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Brief Opinion

Contradictions in Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda's idea of *Karma Yoga* (detached 'witness-consciousness' through action)

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'How far can he fly - can he fly and fly, till he flies into nothingness itself?'¹

- '*Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*' by
Rabindranath Tagore (1915).

*'If you take the character of any man, it really is but the aggregate of tendencies, the sum total of the bent of his mind; you will find that misery and happiness are equal factors in the formation of that character. Good and evil have an equal share in moulding character, and in some instances, misery is a greater teacher than happiness. In studying the great characters the world has produced, I dare say, in the vast majority of cases, it would be found that it was misery that taught more than happiness, it was poverty that taught more than wealth, it was blows that brought out their inner fire more than praise.'*²

- In 1893, Swami Vivekananda went to the United States to participate in the Parliament World's Religions and got overwhelming success and public attention.

The book *Karma Yoga* was first published in 1896. The lectures of this book were recorded by professional stenographer Joseph Josiah Goodwin (initially Goodwin was hired to record Swamiji's lectures and he later became a friend and a follower of Vivekananda).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Indian polymath, unified his vast gamut of creative excellence (in poetry, essays, novels, plays, songs, paintings, and ingenious social reform) through the common theme of 'realisation of life' that he imbibed from the spiritual wisdom of the East - especially monistic Hinduism, as laid down in the *Upanishads* (late Vedic Sanskrit texts of Hindu philosophy).

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902, a.k.a Narendranath Datta), was an Indian Hindu monk and the chief devotee of the 19th-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna. He was the central figure in the introduction of the Indian *Vedantic* and *Yogic* philosophy to the Western world during the late 19th century.

The following discourse is a brief yet appealing comparative analysis of two viewpoints on the same subject of *Karma Yoga* (detached witness-consciousness through action) written separately by these two stalwarts of Indian philosophy.^{1,2}

The word '*Yoga*' is derived from the Sanskrit root '*Yuj*', signifying 'to join' or 'to unite' – the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness – a detached self-reflective 'witness-consciousness' as untouched by the activities of the mind (*Chitta*) and everyday misery (*Dukkha*).

The 'meditative' element of *Yoga* is and always will be perceived in Indian philosophy as a tool of constant remembrance for liberation – quite contrary to the fancy interpretations of deep-breathing, health or mindfulness (Vivekananda, for example, known to have practised the major forms of *Raja Yoga*, passed away at the age of 39 following a third heart attack and had more than 30 diseases and ailments). To put it very shortly, the key paths for practising this means to liberation can be broadly categorised into:

Karma Yoga: selfless, nonattached work that makes oneself conscious of the absolute.

Bhakti Yoga: love that doesn't give rise to selfishness but makes conscious of the absolute.

Raja Yoga: concept of the absolute through psychic control.

Jnana Yoga: concept of the absolute through philosophical thought.

The term 'absolute' coined above refers to the '*Brahman*' in the Vedic texts – '*the creative principle which lies realized in the whole world*' – as defined by German Indologist Paul Jakob Deussen. *Brahman* has been variously described as *Sat-cit-ānanda* or truth-consciousness-bliss.

The word '*Karma*' is derived from the Sanskrit root '*Kri*' which means: 'to do' and the selfless, nonattached work that makes oneself conscious of the absolute is thus *Karma Yoga*. Tagore defines its purpose in his 'realization of action' saying – '*The more man acts and makes actual what was latent in him, the nearer does he bring the distant Yet-to-be*'.

Tagore refuses to accept that meditation in isolation in search of absolute is the correct path to achieve the absolute or the *Brahman*. He labels isolation as 'inaction' and escapism which leads to nothing but the intoxication of self. This concept which he offers in

his article 'realization in action', is puzzling since in his other essay 'relation of the individual to the universe'¹ he speaks the integral importance of our ancient Aryan sages who remained in isolation most of their lives to realize the concept of oneness with the universe.

This undoubtedly highlights a self-contradiction and a glaring difference with Vivekananda's views on *Karma Yoga*.

In 'realization in action' Tagore argues that the huge dynamics of human activity through history and civilizations can't all be labelled insignificant. So activity is a means to manifest the soul. The soul desires to manifest itself in activity just like the absolute manifests itself through the creation of the universal laws of action.

Now the question is what kind of action is referred to here?

Swami Vivekananda in his lectures on *Karma Yoga* says that none of the methods of *Jnana, Karma, Raja and Bhakti Yogas* is separate from each other and nor has they got any hierarchical significance. All paths are of the same importance; only everything is not for all.

Defining *Karma Yoga* Vivekananda refers to *Bhagabath Gita* saying any *Karma* should be done without attachment and as a part of duty.

Tagore in his definition of action says everything should be done as a work for the *Brahman* such that in all his work he finds eternal joy—a sense of holiday in his working days.

So far, both of their concepts are more or less referring to the same philosophy. However, Tagore goes one step further saying that those who escape the rigours of daily life actually escape life itself and hence escape the absolute – much in contradiction to his own words in another essay¹ as discussed above.

Now, if we categorise actions they can be classified as follows:

1. Actions as a direct response to any stimuli. This is the material cause for any action which might have formal and final causes such as,
2. Actions as means of earning a living.
3. Actions as a duty to the family.
4. Actions as beneficial to society.
5. Actions that cultivate intellectual knowledge.

6. Actions for self-realisation which may involve complete renunciation of the world and meditation in isolation.

It will be an utter mistake if we think that meditation for self-realization is a process of inaction and it will also be a biased opinion to brand any of these actions as more important than others.

The civilization which Tagore speaks of is a result of actions manifested in all these forms – just different modes of practice for different individuals or even for the same individual at different times of life.

When a farmer ploughs a field he is not expected to be a poet. He might find immense joy in his activity of ploughing the field, a joy in doing his duty, in being able to feed his family, and even for the simple pleasure of anticipating the outcome of ploughing – a vast green crop field. Is it wrong to think that way? These thoughts do not belittle him – he is performing his duty as is expected of him.

Similarly, our ancient sages, as mentioned in another text¹ by Tagore himself, who spend most of their lives in seclusion and deep meditation, are performing their own process of realisation – to comprehend the unity of self and universe. They are not expected to plough fields, nor can their activity be termed inaction. Of course, the extreme form of austerity which involves torturing the body is not the correct process since it has the opposite effect of diverting the mind towards the body itself. So, as advised by Gautama Buddha, that is not advisable. Nonetheless, meditation in seclusion being detached from the world is also a means to attain truth – who are we to judge which way is better or higher?

One cannot help but agree with Tagore that the driving force of our civilization, of the chariot of human progress, is not something to be taken lightly or belittled. However, how much of this progress is the result of our effort to attain selfless pursuit of liberation? How does the realisation of *Brahman* account for the grotesqueness of blood spilt, the horrors of war, the unfathomable injustice, and the misutilization of human knowledge? Though evil and progress are indeed intertwined, no one can deny the fact that the I-ego was the driving force of the progress of human civilization rather than the essence of *Karma Yoga*.

Whatever our actions might be, we have to come out of our I-ego to know the I-self. We can't change our basic receptivity, bent of mind, and the structure of our consciousness and neither can we change the nature of our actions. A worker might have to face cold-blooded, relentless exploitation from his employer. Yet, he could strive to realise the

absolute through his unyielding pursuit of joy even amidst inhuman suffering. Similarly, a sage can renounce all work, break out from the hustle and bustle of life and seek absolute truth in complete isolation. This is the law of the eternal absolute. It imparts diversity to human nature and also imparts diversity in the ways of achieving *Brahman*. This was what was emphasized by Ramakrishna when he said '*jata mat tata path*' (meaning that 'Truth' can be realized through various paths taught in world religions - each path is valid). This is what was actually endorsed in Vivekananda's *Karma Yoga* and is unarguably a more liberal view.

References:

01. Rabindranath Tagore. (1998). *Sadhana: the realization of life (1915)*. Kessinger Pub.
 02. Vivekananda, S., & Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre. (1982). *Karma-Yoga ; and, Bhakti-Yoga*. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
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