadevaraya was surprised at the decision of Ramakrishna; but he made all the arrangements for the contest.

Next day, Ramakrishna entered the court in great splendor. He was wearing a Kashmir silk dhoti and a laced shawl. He displayed medals studded with precious stones. His forehead shone with vermilion and vibhuthi (sacred ash). Before him walked the seven great scholars proclaiming his greatness; behind them came Ramakrishna stepping on bricks of gold which the servants placed on the floor.

The scholar from Kashi was dumb-founded at the sight.

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Ramakrishna was carrying a big book covered with laced silk. He put it on a desk, looked around and asked in an arrogant voice ': "Who is he, the scholar who wants to face me in a debate?" Ramakrishna's show had already astounded the scholar from Kashi; he stood up and said, I am the man."

The king indicated that the debate might begin. Forthwith Ramakrishna pointed his finger at the book on the desk and said, "Let us argue about this book known as 'Tilakashtamahishabandhana."

The opponent perspired in fear.

The books he had read were countless. But he had never heard of this book! He wanted to ward off the immediate blow. He said to Krishnadevaraya, "I remember to have read this book long ago. I shall study this book tonight and discuss it tomorrow." With this submission he withdrew to the camp with his disciples.

The scholar from Kashi spent the entire night thinking about the book. 'Tilakashtamahishabandhana' remained a riddle! He had never heard of that book! He was afraid he would be disgraced if he stayed, and left with bag and baggage that very night.

The news both surprised and delighted the king. He called in Ramakrishna and said to him: "if the very name of the book made the scholar from Kashi run away, it must be a mighty work. Well, let me see it." Ramakrishna removed the silk cover and replied, "Your Highness, this is no classic. Please look here is a small stick of the plant sesame this is 'Tilakashta'. Here is the rope to tie the buffalo with. That is the 'Mahisha bandhana'. I have just tied the sesame stick with the rope that is all! "On hearing this explanation Krishnadevaraya went into peals of laughter. In appreciation of Ramakrishna's Clever-ness he gave him a big prize. (In Sanskrit, 'tila' means sesame, 'kashta' means a stick, a buffalo is a 'mahisha', and 'bandhana' is that which binds.)

A Lesson to the Greedy

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Ramakrishna earned the affection and the esteem of the king and the people. He was a comic poet and looked, like an ignorant man; but he was pious and on the side of justice. If injustice was done in the court or outside, he used his weapon of humor to set things right.

Krishnadevaraya's mother was a very orthodox woman. She had visited many holy places and had performed religious rites; she had given much in charity. She thought that if, in her old ages, she gave away fruits as gifts her charity would be perfect. She told her son of her desire.

Krishnadevaraya who had great respect for his mother immediately got delicious mangoes from Ratnagiri. But alas! On the auspicious day when she was to present those fruits to Brahmins, the king's mother died.

The religious rites connected with her death went on for several days. Meanwhile, the king called a few Brahmins and said, "My mother's last wish was to offer mangoes to Brahmins. But she died before the wish could be fulfilled.

What should I do now that she might earn the merit for giving away the fruits?"

The greedy Brahmins replied: "Your Highness, only if you offer mangoes made of gold to Brahmins will your mother's soul rest in peace."

Ramakrishna came to know of this. The next day he went to the houses of those Brahmins, and said, "My mother's ceremony is on the same day as that of the king's mother. Please come to my house straight from the palace."

The Brahmins came to Ramakrishna's house after receiving the mangoes of gold from the king. Ramakrishna's servants closed all the doors of the house. They brought red-hot iron bars and stood before the Brahmins!

The Brahmins were taken aback. Then Ramakrishna told them: "Venerable ones, my mother suffered from rheumatism. One day, unable to bear the pain, she called me and asked me to burn her skin with a red-hot iron bar; she said that would relieve her rheumatic pain. I could not disobey my mother's command. But before I could fulfill her last wish, she died. I want to burn your

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skin with these red hot iron bars so that her soul may have peace." He and his servants approached the Brahmins. The Brahmins began to cry and run about. They thundered at Ramakrishna: "How unjust! Ramakrishna, are we not your guests? Do you want to insult us?"

Ramakrishna replied: "There is nothing unjust in this. Have you not accepted golden mangoes from the king, to fulfill the last wish of his mother? In the same way is it not your duty to fulfill my mother's last wish?" Then wisdom dawned on the Brahmins. They felt ashamed of their greed and begged Ramakrishna to forgive them. They left golden mangoes in his house and went away.

Later, Krishnadevaraya asked Ramakrishna: "Why did you insult those Brahmins?" Pat came his reply: "Your Highness, the palace treasury should not be exploited by these selfish people; it is not there to feed lazy follows. It is there to serve the people."

How Does the Water Appear?

Ramakrishna was not afraid of the king, inspire of his patronage. He spoke the truth without fear and sometimes he taught the king himself a lesson.

Once Krishnadevaraya, accompanied by his eight scholars, went to inspect a newly built reservoir. Looking at the vast expanse of water, he put a question: "How does the water in this reservoir appear?"

One scholar replied: "This water appears like a pure-minded nymph!" Another said: "It is dazzling like a crystal!" the third one told the king: "The water appears like a serene man whose mind is spotlessly pure." When the king turned towards Ramakrishna, his answer was simple, "Your Highness, the water appears to be contained in the reservoir you built." He did not indulge in flattery and gave a simple, direct answer. The king praised him for his outspokenness.

Hide Your Head

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One day, Ramakrishna was looking at colored pictures newly painted on the walls of the royal ladies' apartments. He saw the picture of a nymph. He thought she was scantily dressed. So, taking hold of the brush and colors, he made some changes.

The Chief Minister happened to go there just then. He exclaimed: "Ramakrishna, what a foolish thing you have done! You have daubed the picture specially painted under the king's own supervision! The king will be angry and will surely punish you severely. You had better hide your head somewhere."

The next morning, Krishnadevaraya was taken aback to see a person, whose face was covered with a mud pot, waiting at the door of the apartments.

The king asked: "Who are you? Why are you standing here with the face covered?"

"Ramakrishna replied: "Your Highness, I am Tenali Ramakrishna. I committed a small offence; the Chief Minister said you would have my head cut off and that I should hide my head. Therefore ..."

The Chief Minister narrated the incident to the king; he appreciated Ramakrishna's plan and forgave him.

Ramakrishna and his Family

Ramakrishna had a good wife. She knew her husband was generous, and adjusted herself to his ways.

The king got a big house built for Ramakrishna. In spite of this, usually Ramakrishna was short of funds. But he was a man of self-respect and he would never beg the king for money.

Occasionally Krishnadevaraya used to go about in the city in disguise at night. One night, he went to Ramakrishna's house and peeped through the window. He saw Ramakrishna sitting before a grinding stone, engrossed in powdering the grains! Touched by the poverty of Ramakrishna, he granted a raise in his monthly salary.

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Ramakrishna's wife was a clever woman. Once a gang of thieves wanted to steal the little money and gold he had. They entered Ramakrishna's house and were hiding in the back yard. Ramakrishna sensed their presence and secretly informed his wife. Then they said to each other: "Thieves are active in the town. So let us hide our valuables in the well at the back of the house." The thieves heard their words clearly. Ramakrishna and his wife filled a trunk with stones and dropped it into the well with a splash, which the thieves could hear.

The thieves were convinced that the trunk contained the jewels. They wanted to get the trunk. The entire night they drew water from the well and poured it into the garden. All plants in the garden got plenty of water! Early next morning, Ramakrishna cried aloud, "Our plants have had enough water; you can stop now!" On hearing these words the thieves fled. Ramakrishna and his wife enjoyed their practical joke!

Ramakrishna had a son by name Bhaskara Sharma. He was as intelligent as his father.

It is said that he helped his father on several occasions to knock sense into the heads of vain people.

Ramakrishna's life fills us with wonder. He was yet a boy when he lost his father. Because of the narrow-mindedness of the teachers of the day he was denied education. By his own efforts he acquired education and attained fame as a scholar and poet in the court of Krishnadevaraya. He used humor to teach arrogant people a lesson. He corrected any one - a rich man or a learned man or a minister - who did wrong; he corrected even the king.

Life demands serious thought, it is true. But laughter, too, is necessary. Humor lightens the mind. But our object in laughing at others should not be to wound others; our object should be to correct them. Laughter should be gentle and friendly. Such was the humor of Tenali Ramakrishna.

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