

Chapter 6

Tagore on Mukti

The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore is aesthetic humanism. Like Sri Aurobindo, he advocated creative self-expression in the humanities as a means for spiritual growth and as being essential for the education of the individual. He however did not have any formal yoga that we can delineate or any systematic approach to sādhana. His collection of poems, *Gītānjali* (Song Offerings), received international recognition and he was awarded the 1913 Nobel Prize in literature, when he was 52 years old, just before the onset of the First World War. A year later, he was knighted by the Queen.

With the Nobel Prize money, he established the Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan, near Calcutta, in 1921. Shantiniketan which literally means ‘abode of peace’ is essentially a creation of Tagore and embodies his ideal for the future of the world. Almost a century old, this university has produced a stellar list of great intellectuals and leaders such as Indira Gandhi, the famous film director Satyajit Ray and Amartya Sen (who later went on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics). Today, the university is seen as a major center of learning and Tagore is revered as a towering figure on the Indian literary landscape. His poetry, essays, dramas, novels as well as his art and music, have given him the title as the “Shakespeare of Modern India”. But Tagore cannot be judged only by his writings in English. Scholars say that a bulk of his creative output was in Bengali and he managed to give his native language new energy by creating innovative forms of expression. His work energized literature in other vernacular languages in India.

Tagore’s philosophy of aesthetic humanism was rooted in the idea of education which he viewed as the foundation of society. The educators of today are the makers of tomorrow and so it is important that our educators are imbued with a sense of purpose and hope. But the ideal of education that Tagore envisaged was not in the traditional sense where the student’s goal is to get a college degree and then get a job. True education must also form character, must awaken a sense of creativity and innovation in the individual as well as a universal sense of a collective humanity. This is the essence of his aesthetic humanism.

Regarding his philosophy of education, he wrote, "We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language, to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates. He was born in the human world, but is banished into the world of living gramophones." (Tagore, *Essays*, 402)

It was this vision that inspired him to found his university, Viswa Bharati, or World University. A hint of this vision can be seen when he wrote, "Children are living beings more living than grown-up people who have built shells of habit around themselves. Therefore it is absolutely necessary for their mental health and development that they should not have mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is personal love. It must be an ashram where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities ... where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored; where nature's festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from man; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to take their daily food and the food of their eternal life."

Tagore was born in 1861, two years before Vivekananda, in Calcutta, into a wealthy, artistic family. He was the fourteenth child of Devendranath Tagore. Devendranath was a contemporary of Sri Ramakrishna and was also the leader of the Brahmo Samaj, a movement started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to revive and modernise Hinduism as a response to British colonial rule. Devendranath was well-versed in the ancient philosophical literature of India and especially the poetry of the Upanishads. He wanted his children to learn from this ancient tradition rather than be subjected to an indoctrination that they would have received in Macaulay's India. So he engaged private tutors for all his children.

In his reminiscences, Tagore recalls one teacher, Bihari Lal Chakravarti, who impressed upon him the greatness of the ancient poets and their literary style. "He was a great admirer of Valmiki and Kalidas. I remember how once after reciting a description of the Himalayas from Kalidas with all the strength of his voice, he said: "the succession of long 'a' sound here is not an accident. The poet has deliberately repeated this sound all the way from *devatātma* down to *nagādhirāja* as an aid to realizing the glorious expanse of the Himalayas."'" (Tagore, *Omnibus 2*, 506)

Thus, from an early age, Tagore was imbued with a sense of the literary greatness of ancient India. This is a sharp contrast to the upbringing of Sri Aurobindo. The formative years are the most important in the growth of the human mind and they shape the future. Though Tagore's early years were nurtured through home schooling, he later attended the Bengal Academy and after that, University College in London. There, he studied law, but left in disgust after one year.

Tagore's writings have a universal appeal and his ideas resonate in the hearts of all people. Against the backdrop of the First World War, he became

the voice of conscience of that segment of humanity that was searching for something grander in the life of man. His essay "Pathway to Mukti" written in 1925 summarises his thought and maps out the future of the humanities as a vehicle for philosophy.

In this pursuit, the individual must learn to reflect and introspect in solitude. And out of that inner reflection must come creativity. In his essay on Tagore, Radhakrishnan wrote, "The poetry of human experience, the realities of life as distinct from its mere frills, are achieved in solitude. ... Only the man of serene mind can realize the spiritual meaning of life. Honesty with oneself is the condition of spiritual integrity. ... Our pretensions and professions are the barriers that shut us away from truth. We are more familiar with the things we have than with what we are. We are afraid to be alone with ourselves, face to face with our naked loneliness." (Radhakrishnan, *East and West*, 135)

Tagore had a positive vision for the future of humanity. He wrote, "The call has come to every individual in the present age to prepare himself for the dawn of a new era, when man shall discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings." (Ray, 10)

Though he was against British imperialism, he was not a great adherent of nationalism. In his 1917 essay titled *Nationalism*, he wrote "Nationalism is a great menace." (BG, 29) For the populace, he advocated "against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity." (BG, 27) With the evils of the First World War clearly in front of him, he stressed again and again, "I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations." (BG, 28) He viewed the British occupation of India as a providential opening for a new era of international co-operation. In the same essay, he wrote, "If Providence wants England to be the channel of that communication, of that deeper association, I am willing to accept it with all humility." (BG, 28)

Because of his ideal view of internationalism, Tagore was often at odds with the Indian independence movement and in particular with Mahatma Gandhi. However, in 1919, with the passing of the infamous Rowlatt Bill which banned any public gatherings and later the Amritsar massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, Tagore changed his views. He was so disgusted that he renounced his knighthood. He was torn between idealism and reality.

Tagore lived to a ripe old age of eighty and he died in 1941. Against the backdrop of the Second World War, his last book, *Crisis in Civilization* warns humanity that if it doesn't embrace internationalism and a unified world view, it will perish. He wrote, "The modern civilization is largely composed of *ātmahanojanāh* who are spiritual suicides. It has lost its will for limiting its desires, for restraining its perpetual self-exaggeration. Because it has lost its philosophy of life, it loses its art of living. Like poettasters it mistakes skill for power and realism for reality." (BG, 163)

In his reflective literary journey *The Discovery of India* written during his imprisonment, Jawaharlal Nehru summarized Tagore's life accurately

when he wrote, “A contemporary of Vivekananda, and yet belonging much more to a later generation, was Rabindranath Tagore. The Tagore family had played a leading part in various reform movements in Bengal during the nineteenth century. There were men of spiritual stature in it and fine writers and artists, but Rabindranath towered above them all, and indeed all over India his position gradually became one of unchallenged supremacy. His long life of creative activity covered two entire generations and he seems almost of our present day. He was no politician, but he was too sensitive and devoted to the freedom of the Indian people to remain always in his ivory tower of poetry and song. Again and again he stepped out of it, when he could tolerate some development no longer, and in prophetic language warned the British Government or his own people. He played a prominent part in the Swadeshi movement that swept through Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century, and again when he gave up his knighthood at the time of the Amritsar massacre. His constructive work in the field of education, quietly begun, has already made Shantiniketan one of the focal points of Indian culture. His influence over the mind of India, and specially of successive rising generations, has been tremendous. Not Bengali only, the language in which he himself wrote, but all the modern languages of India have been moulded partly by his writings.” (Nehru, Discovery, 372)

This is quite a testimony coming from the first Prime Minister of India who himself had extraordinary literary talent, who believed in internationalism and world unity. In his synopsis of Tagore’s life, Nehru underscores the power of the pen, the power of thought to shape the future. It is quite formidable. Surveying the landscape of all philosophers of the subcontinent, he concluded that Tagore was “the great humanist of India,” and said “more than any other Indian, he [Tagore] has helped to bring into harmony the ideals of the East and the West, and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism. He has been India’s internationalist par excellence, believing and working for international co-operation, taking India’s message to other countries and bringing their message to his own people. And yet with all his internationalism, his feet have always been planted firmly on India’s soil and his mind has been saturated with the wisdom of the Upanishads.” (Nehru, Discovery, 372)

6.1 Pathway to Mukti

The Sanskrit word *mukti* means liberation or freedom. Freedom from what? In the earlier chapters, Vivekananda highlighted the problem of *Māya* and underscored the problem of human bondage. Thus, the idea of *moksha* or *mukti* has thus been a dominant theme in Indian philosophy.

In his essay, “Pathway to Mukti”, Tagore begins by comparing the approach to philosophy in the eastern and western traditions. In the latter, with

its insistence of pure rationalism, there was no place for poetry or art. This kind of compartmentalisation leads to a schism in the collective psyche. In India, poetry and philosophy “live in a joint family” and “philosophy ever sought alliance with poetry because its mission was to occupy people’s life and not merely the learned seclusion of scholarship.” (BG, 153)

It would seem that our division of knowledge into numerous sub-disciplines is for our convenience so that we are not overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. We forget this and refuse to acknowledge their interdependence as well as their aid in shaping our world view so that we can experience a greater cosmos of mutual understanding and co-operation.

Citing the examples of sage musicians and poet saints stretching back to the time of the Mahabhārata, Tagore underlines how these writings are not the personal ideas of a single poet but “the normal mentality of the people who are willing to be led along the many-branched path of a whole world of thoughts, held together in a gigantic orb of narrative surrounded by innumerable satellites of episodes.” (BG, 154) The image of an interdependent solar system held together by an invisible gravitational force is very powerful. Philosophy is the invisible gravitational force that holds the people together. For what after all is the purpose of philosophy if not to transform the people to a higher level of consciousness. Our conventional view of philosophy is as a subject taught in the elite corridors of academe. But in India, especially with its poetic tradition, this has never been the case. Philosophy expressed through poetry and music penetrated into the hearts of ordinary people. Even today, we find this musical tradition prevalent in India in the form of devotional music, not restricted to temples or churches, but as something common in every day life and consumed on a daily basis.

Tagore writes, “That may not be remarkable in itself, but when we find that these songs are not specially meant for some exclusive pandits’ gathering, but that they are sung in villages and listened to by men and women who are illiterate, we realize how philosophy has permeated the life of the people of India, how it has sunk deep into the subconscious mind of the country.” (BG, 154)

Sadly, this tradition that Tagore speaks about is disappearing even in India. Fifty years ago, one can see in every remote village, the nightly performance of the famous *harikatha* or the story of Hari (another name for God as Vishnu), with its myriad episodes of drama, music, and poetry, performed by artists in a continuous flow of structured improvisation. This is how people used to entertain themselves in the evening. But this art form is quickly disappearing with the advent of television and technology.

Referring to this ancient tradition of wandering minstrels, Tagore says that “this wonderful system of mass education which has prevailed for ages in India, is in danger of becoming extinct.” (BG, 156) But the genius of the poets was to communicate metaphysics through song and dance. “The lyrical wealth of the popular literature distributed far and wide by the agency of mendicant singers ... are the clouds that help to irrigate the minds of the

people with the ideas which in their original form belonged to difficult doctrines of metaphysics." (BG, 156)

This symbiotic relation between philosophy, art and music enabled great thoughts and ideals to become practical. "Profound speculations contained in the systems of Sāmkhya, Vedānta and Yoga are transformed into the living harvest of the people's literature, brought to the door of those who can never have the leisure and training to pursue these thoughts to their fountainhead." (BG, 156)

Today, we think of education as being equivalent to literacy and numeracy. In this mechanized and mercantile civilization that we have created, the individual has no time to pursue aesthetics and the culture of the mind. Thus, it is essential that we facilitate the flow of the higher ideals into the every day life of the common man so as to "irrigate the minds of the people."

The human being is caught in the endless cycle of earning a living. They have no time to make a life. The "daily grind" as it is called makes us all robotic and mechanical both in our movements and in our thoughts. The only way the cycle can be broken is to inject some higher thought into the system so that the enslaved populace can also cultivate their minds. If we do not do this, we risk the decline of human civilization.

In his essay, "Pathway to Mukti", Tagore wrote "In order to enable a civilized community to carry on its complex functions, there must be a large number of men who have to take charge of its material needs, however onerous such task may be. Their vocation gives them no opportunity to cultivate their mind. Yet they form the multitude, compelled to turn themselves into unthinking machines of production, so that a few may have the time to think great thoughts, create immortal forms of art and to lead humanity to spiritual altitudes." (BG, 157)

This responsibility seems to lie with the artists and the philosophers and even the world of entertainment. The crowds throng to see the cinema, but does the cinema take us higher and enable us to have a higher vision or does it degrade us. Or is the cinema chaotic growth and is it simply catering to the more archaic and baser human emotions? This leads us to the notion of social responsibility and the duties of the artist and the philosopher in the interdependent society that we live in.

Tagore calls the common workers "social martyrs" because they have had to sacrifice a life of higher thought in order to ensure the cogs of corporations run smoothly. Technology does not seem to be giving us greater leisure but only depriving us of it and eating into our vitals. In India, Tagore says, there has been a "spontaneous social adjustment" to remedy this situation and this has been through the marriage of poetry and philosophy. "Poetry and philosophy have walked hand in hand, only because the latter has claimed its right to guide men to the practical path of their life's fulfilment." (BG, 157)

This really then is the problem. In our modern world, philosophy and poetry do not occupy the exalted position suggested by Tagore. They are

relegated to the halls of academe. But with the rise of artificial intelligence even the need for the human beings will soon be eliminated because we will all be replaced by robots. This is the crisis of modern civilization. The compartmentalisation of knowledge into multifarious subdisciplines with poetry and philosophy being relegated to obscurity has led to this predicament, our collective existential crisis. Tagore writes “the abiding cause of all misery is not so much in the lack of life’s furniture as in the obscurity of life’s significance.” (BG, 159)

This is the problem of the human race. Population is ever increasing. Poverty is also on the rise even in affluent countries. We have been deluded into thinking that politics, which is really the science of self-government, will solve the problem and have entrusted our political leaders with the responsibility of ensuring that there is justice and equitable distribution of wealth. When we reached the precipice of self-destruction at the end of the two world wars, we had the momentary wisdom to create the forum of the United Nations, where we would resolve disputes through dialogue but even this body has been made irrelevant by the super-powers. Now with the rise of populism, all we are seeing is an increase in autocratic rulers who are using their position and power to increase their own wealth. This is the crisis of the present moment. What is the solution? How can the common man extricate himself from this quagmire?

Tagore replies. The poet “knows that there is no external means of taking freedom by the throat. It is the inward process of losing ourselves that leads us to it. Bondage in all its forms has its stronghold in the inner self and not in the outside world. It is in the dimming of consciousness, in the narrowing of our perspective, in the wrong valuation of things.” (BG, 160)

In the past, we hoped that the media would create for us the window through which we can look at ourselves objectively. But now with the weaponisation of cyberspace, the spread of fake news, and the autocrats calling legitimate media as an “enemy of the people”, we have an existential crisis.

In 1940, at the dawn of the second world war, Tagore was prompted to write ‘Crisis in Civilization’ and its message seems relevant today.

Underscoring the idea of *mukti* or freedom from this bondage, Tagore suggests that the common peasant is aware “that an Emperor is a decorated slave remaining chained to his Empire, that a millionaire is kept pilloried by his fate in the golden cage of his wealth” and only the peasant imbued with philosophic reflection and poetic delight “is free in the realm of light.” (BG, 159)

But is the emperor aware that he is a “decorated slave”? Is the millionaire aware that he lives in a “golden cage of wealth”? It seems then that education and a sense of philanthropy are not to be brought to the common man but to those in positions of power, to ensure that they carry out their duties responsibly.

The poet saints of the past recognized this reality. Tagore writes, "According to these singers, truth is in unity and therefore freedom is in its realization." (BG, 160) What is the need for daily meditation? Tagore answers that it is to "go beyond the world of appearances", to realize "the inner truth of all things in which the endless Many reveals the One." (BG, 160)

References

1. Aurobindo, Sri, *Collected Works*, Pondicherry.
2. Cannon, Garland, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.
3. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *The Portable Emerson*, Penguin Books, 1946.
4. Heehs, Peter, *The Lives of Aurobindo*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008.
5. Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*, Penguin, India, 2008.
6. Isherwood, C., *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1986.
7. Iyengar, Srinivasa, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History*, 2 Volumes, Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education, Pondicherry, 1972.
8. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Warner Books, New York, 1998.
9. Luytens, Mary, *Krishnamurti, The Years of Awakening*, Avon Books, New York, 1975.
10. McFetridge, Paul, *A Linguistic Introduction to the History and Structure of the English Lexicon*, Simon Fraser University Publications, Burnaby, BC, 2008.
11. Murty, M. Ram, *Indian Philosophy: an introduction*, Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ontario, 2013.
12. Murty, K. Satchidananda and Ashok Vohra, *Radhakrishnan: His Life and Ideas*, SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 1990.
13. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Charles A. Moore, *A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989.
14. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *East and West in Religion*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1958.
15. Ray, Satyajit, *Portrait of a Man*, in *The UNESCO Courier*, December 1961.
16. Satprem, *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness*, Mysore, India, Techprints, 1970.
17. Schlipp, Paul Arthur, ed., *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois, 1952.
18. Tagore, Rabindranath, *Omnibus*, Volumes 1-2, Rupa and Company, New Delhi, 2006.
19. Tagore, Rabindranath, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 4, *Essays*, Atlantic Publishers, 2007.
20. Vivekananda, Swami, *The Complete Works*, Mayavati, Advaita Ashram, 1970.