

## **RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY: A CONFLUENCE OF IDEALS**

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### **Abstract**

*The lineage of Buddhism comes under two categories: hearing the Buddha's teachings directly and writings of Indian Buddhist masters on epistemology, metaphysics and logic. According to the Tibetan traditions, the teachings of the Buddha are collected under the Sūtra and Tantra, comprising teachings on psychology, neuro-science and meditational teachings for controlling our negative feelings. Rabindranath Tagore was inspired by the teachings of Buddhism. He felt the moral values supporting the dignity of man and subscribed in one way or another to the Bodhisattva ideal.*

**Keyword:** *Upaniṣads, Buddhadeva, Sādhanā, Sutta-nipata, Nagārjuna, Śraddhā-Utpatti-Śāstra.*

Rabindranath Tagore, an eminent personality in Indian modern thought, who has reassembled the *Upaniṣads* on the same pedestal in the company of the *Dhammapada*, because both have become one unbroken spiritual inheritance through history. For him, it was a matter of spirit and therefore, there is no Brāhminical-Buddhist divide. Before understanding his insights, we must have a look about his foundation on which he has assessed the Buddhist philosophy.

That Rabindranath has written variously on the Buddhist lore is a common knowledge, yet perhaps not a very deep one. One might cite instances of the ballads composed on Buddhist episodes in the *Katha-O-Kahini*. These are acknowledged as having been based on the Sanskrit manuscripts discovered from

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Nepal by Rajendralal Mitra and Haraprasad Shastri. Both these persons of monumental scholarship were personal acquaintances of Rabindranath. The publication of Nepalese Buddhist Literature occurred in 1882. The Buddhist Text Society was founded in Kolkata in 1892. These events impacted Bengali literature in a measure that is worth recalling. For example, the publication of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a poetical biography of Buddha based on the *Lalita Vistara* inspired Nabinchandra Sen to compose in Bengali verse an account of Buddha's life under the title *Amitabha*. And Rabindranath's elder brother, the first Indian civilian, Satyendranath Tagore wrote *Buddhadeva* in Bengali and thereby popularised the Bengali reading public with the thoughts and ideas of Buddha. Lesser known are the various articles on Buddhist philosophical themes and a biographical account of the life of the Master by Satischandra Vidyabhusan. The family church of the Tagore has for its scripture, *Brahmadharma*, compiled by the poet's father Devendranath, with copious extracts from the *Dhammapada*, along with those from the *Upaniṣads* and other valued works such as the *Manusamhitā*.

It should not be a matter of surprise that in the introduction of the *Sādhanā*, English version of Rabindranath's *ethico-religious* and philosophical essays, he mentions Buddha's teachings as "matters of spirit" that helped him in the development of his life. There is on record how profoundly he was moved when Rabindranath visited Bodhgaya. And he always mentioned Buddha as the greatest of men ever born, an evaluation that has been endorsed later by Sri Aurobindo as well.

These are evident data. But more important are the oblique ones. For example, in a poem, we find Rabindranath alluding to a prince who had donned tattered robes and gone homeless in looking for a larger life of the spirit. In another, he wishes to wander about manuscript-filled monasteries on hill sides in Tibet. This is somewhat surprising, even as a matter of wishing, and it goes to show the poet's expansive awareness of the existence of faiths other than his own. Rabindranath was

actively associated with the activities of Mahabodhi Society, and he composed a poem to mark the inauguration of the Mulagandha Kuti Vihar at Sarnath. His visits to Java and sighting the Buddhist archaeological remains at Barobudur inspired a couple of poems on the message of Buddha. His drama, *Natirpuja* was a remake of an earlier poem. But the prelude song captures the rejuvenating message of love and compassion to be instilled in our hearts when the world around *suitten* by hatred and anger. The first two stanzas summarise Buddha's ethical teachings that bear a crying relevance for the world devilled as it is by strife and war.

Mostly Rabindranath was acquainted with Pali Buddhism, and the Metta Sutta of the *Sutta-nipata* reappears more than once in his discourses. The metaphor of a mother ever mindfully protecting her only child marks the quality of unbounded love to be extended towards all being in every direction. The metaphor is a part of the meditational technique called *brahmavihāra*, which Rabindranath had discussed more than once in his various writings. He knew as well some *Mahāyāna* works. For example, he discussed the contexts of Nagarjuna's *Śraddhā-Utpatti-Śāstra* (the original in Sanskrit is lost, but a translation in Chinese is extant. There is a classic restoration in English by Venkataraman). In the context of his discussion, Rabindranath makes a crucial judgment. He interprets the Buddhist *tri-ratna* as providing a three-fold scheme of life. Dharma is the pursuit of liberative knowledge, Sangha inculcates the ethics and art of living with others, and Buddha is the object of devotion. This implies that Buddha is important in so far as he points to the way of Dharma, which is the point of supreme importance. The teaching is more important than the teacher, who only points to the way. This interpretation is consistent with the view that Buddha used the parable of a raft for crossing over to the other shore. Having crossed over, the raft is no longer important. The metaphor of the raft is the cognitive aid to one's attaining liberative knowledge. The conative aspect is answered by the Sangha, the community of persons who are striving together to cross over the stream. The affective aspect of devotionalism is

satisfied by the figure and image of the person who has gone before us, pointing to the Way. It is in this three-fold way that the Buddhist *tri-ratna* satisfied the needs of the human psyche, the cognitive, the conative and the affective.

Rabindranath rejects the commonly mistaken view that Buddha's teaching was self-annihilating. He asks if the people flocked around Buddha to listen to the discourses on spiritual suicide. To think so should be preposterous. The view that *nirvāṇa* is just passing into nothingness is also not endorsed by Rabindranath. The idea of *nirvāṇa* as implying breaking the hard shell of the private ego is ethically felicitous an experience which alone makes unbounded love by an expansion of consciousness. It is the ethical teaching of Buddha that appears more important to Rabindranath than all its metaphysical ramifications. Buddha himself, had disdained metaphysical speculations, and was more concerned with exploring the possibility of a good life of harmony and goodwill, without selfishness, avarice and harming others. Rabindranath exploits the metaphor of the blowing out of the lamp to say that when the dark night of the private ego is ended, the sun of illumination arises. Altruism becomes possible only when the claims and demands of the ego are put down. It is only then the alienation between I and the other is transcended, and the harmony that love and compassion bring about world dawn upon us. It is in this sense that *nirvāṇa* is freedom from the bondage of the ego.

Rabindranath surprises us by his awareness of the symbolism of Tāntrika Buddhism in the drama, called *Rājā*. In the drama there are two kings, one false, and another real. The counterfeit king symbolizes sensuality, and on his standard, there is the insignia of Kingshuk-flower. On the flag of the real king there is "a thunder bolt in the middle of lotus". This is the mystic symbol for the union of compassion and wisdom, *karuṇā* and *prajñā*, each informing the other. There is a sense in which *Rājā* is a drama of Tantrika Mahāyāna Buddhism. The name of a heroine, Surangama looks back to the celebrated *Surangama*

*Sutta*, a basic text of *Vijñānavāda* school of Buddhism, and this provides a promising avenue of inquiry in studying the drama.

Towards the end of his life, Rabindranath wrote a short poem in response to devotional chant made by a Nepalese Buddhist. In that poem he declares that he as a man too had a share of the glory of Buddha having born as a human being.

Apart from his own creative engagement with Buddha and his lore and teachings, Rabindranath pioneered Buddhist studies in modern India. In fact, Santiniketan has been an important centre of Buddhist studies in eastern India. Under Rabindranath's inspiration Vidhusekhar Shastri, and P. C. Bagchi carried researches in Sanskrit-Tibetan and Sanskrit-Chinese studies, valuable papers and books appeared, since 1932 in the Visva-Bharati Studies and Visva-Bharati Annuals, K. Venkataraman's English translation of the *Sāmmitiya-nikāya-Sāstra*, Pa-Chow's comparative studies of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutta* and the *Pratimokṣa Sutra*, Aryyaswamy Shastri's rendering of Tibetan and Chinese works into Sanskrit have been important works. This includes Buddhist philosophical works by Dinnāga, Bhavaviveka, Nagārjuna, Vasubandhu and Śāntideva.

Rabindranath's own creative works of later period are the two dance dramas: *Shyama* and *Chandalika*. Both are based upon Buddhist episodes. The last-named recounts the story of an untouchable girl's passion and the pacification of her disposition by coming into contact with Buddha's disciple, Ananda. Long before Ambedkar was a twinkle on the socio-political horizon of India, this drama of a dalit girl shone in literary perfection, and is still unparalleled in dalit literature produced ever since.

In the domain of plastic arts, Rabindranath's encouragement for executing Buddhist themes manifested in the paintings of Nandalal Bose, and the monumental sculptures by Ramakinkar of Buddha in meditation and of Sujata at Santiniketan. It should be noted that culture of the mind, or *bhāvanā* in Buddhist terminology, is comprehended under the term *saṃādhi*, the arts contribute to the perfection, refinement and elevation of consciousness. Rabindranath has noted that wherever Buddhism

went in Asia it brought about an efflorescence of painting, music and poetry by reason of their emotional appeal and potency for rising to higher consciousness. Art is a means of rising to higher plane of consciousness. Buddha had once taught that the self is no part of beauty. This was also the thesis of Rabindranath's philosophy of art. Non-egoity is essence of both art and ethics.

Tagore distinguishes a two-fold teaching of Buddha. One is the negative teaching, purporting to generate dispassion towards the objects of the senses; another is the positive teaching formulating the ethics of love, *maitrī*. Tagore argues that if the negative teaching of Buddha were to be taken at its face value, then there would have not been any need for an ethics of loving kindness and compassion. Hence there is the necessity of interpreting of the real intent of Buddha's teaching. According to Tagore, the apparently negative teaching does not imply the positive teaching of ethics. The two teachings fall apart. A holistic interpretation should integrate the two teachings, the negative and the positive. Moreover, Tagore points out that the teachings were addressed to different audiences of diverse dispositions. A teaching intended for the rogue Angulimal must be different from the one directed towards the soft and tender Ananda. A hermeneutics of the teachings must be undertaken to have an overall view of Buddha's teachings. This is an important point made by such philosophers as Asanga, Aryadeva and the great Nagārjuna. A hermeneutics of the teachings of Buddha is an important part of the programme of the philosophers in the tradition of Buddhism. And Tagore does the same job in his own way, the poet's way.

Rabindranath's knowing and reflections on the teachings of Buddha are strewn over the vast expanse of his creative writings. More specifically, mention should be made of those pieces where he places Buddha in line with the message of the *Upaniṣads*. In the course of his Oxford lectures, *The Religion of Man*, he juxtaposes the Upaniṣadic concept of *visvakarmā* and the *Sutta Nipata* metaphor of the mother protecting her only child. The liberated man works with the entire human world in

view, he becomes a *visvakarmā*, breaking through the barrier of the private ego. This is a new interpretation of the concept. Rabindranath associates the concept of *visvakarmā* with the Buddhist ideal of *Brahmavihāra*. This is a status of the spirit extending love, friendship, sympathetic joy and indifference towards one's own happiness as well as sorrow. The *Gītā* says, and Saṅkara too comments, that a jivanmukta engages himself in working for the good of others, *sarva bhute hite retah*. For Rabindranath, this mode of wide and open ethical living has a universal import. His distinction between the lesser I and the greater I, living in terms of the dictates of the ego and abiding in the openness of the universal consciousness, is based upon the metaphor of the two birds in the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* and ethically spelt out by the Buddhist ideal of abiding in altruistic motivation. In the *Sādhanā*, Rabindranath dwells on the Buddhist notion of *anātma* explicating it in the manner and mode of transcending the closed life of the ego, and entering the life of a larger consciousness.

Further, he considers the concept of *śīla*, and goes on to remark that virtue consists in steadfastly practising the precepts. There is an essay on the *Dhammapada*, which he compared with the *Gītā*. He considers the *Dhammapada* as one amongst the great scriptures of the world. In this essay, Rabindranath has discussed the eastern and the western perspectives on the life of action. There is a basic difference between the Eastern and the Western approaches to action. In the West, action is meant to engender life's purposes, whereas in the East, action is to be performed to get freed from the cycle of returning to life. According to the Eastern point of view, action is to be resorted to only for the sake of wresting freedom from action's binding implications. Philosophies of India have divergent, even conflicting epistemological and metaphysical views, Rabindranath points out, as to the aim and goal of liberation and freedom, there has been a unity and unanimity among them. This unity of view lies in making action geared towards dispassion. And in this regard Buddha's teachings had been an exception. Even Kumarila Bhatta held that ethics of Buddhism,

except its rejection of *śabda* as a *pramāna*, is worthy of emulation.

As for the *Dhammapada*, Rabindranath holds that it contains the ethical and spiritual wisdom in the form of a compendium, and as such it is continuous with the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, and there is unity of the teachings of the *Dhammapada* with other sources like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gītā*. Viewed in this fashion, the *Dhammapada* is an inalienable part of the spiritual heritage of India.

Towards the end of the essay Rabindranath implores greater attention to be paid to the study of Buddhist scriptures. He held that without a recovery of the Buddhists works, no fuller account of the history of India would ever be possible. This is an important notice.

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