

The Life and Teachings of Saint Chaitanya



Saint Chaitanya (1486 – 1534).

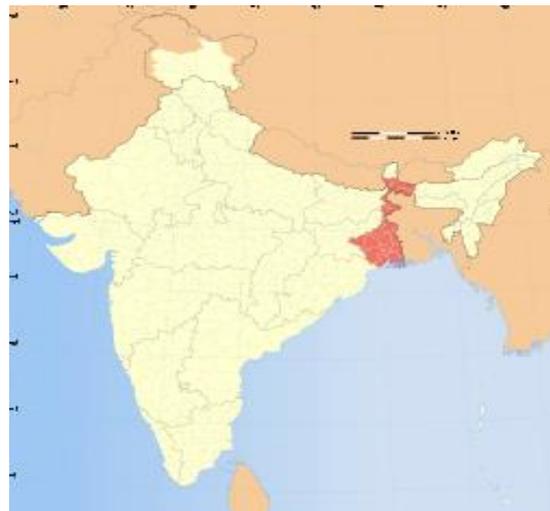
Chaitanya is a saint from West Bengal, India. He helped revive the movement of 'bhakti' or 'devotion for God', which swept India from the 14th Century. Chaitanya opposed social injustice (and the hereditary caste system) by teaching about spiritual equality. He popularised the chanting of the Hare Krishna Maha-mantra and worshipped Radha and Krishna.

Anecdotes from early childhood

1. When Chaitanya was an infant in his mother's arms, he cried continually. He stopped only when people said 'Haribol' which means 'chant the names of Hari or God'. In this way, there was always the sound of the word 'Haribol' around him.

2. Once, when Chaitanya's mother gave him sweets to eat, he ate clay instead of the food. He explained that he doesn't see why he should eat the sweets instead of clay, since the sweets were nothing but clay transformed. His mother explained that clay in the form of a jug can be used as a water pot, but clay in the form of a brick cannot have such use. In the same way, only clay in the form of food can be eaten. The young boy was convinced by the argument and he didn't eat clay again.

3. Once, a Brahmin on pilgrimage visited Chaitanya's house. While the Brahmin was offering rice to the Deity of Lord Krishna, Chaitanya came and ate the cooked rice. The Brahmin was astonished with the behaviour of the young boy. He cooked again and once again Chaitanya came and ate the offering. When the same was repeated for a third time, the young boy showed Himself as Krishna, the object of Brahmin's worship. The Brahmin was astonished and became very happy.



West Bengal in India

Exercise

1. Read anecdotes 1 and 2. What do they tell us about the personality of Saint Caitanya?
2. Read anecdote 3. What do some Hindus believe about the identity of Saint Caitanya?

Chaitanya as a scholar and family man

During his childhood and early life Caitanya was known with the names of Nimai and Visvambhar. From the early age of 10, Nimai was well versed in Sanskrit, Grammar and Rhetoric and soon became one of the best scholars in his home town. He married at an early age and took care of his widowed mother and young wife with great affection. When his first wife died from a snake bite, he remarried after

the request of his mother. Nimai travelled all over India to discuss philosophy with other famous scholars. In these discussions, he used logic and defeated all his opponents. As a result, his reputation as a great scholar grew and he acquired many followers.

Task 1: Explain why it is important to give good arguments for our answers

Task 2: Divide in two groups, A and B. Discuss the statement: 'We are all equal' Group A gives reasons to agree with the above statement and group B gives reasons to disagree. What is your final conclusion as a whole group?

Task 3: What kind of knowledge is important to you? Write down a list of things you don't know but would like to know in the future.

Chaitanya revives the Bhakti movement

Nimai had a change of heart when he took his spiritual initiation at the age of seventeen. He turned his attention to the worship of Radha and Krishna and he preached the importance of the chanting of the names of God. Many appreciated his devotional attitude and exemplary character and he soon became the leader of the Bhakti movement in the area.



Saint Chaitanya and his followers chant the names of God

At the age of 24, Chaitanya accepted the status of a lifelong celibate (sannyasa) and he left home never to return. He taught that the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra is the means to achieve 'prema', spontaneous love of God. He spent all his life chanting the Holy names and encouraging others to chant.

The Bhakti movement

The Bhakti movement is a Hindu religious movement that traces its history to the latter half of the first millennium. Important figures such as the Tamil poet-saints and theologians such as Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE), and Madhva (dates) have contributed to its development.

The movement later flourished in North India and was popularised by saints who threw off the social constraints of both caste and foreign rule. There were two stands. Through saints such as Kabir, the northern 'sant' tradition preached personal piety and the ever-presence of a non-personal God. Others, like Tulsidas and Chaitanya focused on building a relationship with a personal God, most often represented as Rama or Krishna.



Those who worship Krishna (above) are part of the Vaishnava tradition.

The Bhakti movement, also known as 'bhakti yoga' or the 'path of devotional service' aims to nurture the appropriate desire and attitude and to ultimately achieve pure love of God.

Nine processes of bhakti

Texts list nine practices of devotion:

- Hearing about God
- Glorifying the Lord
- Remembering the Lord
- Serving God
- Offering worship (puja)
- Offering heartfelt prayer
- Feeling oneself God's servant
- Nurturing Friendship with God
- Surrendering everything

Chaitanya Vaishnavism

Chaitanya founded the tradition and sacred lineage known as Bengali Vaishnavism, or Chaitanya-Vaishnavism, now spread throughout the world. It is largely represented through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)/ Chaitanya's birthplace in Mayapur remain an important place of pilgrimage.



Chaitanya's birthplace in Mayapur, West Bengal

The teachings of Saint Caitanya

Saint Chaitanya emphasized spiritual equality. He taught that all living beings, including plants and animals, share the same spiritual nature, namely the soul. He also taught that everyone desires to love and to be loved unconditionally. Thus, cultivating loving relationships - and especially reviving our lost relationship with God - is an essential part of life.

Sikshastakam 1

The verse below is first of the 8 verses written by Saint Chaitanya.

Let us praise the chanting of God's names, which cleans away all our selfish thoughts. It stops the cycle of repeated birth and death. It is the best gift, because it spreads good fortune everywhere, like the cooling rays of the rising moon. This moon increases the ocean of spiritual joy, helping us taste real happiness. It gives life and purpose to our learning'.