

Tagore's Philosophy of Life – a Study of *Sadhana*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to study the collection of Tagore's lectures in the book *Sadhana* which deals with his philosophy of life. At various instances in his lectures Tagore repeatedly emphasizes on the Indian philosophy of oneness of Being that is the cause for the progress of the soul towards the union with the Brahman. The collection is compiled of eight lectures, based on ideas of the individual's relation to the universe, soul consciousness, evil, self, of love, of action and of beauty and finally the nature of union with the Infinite. The Infinite can be attained through endless means of activities found in joy and love. His *sadhana* has been in writing poetry and in living his life in all its hues and colors and thereby attaining realization of life.

[Keywords: Tagore, *Sadhana*, Radhakrishnan, philosophy, life]

I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted
and behold, service was joy.
-Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore, the poet- saint of India, with his creative soul endeavored upon varied literary enterprises – poetry, drama, novel and short story to mention a few, that are truly the manifestation of his realization of man's integral presence in the overall infinite and sublime purpose of the cosmic Godhead. *Sadhana*, a collection of Tagore's discourses delivered at various instances to his students at Bolpur, Bengal, contrary to his claim that these lectures do not carry any philosophical bent of mind, in fact represents the culmination of the poet's philosophy of life in a comprehensive manner. Deeply indebted to the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha, Tagore speaks from his own personal experiences at once instinctual and individual, the values of the spirit which enables man to achieve communion with the divine in his everyday life. Comprising of eight titles – 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', 'Soul Consciousness', 'The Problem of Evil', 'The Problem of Self', 'Realization in Love', 'Realization in Action', 'The Realization of Beauty' and 'The Realization of the Infinite', the poet has offered in this collection the ways and means of attaining the ultimate purpose in human life -that is to become one with the Infinite.

In his book, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, S. Radhakrishnan states that,

Rabindranath's philosophy of life is viewed... as nothing but the ancient wisdom of India restated to meet the needs of modern times. His writings are a commentary on the Upanishads by an individual of this generation on whom the present age has had its influence. The soul of ancient India is mirrored in them.
(3)

Though Dr.S.Radhakrishnan discusses Tagore's philosophy of life as is exemplified throughout the creative literary output of the poet ranging from his variegated collections of poetry- *Gitanjali*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Fruit Gathering*, *The Cycle of Spring*, including *Sadhana* and so on, however, it would be valuable to study *Sadhana*, wherein the poet- philosopher has gathered the entire thesis of his philosophical knowledge and wisdom between the covers of a single text, which seeds are strewn and spread separately in his other creations.

In the first lecture, 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', Tagore distinguishes between the Western ideas of the relationship between nature and man, with those of the Indian concepts. The West always believed in the mastering of nature because to them nature consisted of inanimate things and the beasts. This kind of thinking stemmed from the sense of superiority that man stood first in the scale of creation that he is born to rule over the universe. In today's world situation, this attitude of man has led to diverse problems between not only man and nature but also between man and man. The emphasis of the West on man as a superior being has resulted in the dislocation and destruction of our environment. Whereas in the Indian context, right from the ancient times, India believed that the forest/nature was the sanctuary to the rishis, a place where the soul of man found reconciliation with the soul of the world. For India also man is a supreme being but understood that "superiority is not in the power of possession but in the power of union" (Tagore 9). When confined within the walls of human self, man loses the inner perspective. Tagore compares the situation to the settlers' occupation of the American lands, when they had no regard for the environment, the forests, and the earth that gave sustenance to the natives. As Radhakrishnan aptly points out,

... Rabindranath advocates life in nature and in the open as the best means of spiritual progress, for in nature the religious eye will see the infinite lying stretched in silent smiling repose. According to him the best way to derive inspiration is to lose oneself in the contemplation of nature...(The Philosophy 21)

Only perfect harmony between man and everything else in nature would enable man's soul to comprehend the mysteries of reality and realize the Infinite. Man must thus cross barriers to become more than man, experience the freedom of consciousness, to unite with All: "To be truly united in knowledge, love, and service with all beings, and to realize one's self in the all- pervading God is the essence of goodness...Life is immense" (Tagore 22).

In the next discourse titled 'Soul Consciousness', Tagore lays emphasis on man's search for a system in expediting his everyday affairs of the world:

This search for system is really a search for unity, for synthesis; it is our attempt to harmonize the heterogeneous complexity of outward materials by an inner adjustment. In the search we gradually become aware that to find out the One is to possess the All; that there, indeed is our last and highest privilege. (25-26).

To know one self is to understand the world around. Hence when we understand something, it means then that we find in it something of our own. Tagore draws illustrations from the family, where the parents love their children. It is nothing but the fact that whomsoever we love, we find in him or her, our own soul. We tend to realize that the same supreme soul in us is as well as in our children. The Upanishad teaches that in attaining consciousness of one's soul, one attains cosmic consciousness or God-consciousness. First of all man must know how to segregate his soul from his self. The self is the body that causes him pain and suffering, greed and pride, fear and death. However true greatness lies in the realization of the fact that we are not just the physical self or body but our soul is part of the larger consciousness. Man travels from ignorance to light when his soul attains freedom from mundane activities of the physical world:

When a man's life rescued from distractions finds unity in the soul, then the consciousness of the infinite becomes at once direct and natural to it as the light is to the flame. All the conflicts and contradictions of life are reconciled; knowledge, love, and action harmonized; pleasure and pain become one in beauty, enjoyment and renunciation equal in goodness; ... it is only the soul, the one in man which by its very nature can overcome all limits, and finds its affinity with the Supreme One. (Tagore 43)

'The Problem of Evil', deals with the fact that suffering and pain and evil in world are only impermanent though we imagine it to be standstill and therefore exaggerate its presence. The idea of death too is similarly questioned by Tagore when he says: "Life as a whole never takes death seriously. It laughs, dances and plays, it builds, hoards, and loves in death's face... we lose sight of the wholeness of a life of which death is part... but the truth is, death is not the ultimate reality" (50). There is evil in the world in various forms that we encounter in our everyday life which is but a manifestation of imperfection in this world. We are forced to learn the limiting weaknesses of human efforts to survive. Man understands that "evil cannot altogether arrest the course of life ... for evil has to pass on, it has to grow into good; it cannot stand to give battle to All" (52). Tagore firmly believes that existence cannot be an evil and calls upon the intellect of man "to realize the truth through untruths, and knowledge is nothing but the continually burning up of error to set free the light of truth" (53). The very goal of life is to move from imperfection to perfection, as the poet establishes that:

This life process is going on- we know it, we have felt it; and we have a faith which no individual instances to the contrary can shake, that the direction of humanity is from evil to good. For we feel that good is the positive element in

man's nature, and in every age and every clime what man values most is his ideal of goodness. (53)

Tagore distinguishes between goodness and pleasure and says that while pleasure is limited to one's own self, "goodness is concerned with the happiness of all humanity and for all time" (57). Again to live in perfect goodness means to realize one's life in the infinite. He draws from Buddha's teachings at this juncture to reiterate the point that when the individual is merged in the universal then man is freed from the thralldom of pain. It is therefore important to realize the 'world-man' in oneself who remains unaffected by death and suffering and one who understands that pain is but the other side of joy.

In the lecture on 'Problem of Self', Tagore discusses how the self is responsible for the sufferings and the sins that man commits; "It has led man to shame and crime and death; yet it is dearer to him than any paradise where the self lies, securely slumbering in perfect innocence in the womb of Mother Nature" (70). It is in a state of ignorance that we believe that self is an end in itself. It is only dharma that can deliver man from his selfishness or self-centeredness. 'Dharma' as Tagore interprets for us is the "the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. Dharma is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self" (74). The true nature or essence of our being is the godliness inherent within us. This can be realized only when selfishness is extinguished from us. In recalling the words of Buddha, Tagore says:

The emancipation of our physical nature is in attaining health, of our social being in attaining goodness, and of our self in attaining love. This last is what Buddha describes as extinction- the extinction of selfishness. This is the function of love, and it does not lead to darkness but to illumination. This is the attainment of *bodhi*, or the true awakening; it is the revealing in us of the infinite joy by the light of love. (83-84)

In the journey from Self to Soul, the freedom of self-will has to be negated, for which purpose Tagore lays great emphasis on love. Just as God created the universe not out of necessity but out of joy and love, so should man strive to attain freedom from self through love. It is in action that we tend to manifest our nature. The poet gives the example of a mother, who "reveals herself in the service of her children, so our true freedom is not the freedom from action but freedom in action, which can only be attained in the work of love" (78). He brings out the distinction between *maya* and truth, in that *maya* is the self separate from God, while love is truth or *satyam*. Man has to discard his selfish desires which hang on to him as his second skin, seeming to be his very nature. But once he starts giving in love then he finds fulfillment in that as is his true nature. Therefore when the self sees itself in isolation from the soul as the absolute it lives in futility. But it becomes *satyam* when it recognizes its essence in the universal and the infinite:

It is the end of our self to seek that union. It must bend its head low in love and meekness and take its stand where great and small meet. It has to gain by its

loss and rise in its surrender...We must know that it is only the revelation of the infinite which is endlessly new and eternally beautiful in us and gives the only meaning to our self. (91)

In echoing the words of Tagore, Radhakrishnan also expresses a similar view when he says that in the annihilation of the self lies the fulfillment of love which leads man from the self-centered life to a god-centered one (*The Philosophy* 59).

Tagore's talk on the 'Realization of Love' hinges upon the concept of the infinite love of Brahma that manifests itself through finite forms. It is said that though bound by the laws of the world, so as to lead a disciplined and moral life, the human soul sets on its passage from bondage in law to freedom in love. Tagore alludes to Buddha's idea of *Brahma-vihara*, or the joy of living in Brahma. This idea entails the proposition that the one, who overcomes pride, hatred, deception, anger, cruelty, and antagonism towards fellow beings and fellow creatures, cultivates the quality of love for all creatures in the process of exercising universal goodwill, attains perfection of consciousness (Tagore 106). Imbibing this key thought from Buddha's teachings, Tagore asserts that: "It is through the heightening of our consciousness into love, and extending it all over the world, that we can attain *Brahma-vihara*, communion with this infinite joy" (107). In the name of civilization man indulges in cannibalism that deadens consciousness and results in a kind of spiritual suicide. Probably Tagore here refers to the imperial British who deprived nations like India of self-government and self-defence. As he rightly points out,

...we never can have a true view of man unless we have a love for him. Civilization must be judged and prized, not by the amount of power it has developed, but by how much it has evolved and given expression to, by its laws and institutions, the love of humanity. (111)

When love becomes the *modus operandi* among races and peoples, then treating of people as slaves or instruments of power will be replaced by freedom, fair-play and justice. Tagore discusses at length the quality of love adding that the world is born out of love, that it is sustained in love, that it moves towards love, and finally enters into love. It is love that enables man to transcend all limitations as at the same time it is his love of life that urges him to continue his relation with this great world (Tagore 112). Only love can harmonize the opposing principles of creation that of unity and diversity, loss and gain, personal and impersonal, bondage and liberation. It is the poet's strong perception, hence, that: "It is the high function of love to welcome all limitations and to transcend them. For nothing is more independent than love, and where else, again, shall we find so much of dependence?" (115). Love is not a product of compulsion but of joy. And this joy which is manifest in creation, "is the realization of truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover" (116). Tagore, therefore, equates love to joy that in turn is equated to God.

Rabindranath Tagore's concept about the function of action is well extrapolated in the discourse on 'Realization in Action', wherein the poet-philosopher appears to be speaking from his own experience. According to Tagore a recluse who shuns the society and lives a life of seclusion can never attain God apart from the world of action. As he says aptly:

The more man acts and makes actual what was latent in him, the nearer does he bring the distant Yet-to-be. In that actualization man is ever making himself more and yet more distinct, and seeing himself clearly under newer and newer aspects in the midst of varied activities, in the state, in society. This vision makes for freedom. (120)

The soul of man seeks freedom from ignorance or darkness, and in order to realize itself distinctly with the world-soul, it creates fresh fields of action so as to set itself free in action. He critiques those sanyasins who believe that they can find Brahma outside of humanity or society. Tagore stresses the idea that "activity is the play of joy" (131), for just as the Brahma finds joy in creation/action so does man need to realize Brahma through his everyday action – a two way process. He is of the opinion that one must work to live, and simultaneously live to work; hence that life and activity are inseparably inter-connected. In quoting the Upanishad, Tagore emphasizes that God's nature itself lies in knowledge, power and action. Therefore one must learn to find joy in work and give oneself entirely to work rather than allow it to overpower us (133). Radhakrishnan points out that Tagore is vehemently against both the Western idea of the importance of the body/flesh/materialism that neglects the soul, as opposed to the Eastern faith in the significance of the soul that neglects the body. According to him, Tagore staunchly propounds the fact that a good balance between the two attitudes towards life is much more fruitful for humanity. Tagore believes in the integration of contemplation and work in the world, and as Radhakrishnan wonders about this belief of Tagore, posits the view that: "To live the life of man, both the calm and stress of life, the joy and self-abandonment and the pride of creativity should be chosen ...random busyness as well as complete renunciation is a failure to live the life of man" (The *Philosophy* 104-105). Tagore ends this lecture on a prayerful note as when he says, "Let us once for all dislodge from our minds the feeble fancy that would make out thy joy to be a thing apart from action, thin, formless, and unsustained" (Tagore 134).

In his teachings on 'The Realization of Beauty', Tagore echoes a simple but universal truth, that unless we take joy in our work or action, it ends up being burdensome. As already specified by Tagore, everything in the universe is created and sustained in love and joy. In order to comprehend this principle in creation, man has divided the whole of creation as either beautiful or non-beautiful. However man has understood the idea of beauty differently at every stage of his growth in history, when there was a time in ancient India the beauty cult belonged to a chosen few. Then came a time, when in the history of aesthetics, people believed that beauty existed in things great and small. Beauty

was recognized in common objects and so on. However Tagore attributes this kind of attitude to the narrowness of perception which sharply divides the field of aesthetic consciousness into ugliness and beauty. He says:

When he has the power to see things detached from self-interest and from the insistent claims of the lust of the senses, then alone can he have the true vision of the beauty that is everywhere. Then only can he see that what is unpleasant to us is not necessarily unbeautiful, but has its beauty in truth. (140)

Tagore also links beauty with truth and posits the view that it is through our sense of truth that we realize order in creation while our sense of beauty helps us recognize harmony in the universe (141). The more we become conscious of this harmony in creation both within (our soul) and without (the physical world), then our life is in itself an expression of beauty that inclines towards the Brahma. In other words, as Tagore quotes the words of John Keats, we understand that the aim of our existence is to obtain knowledge that beauty is truth, and truth beauty. It is music, according to Tagore which is the most direct expression of beauty in art and at the same time the most finite form of the manifestation of the Divine. It is the poets who are the best seers who reflect the beauty of the infinite through the song of their hearts. In every movement of Nature, Tagore identifies the music and harmony of creation, as in the fall of rain, the child's first utterance, and the starry constellation etc. he sums up beautifully the music of his body at night when he is fast asleep—"the heart will throb, the blood will leap in the veins, and the millions of living atoms of my body will vibrate in tune with the note of the harp-string that thrills at the touch of the master" (144).

In his last discourse on 'The Realization of The Infinite', Tagore speaks about the nature of attainment of God. At the outset he categorically states that God is not a material possession like money, or house or car. All these earthly objects manifest but one truth and that is they have their meaning not in themselves but only in their relation with the infinite. Desire for man is endless but once he realizes that worldly possessions are not the end, but he has to outgrow his desire for them, then that very moment his soul takes to the path of the eternal. He puts forward the proposition that God cannot be possessed; rather, He is to be experienced. In the finite world man is to fulfill his necessities of food, clothing etc, that satisfies a particular need of his. But once his self seeks joy and freedom beyond the finite existence, and then he no longer wants to get but only to be one with the Brahma. Tagore draws the analogy of the river which joins the larger body of water, the ocean, but cannot become the ocean. Similarly man's soul though yearns to become one with the Infinite, however cannot become the Brahma Himself.

Brahma is Brahma, he is the infinite ideal of perfection but we are not what we truly are; we are ever to become true, ever to become Brahma. There is the eternal play of love in relation between this being and the becoming; and in the depth of this mystery is the source of all truth and beauty that sustains the endless march of creation. (155)

Tagore also uses the analogy of the poem to speak about the progress of the soul, which once it realizes the Infinite, is filled with joy and meaning, like a perfect poem. Another important factor regarding the nature of realization is that it can happen not through intellectual knowledge but only through joy and love. Brahma can be known only by the soul, “by her joy in him, by her love” (159). Man comes into relation with Him only by union of the whole being. The soul is likened to a bride by the poet and hence the union is a marriage of the *atman* with the *paramatman*:

When the soul-bride understands this well, her heart is blissful and at rest. She knows that she, like a river, has attained the ocean of her fulfillment ...she knows the world as her own household by the right of knowing the master of the world as her own lord. Then all her services become services of love... (161).

But when the soul fails to recognize her lover then she is the handmaid that is swayed by dejection and sorrow. It is in the very heart of his activities that man seeks to unite with the lord, not from being relieved of all his works or responsibilities of life. Tagore appropriately ends by saying “therefore in the midst of our home and our work, the prayer rises, “lead me across!” for here rolls the sea, and even here lies the other shore waiting to be reached-yes, here is this everlasting present, not distant, not anywhere else” (164).

The philosophy of Tagore, as he presents in his work *Sadhana*, thus, is a comprehensive one that at once includes the idea of a happy reconciliation between service and renunciation, action and seclusion, between self and soul, the finite and the infinite, the individual and the world. As S. Radhakrishnan rightly says, Tagore gives an eloquent expression to his thirst for social betterment. Man as a member of society has to offer himself entirely and exhaustively to the service of one’s fellows (*The Philosophy* 79-80). The soul filled with the infinite love spends itself in the service of man, which otherwise would be an abstract barren negative. To quote Radhakrishnan:

The philosophy of Rabindranath is an absolute idealism of the concrete type... Rabindranath’s is a wholeness of vision, which cannot tolerate absolute divisions between body and mind, matter and life, individual and society, community and nation, empire and the world...(*The Philosophy* 177)

Though *Sadhana* is a collection of discourses offered at various times it still represents the fine thread of Tagore’s philosophy that forms the connecting link between all these lectures – that of the purpose of human life i.e., the realization of Brahma in our every thought, our every word and our every action on this earth, this universe which is but a manifestation of the Infinite, in terms of joy and love. *Sadhana*, means rigorous practice, and the subtitle being *Realization of Life* clearly states the mission of Tagore, that the poet-saint has been striving endlessly to realize his purpose in life in all its glory. Tagore himself is a fine example of this philosophy, for he has truly been a man of the world in fulfilling his worldly duties as a family man on the one hand and on the other he has been

a man of the world in his service to society at large as a poet who rendered his work in joy and love, in propagating the oneness of Being, so as to be united with the *Paramatman*.

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