CHAPTER II

THE PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE—II

Life-breath is the breath of immortality. The body ends in ashes. O my will, remember thy deeds. O God, O Fire, thou knowest all deeds. Lead us through good paths to fulfilment. Separate from us the crooked sin. To thee we offer our speech of salutation.—Isa Upanishad.

Whoso takes the world’s life on him and his own lays down, He, dying so, lives. Swinburne.

I

The acquisition of the true insight into things is the mark of religion. That insight we can have only when our souls have so expanded as to feel for the whole universe. This expansion of soul, this “widening of the range of feeling,” can be achieved not by adding to our possessions, not by extending our dominions, but by giving up our finite self. “We have, however, to pay a price for this attainment of the freedom of con-
consciousness. What is the price? It is to give oneself away. Our soul can realise itself truly only by denying itself. The Upanishad says, *Thou shalt gain by giving away, Thou shalt not covet.*"¹ “The consciousness of the infinite in us proves itself by our joy in giving ourselves out of our abundance. And then our work is the process of our renunciation, it is one with our life. It is like the flowing of the river, which is the river itself.”² Spiritual attainment consists in giving away or renunciation. We have to conquer the world by caring naught for it. Self-denial is the path to self-realisation. This idea is brought out by the image of the lamp and the oil. “The lamp contains its oil, which it holds securely in its close grasp and guards from the least loss. Thus is it separate from all other objects around it and is miserly. But when lighted it finds its meaning at once; its relation with all things far and near is established, and it freely sacrifices its fund of oil to feed the flame.”³ With the annihilation of self comes the fulfilment of love. The self-centred life becomes God-centred. Man shall not see

¹ *Sādhanā*, p. 19. ² *Personality*, p. 63. ³ *Sādhanā*, p. 76.
God and live, goes the saying. Certainly not. So long as he is man he cannot see Him. When he sees Him he ceases to be man.\textsuperscript{1} Before that vastness and splendour man's individuality shrinks and crumbles into dust. The all-dwelling love invades, submerges, and overpowers the individual consciousness. The whole individual — body, mind, and soul — is given up to God.

From the blue sky an eye shall gaze upon me and summon me in silence. Nothing will be left for me, nothing whatever, and utter death shall I receive at thy feet.\textsuperscript{2}

This state of supreme bliss is not "death but completeness." It is the perfection of consciousness, where there is no dust or darkness to obscure the vision. It is an utter clearness and transparency through which God's rays pass and repass without let or hindrance. It is complete harmony, perfect love, and supreme joy. In that all-embracing consciousness the finite and the infinite are enfolded in one. "The inward and the out-

\textsuperscript{1} "Fully to realise the existence of the Absolute is for finite beings impossible. In order thus to know we should have to be, and then we should not exist" (Bradley: \textit{Appearance and Reality}).

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Gitanjali}, 98.
ward are become as one sky, the Infinite and the finite are united.”¹ It is self-tran-
scendence, not annihilation. It is life eternal.
“It is the extinction of the lamp in the morning light; not the abolition of the sun.”² A passage in Nettleship hits the point well. “Suppose that all human beings felt habitually to each other as they now do occasionally to those they love best. All the pain of the world will be swallowed up in doing good. So far as we can conceive of such a state it will be one in which there will be no individuals at all, but an universal being, in and for another; where being took the form of consciousness, it would be consciousness of another which was also oneself—a common consciousness. Such would be the atonement of the world.” Mr. Bosanquet asks us to think of the attitude demanded of one by a masterpiece of art. “You scarcely recognise yourself, when for a moment Shake-
spere or Beethoven has laid his spell on you.”³ In human life we soon slip back from this condition of self-forgetfulness; in the supreme state of bliss we have a perpetuation

¹ Kabir’s Poems, XVII. ; see also Sādhanā, p. 43.
² Sādhanā, p. 82; see Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, iv. 3. 21.
³ Gifford Lectures, vol. i. p. 260.
of this condition. The final state is a total transformation of the personality into an explicit organ of the Absolute. The independent false will is destroyed, the perfect surrender of the will to God makes the will the Divine will. We obtain this condition, not by abstraction, but by comprehension, not by exclusion, but by inclusion. It is therefore fulness of life. "Life dies into the fulness." ¹ The individual tries to realise the infinite within him, adore it, clasp it with affection, and ultimately become one with it. Till this goal is reached, man is caught in the world process. When it is reached the false individuality separating man from God becomes extinct. "When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut." ² The soul is then prepared to meet death or anything even more fearful than that. For it then shares the life eternal which death cannot defeat. "My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come." ³ The white radiance of eternity fills him, and puts fire into his heart

¹ Fruit-Gathering, LIV.
² Gitanjali, 63; see also Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, ii. 4. 14.
³ Gitanjali, 96.
and music into his soul. He becomes endowed with eternal youth and strength, and fills the world with light.¹

II

Side by side with this view of eternal life, we also come across the doctrine of re-incarnation.

The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation.²

Death belongs to life as birth does.
The walk is in the raising of the foot as in the laying of it down.³

With the Hindu philosophers, Rabindranath believes in the gradual perfection of individuals till the ideal is attained. The soul has to pass through many lives before the goal can be reached. “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long. I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my

¹ See Sādhanā, p. 14; Bhagavadgītā, ii. 55-58.
² Gītājanī, 95.
³ Stray Birds, 268.
track on many a star and planet.” In the progress towards perfection, man, owing to the weakness of his flesh, has to renew his body, and this renewal is what we call death. “It is thou who drawest the veil of night upon the tired eyes of the day to renew its sight in a fresher gladness of awakening.” Death is only a preparation for a higher and fuller life.

In the matter of future life, Rabindranath is at one with the Rishis of the Upanishads, who also hold the two views of immortality and reincarnation, the life of completeness and perfection and the life which continues endlessly. Both these views are valid in their respective spheres. So long as man is finite and does not give up his selfish nature, his destiny is not fulfilled, and the final consummation of becoming one with God is not attained, he is in the moral life struggling hard to attain the end which he does not get. He perpetually approximates to the goal, but never reaches it. For a finite being to achieve this impossible task, as Kant urges, infinite time is not enough. So long as man identifies himself with his finite, fleeting personality, he is

1 *Gitanjali*, 1 and 12.  
subject to the law of infinite progress and perpetual approximation. As Indians have it, he is bound in the cycle of births and deaths. He goes from life to life; death becomes only an incident in life, a change from one scene to another. But when the individual completely surrenders himself to the universal life, and the self becomes one with the supreme, then he gains the bliss of heaven and shares the life eternal. He is lifted above the travail of births and deaths, and above mere succession in time, to which alone death is relevant. In the moral life, where we have the individual attempting to reach the goal, we have the endless succession in time which belongs to the finite; but when moral life is swallowed up in religion, then the spirit transcends time and attains a timeless immortality.

III

The Absolute is the organic whole consisting of the different elements of matter, life, consciousness, and intellect.\(^1\) These are the expressions of the whole; but if they set themselves up for the whole, we are in the

\(^{1}\) See the Taittiriya Upanishad.
region of *maya*. As parts of the Absolute they are real; as unconnected with it they are illusory. *Avidya* or ignorance of the real nature of the world and man's place in it chains us in the bonds of *maya*. Then the finite existence becomes a *pathos*, and nature a bondage from which we should escape. In the world of *maya* our individuality appears to be ultimate; but if we overcome this illusion, we find our individual consciousness to be a unique expression of the universal. "Everything has this dualism of *maya* and *satyam*, appearance and truth. ... Our self is *maya* where it is merely individual and finite, where it considers its separateness as absolute; it is *satyam* where it recognises its essence in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self, in Paramātman."¹ In the Devi Bhagavata it is said that when Shakti turns towards the world she is *maya*; when she turns towards the Lord she is seen to be himself.² It is wrong to think that the world has an independent existence. "This world-song is never for a moment separated from its singer. Music and the musician are in-

¹ *Sādhanā*, p. 85.  
² See *Fruit-Gathering*, V.
separable.”¹ The play of the universe is centred round God.

The piper pipes in the centre, hidden from sight,
    And we become frantic, we dance.²
If we separate the two, we break up the real into the two abstracts of the finite and the infinite, which are both unreal and illusory. The mere finite is like “a lamp without its light,” a “violin without its music.” The mere infinite is “utter emptiness.” The two are real in their union. “The infinite and the finite are one, as song and singing are one.”³ It is only in marriage with the finite that the infinite can bear fruit; divorced from it, it remains barren. The unity of God is realised only through the many. “The real with its meaning read wrong and emphasis misplaced is the unreal.”⁴

Maya, thus, is a phantom that is and is not.

IV

When we perceive the real significance of nature and society we find they are there for the purpose of enabling us to reach the infinite. The ideal is to be attained, not by escaping

¹ Sādhanā, p. 143. ² The Cycle of Spring.
³ Personality, pp. 56-57. ⁴ Stray Birds, 254.
from the confusions of the world of sense, but by spiritualising them. Rabindranath does not look upon the body as the tomb or the prison of the soul from which it has to be liberated. For him man is bound up with nature; the human spirit is wedded to the material organism. Contact with the body, instead of being a tainting of the purity of the soul, is just the condition necessary for developing its nature. Nature is not, as such, evil. It all depends. If the individual rests in his sensuous nature self-satisfied, without directing his vision to God, then nature turns out to be a tempter. If, on the other hand, it is made to become the organ of the higher spirit, nothing can be said against it. By itself nature is a-moral. The spirit quickens it. It is the duty of man to transfigure the natural, break its externalism and transitoriness, and make it fully express the spirit for which it is intended.¹

If we think nature to be separate from God,

¹ Tennyson, who comes nearest to this idea, overlooks the essentially positive relation of body to mind. He seems to think that matter is incompatible with spirit:

"This weight of body and limb
Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him?"
we are in the world of *maya*. But if God is immanent in the universe, how can we refuse as dross the material body? The creative love of God is the source of the universe which is destined to reflect in itself the fulness of Divine perfection. The world is not the denial of God. It is His living image and not His enemy. It has to be fashioned into the symbol and instrument of the spirit. The body should be made the sign and utterance of the soul. "The flowers grow out of the dirt, but the foulness of the source is abolished in the flower itself."¹ Rabindranath protests against ignoring the senses.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.²

Rabindranath says:

The dust receives insult and in return offers her flowers.³

The world of nature is neither a delusion of the Creator nor a snare of the devil. It is the playground where we have to build our souls.

Similarly the world of persons and things

is not something to be escaped from. It is there to enable the finite individual to reach his goal. “The entire world is given to us, and all our powers have their final meaning in the faith that by their help we are to take possession of our patrimony.”¹ Nature and society are but the instruments by which to elicit the infiniteness of the finite being, the material to help the finite to work out its destiny. The whole universe is penetrated and vitalised by the living spirit, and so responds to the call of spirit. Not a fragment of it which is not deeply interesting and divine, if we approach it in the right way. Anything can be made the channel of approach to God, an entrance to immortality. “All paths lead to thee.” Nothing in the visible world is too low for the use of spirit. The dull dense world has openings throughout to the white radiance.

God the great giver can open the whole universe to our gaze, in the narrow space of a single lane.²

Infinite is thy mansion, my lord.³

Earth is crammed with heaven; all exist-

¹ Sadhanā, p. 137. ² Reminiscences, p. 221. ³ Gitanjali, 87.
ence is suffused with God. "Why, the whole country is all filled and crammed and packed with the King." As a Greek thinker has it, the earth is bound by a chain of gold to heaven. The smallest details of the world contain prophecies of the unknown. The universe is everywhere a gate through which we can enter our spiritual heritage. Strike it anywhere, lay hold of it anywhere, it opens to the mansion of God. "He comes, comes, ever comes. Every moment and every age, every day and every night, he comes, comes, ever comes." It is never too late to become a recruit to God's army. "At the end of the day I hasten in fear lest thy gate be shut; but I find that yet there is time." If we miss an opportunity, it is dead and gone, never more to recur. It is no good repenting after the event. At any moment the night may come when no man shall work. We must seize the opportunities as the world presents them, for they do not come at our invitation. We must be ever ready to receive God, for it may well happen that when He comes we

1 Dark Chamber, p. 14.  
2 Gitanjali, 45.  
3 Ibid. 82.
are not ready, and when we are ready He does not come.\(^1\)

The things of nature and the events of the world will cause trouble and vexation of spirit, if, instead of utilising them for spiritual and unselfish ends, we make use of them for our own sensation and enjoyment.

Why did the lamp go out?  
I shaded it with my cloak to save it from the wind, that is why the lamp went out.

Why did the flower fade?  
I pressed it to my heart with anxious love, that is why the flower faded.

Why did the stream dry up?  
I put a dam across it to have it for my use, that is why the stream dried up.

Why did the harp-string break?  
I tried to force a note that was beyond its power, that is why the harp-string is broken.\(^2\)

"Man's abiding happiness is not in getting anything but in giving himself up to what is greater than himself, to ideas which are larger than his individual self, the idea of his country, of humanity, of God."\(^3\) The world gives us opportunities for surrendering our

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1 See *The Gardener*, 8, 36, 57, and 66.  
2 *The Gardener*, 52.  
3 *Śādhana*, p. 152.
all. There is a touch of the eternal in all such surrenders to unselfish ideals, or dedications to high causes. We then feel the feet of God and forget ourselves. A high and noble ideal releases the self. It delivers us from our selfishness and opens the gateway to immortality. Even the common things of earth's everyday experience, if we wholeheartedly give up ourselves to them, would take us to heaven. In such transactions the characteristic features of religion are present. "Whenever we find a devotion which makes the finite self seem as nothing and some reality to which it attaches itself seem as all, we have the essentially religious attitude." ¹ The transcendent value of the ideal and the utter prostration of the self are complementary aspects of one experience. We should say in the presence of the ideal: "You are all my world. I am lost in you."² Look at Arjuna's address to Chitra. "You alone are perfect; you are the wealth of the world, the end of all poverty, the goal of all efforts, the one woman! Others there are who can be

but slowly known. While to see you for a moment is to see perfect completeness once and for ever.”

Chitra responds to this appeal: “I heard his call, ‘Beloved, my most beloved.’ And all my forgotten lives united as one and responded to it. I said, ‘Take me, take all I am.’ And I stretched out my arms to him. . . . Heaven and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life merged together in an unbearable ecstasy.”

There is nothing more heavenly on earth than the surrender of the soul of a woman to the man she loves. Self-transcendence, the mark of all spiritual experience, is present in the devoted passion for the pursuit of science, art, and morality. In human love we have such moments. “Only for a few fragrant hours we two have been made immortal.”

We then touch the hem of the garment of God, though we do not know it. “Entering my heart unbidden even as one of the common crowd, unknown to me, my king, thou didst press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment of my life.”

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1 Chitra, pp. 18 and 19.
2 Ibid. p. 24.
3 The Gardener, 44.
4 Gitanjali, 43.
experience is nothing more than this utter neglect of the self and surrender to God who captures our body, mind, and soul. It is a breaking up of our selfishness and a reaching out towards the whole. The finite ideals we sometimes disinterestedly pursue will sooner or later manifest their inadequacy to satisfy the needs of the soul. Though perfect human love approximates to this, we soon recognise that it cannot satisfy the infinite craving in us for heavenly perfection. It may open the way to it, but it can never be the end. "If their love has its absolute centre in creatures, whether brute or human, then there will be misery, and they will suffer from disappointments through sickness, death, and separation; but if they have the consciousness of the infinite personality in the centre and background of their personal life, then the power of love will be fully satisfied, and all the gaps will be filled, and their joys and sorrows will join their hands in a harmony of fulfilment which is blessedness."1 We long to become one with the perfect ideal. "In

1 Tagore's parting message to the women of America, Current Opinion, April 1917.
that devastation, in the utter nakedness of spirit, let us become one in beauty.” No finite object can satisfy this craving. “Alas for my vain desire! Where is this hope for union except in thee, my God?” ¹ Finite ideals will have to be transmuted into the infinite before the soul can get perfect satisfaction through them.

V

It follows that the God-possessed soul will spend itself in the service of man. Just as to the lover there is nothing unclean or impure in the loved one’s body, even so to the lover of God there is nothing untouchable in the great body of God, the world of men. Withdrawal from social work may be the temptation of the abstract mystic who turns away in disgust from the world of discord and contradiction, but to him the infinite will remain an abstract barren negative. It does not greatly matter whether we call it being or non-being. It is a question of taste or temperament. But, as Kabir says, we “find naught

¹ The Gardener, 50.
in that emptiness."¹ But loyalty to God the highest universal is meaningless if it does not embody itself in work for man the finite particular. The one is not beyond the many but is in the many. To the true mystic who realises by direct experience the central harmony of the universe there is "no mystery beyond the present; no striving for the impossible; no shadow behind the charm; no groping in the depth of the dark."² The infinite is not other than the finite, but is the finite transfigured.³ Life eternal is not the life beyond time, but is the life of recognition, here and now, of all things in the self, and the self in all things. The religious soul dwells in the world and helps to make it more fit for the habitation of God. As it is said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Those who consider that the worship of God will help us to reach the goal, even though we are indifferent and hostile to the service and welfare of man, do not know the secret of salvation. God is not in the king's temple, even though "twenty millions of gold went to

¹ Poems, XX. ² The Gardener, 16. ³ See Gitanjali, 78.
the making of that marvel of art, and it was consecrated to God with costly rites"; for the temple was built in the year when thousands of people whose houses have been burned stood vainly asking for help at his door.¹

The idea of divine immanence requires, first of all, individual purity—purity of body, mind, heart, and will. The methods of yoga, jnana, bhakti, and karma are to be adopted for the development and discipline of the soul.²

Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my body pure, knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.

I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act.³

The consciousness of Divine immanence demands social justice. Every man should be looked upon as an end in himself and not as a means. On this familiar text of the Upanishads, the Bible, the Bhagavadgita, and Kant, Rabin-dranath comments, with special reference to the

¹ Fruit-Gathering, XXIV.
² See the Bhagavadgita, xvii. 14-16.
³ Gitanjali, 4.
modern problems of slum life, sweating, prostitution, and political exploitation. "In the lands where cannibalism is prevalent man looks upon man as his food. In such a country civilisation can never thrive, for there man loses his higher value and is made common indeed. . . . Our desires blind us to the truth that there is in man, and this is the greatest wrong done by ourselves to our own soul. It deadens our consciousness, and is but a gradual method of spiritual suicide. It produces ugly sores in the body of civilisation, gives rise to its hovels and brothels, its vindictive penal codes, its cruel prison systems, its organised methods of exploiting foreign races to the extent of permanently injuring them by depriving them of the discipline of self-government and means of self-defence."¹ Here we have an eloquent expression of Rabindranath's deep hatred of tyranny and social injustice and thirst for social betterment. The true mission or destiny of the religious soul is not isolation or renunciation. It is to be a member of society recognising the infinite and boundless possibilities of man, and offering oneself up entirely

¹ Sādhanā, pp. 108 and 109.
and exhaustlessly to the service of one's fellows. The Bhagavadgita says: "Whoso enjoys without offering to the Gods their gifts, he is verily a thief." The mystic's feeling of kinship or solidarity with the universe expresses itself in the work for a changed earth and a happier humanity. Sustained by the vision of man made perfect, his love goes out to every creature, the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the imbecile, the stranger and the naked; for does not God live in them all? Is not a child born in the slum God's creation? "Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost."

VI

The liberated soul of the true saint does not wish to escape from this world but tries to improve it. But all his work will be rooted in an inner peace and repose. It is the same kind of activity as that which characterises the divine. It is true that it is bliss or delight. "From joy are born all creatures, by joy they are sustained, towards joy they progress, and into joy they enter." But this joy expresses

1 iii. 12.  
2 Gitanjali, 10.
itself in laws, which seemed to be bonds fettering it, while really the laws are the expression of love or freedom. "Fire burns for fear of him; the Sun shines by fear of him, and for fear of him the winds the clouds and death perform their office."¹ Law and Love are one in the Absolute. Even so in the liberated soul perfect service is perfect freedom. How can he whose joy is in Brahma live in inaction? "Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us for ever."² He is knowledge, power, and action, according to the Upanishads; but his action is the expression of his joy. The singer out of the fulness of his joy sings as the divine singer in joy creates the universe. The Isa Upanishad says: "In the midst of activity alone wilt thou desire to live a hundred years." The state of blessedness is not a lotus land of rest; for worship of God coincides with work for man. In Gitanjali, 52, the lover asks: "What is the token left of thy love? It is no flower, no spices, no vase of perfumed water. It is thy mighty sword, flashing as a flame, heavy

¹ Taittiriya Upanishad; see also Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, iii. 9.
² Gitanjali, 11.
as a bolt of thunder.” So the lover resolves: “From now I leave off all petty decorations. Lord of my heart, no more shall there be for me waiting and weeping in corners, no more coyness and sweetness of demeanour. Thou hast given me thy sword for adornment. No more doll’s decorations for me!”

With a firm hold on the eternal, the liberated soul sallies forth to meet the adversary, evil, in the world.

But this activity will not be for any selfish interest. In this it resembles children’s doings. Children take delight in work, as work with them is not work but effluence, or the outflow of their superfluous energies. Their excess energies find an outlet in play. Nothing sordid or utilitarian enters their will. “He has not learned to despise the dust and hanker after gold.”

“Pearl fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.” The difficulties of the world do not affect them. “Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships get wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play.”

1 Gitanjali, 52.  2 Crescent Moon.  3 Gitanjali, 60.
possessed souls are people who, like little children, are innocent, and do work for the mere joy of work, and live for the mere joy of life. "On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children."¹ The Vedanta system and its latest exponent Rabindranath stand for a synthetic idealism, which while not trying to avoid the temporal and the finite, has still a hold on the Eternal Spirit. They give us a practical mysticism which would have us live and act in the temporal world, but make action a consecration and life a dedication to God. But our work in the temporal world should not absorb all our energies and make us miss the vision universal. With a strong hold on the idea of the all-pervading, we must work in the world. "Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many."² The truly religious hero does the dullest deeds with a singing soul.

VII

The end of man is the realisation of the Self or the infinite in him. This is man's dharma. Dharma literally means nature, reality, or

¹ Gitanjali, 60.
² Ibid, 63.
essence. The essence of man is the infinite. His *dharma* is to become the infinite which he already is in potency. The universal one is the goal of the individual one.

That is the Supreme Path of This,
That is the Supreme Treasure of This,
That is the Supreme World of This,
That is the Supreme Joy of This.

The divine in us is to be realised. The "That in the This" has to come to its own. The character which distinguishes man from the other species of creation is the presence of the conscious endeavour to free himself from the limits of self and nature and seek for a seat in the kingdom of God. "In man, the life of the animal has taken a further bend. He has come to the beginning of a world, which has to be created by his own will and power."1 Man is a person. Freedom of endless growth should characterise all his activities. If he fails to do his share of the work in the world of creative freedom, he sins against the Eternal in him. His salvation lies in his freeing his personality from the narrow limitations of selfhood. It is the realisation of the infinite attained by the

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1 *Personality*, p. 88.
surrender of the finite. This giving up of the finite interests dear to man involves pain and suffering, hazard and hardship. The path to realisation, the Katha Upanishad says, is as the sharp edge of a razor. The infinite in man is like the oil in the sesame seeds, or butter in curds, water in river, or fire in the two pieces of wood. To get oil from sesame seeds we have to press them, churn the curds before we can have butter, dig the ground for water, and rub the sticks for fire. This is suffering or hardship. Till the goal of the infinite is attained we have risks and dangers. We have to fight with the finite, not physical wars, but spiritual wars. Every moment our finiteness is transcended. It is the nature of the finite or the lower to pass away before the higher arises. The mother who values dearly her charm, grace, and beauty, should sacrifice them all for the higher pleasure of looking upon her firstborn. This pleasure is born in anguish, at the cost of her charm and the peril of her life. It were prettier if we could shake children from trees or reap them from the fields! In Rabindranath’s image, “The flower

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1 Swetaswatar Upanishad, i. 15.
2 Swetaswatar Upanishad, i. 15.
must bring forth the fruit.” But when “the time of its fruition arrives . . . it sheds its exquisite petals and a cruel economy compels it to give up its sweet perfume.”

For the flower to develop, the bud has to die; for the fruit, the flower; for the seed, the fruit; for the plant, the seed. Life is a process of eternal birth and death. Birth is death, and death is birth. All progress is sacrifice. The finite self which has to be transformed into the infinite, which is its destiny, does not easily lend itself to this transformation. We have to lay violent hands on it before we can force it to express the infinite. So long as man is finite, the infinite within him tries to break through the finite. The spirit chafes against the bonds of the flesh. There is ever a striving forward in man to make real the infinite which he already is. The force of the spirit to rid itself of the encumbrances which oppose its free expression, means fight and struggle. The uprush of the infinite, bursting all barriers set up by the finite, means strain and suffering. Till therefore the infinite is reached, the life of the finite individual will be one of strenuous effort and untiring toil, involv-

1 Sādhanā, p. 99.
ing risk and daring, strain and conflict. "The
pain was great when the strings were being
tuned, my Master!" To suffer pain is the sign
of our finiteness. It is the right of man. It is
"our true wealth as imperfect beings. . . . It is
the hard coin which must be paid for everything
valuable in this life, for our power, our wisdom,
our love. In pain is symbolised the infinite
possibility of perfection, the eternal unfolding
of joy." Struggle, therefore, is the world's
supreme blessing. Man is born for it as he
reaches his aim through it.

To Rabindranath, imperfection is not the
sign of a fall from the high estate but a
condition of progress to it. It is a matter of
gratification that the world is imperfect.

None lives for ever, brother, and nothing lasts for long.
Keep that in mind and rejoice.

Beauty is sweet to us, because she dances to the same
fleeting tune with our lives.

Knowledge is precious to us, because we shall never
have time to complete it.

But this does not mean that the Absolute is
imperfect; for Rabindranath says: "All is

1 Fruit-Gathering, XLIX.; see also Personality, p. 103.
2 Šādhanā, pp. 64-65.
3 The Gardener, 68; see also 73.
done and finished in the eternal Heaven.”¹ As the sun has spots, and the mountain chasms, so the Absolute has imperfection; but the whole is perfect and sublime. Imperfection is a necessary factor in the universe. It is as real as the created universe itself. A universe without imperfection will be a static, unprogressive blank. But imperfection is not the last thing. It is not the end in itself. It exists only to be overcome in the perfect. As the unreal is the incomplete, so the imperfect is the partial. “Imperfection is not a negation of perfectness; finitude is not contradictory to infinity: they are but completeness manifested in parts, infinity revealed within bounds.”² Were imperfection the last thing in the universe, then the earth would be no place for human beings to live in. Nirvana, in the crude sense of death or destruction of self, would be the goal of man.³

The false view which makes imperfection the last thing, is due to an inadequate understanding of the place of evil and imperfection in the world. If we detach the facts from their setting in the whole, they would look

¹ The Gardener, 68. ² Sādhanā, p. 48. ³ Ibid. p. 71.
awry and unintelligible. "Only when we detach one individual fact of death, do we see its blankness and become dismayed. We lose sight of the wholeness of life of which death is part." The perfect sacrifice of the cross by itself meant death and persecution, but it contained a spiritual fact which shone out in the darkness and overcame it, the triumph of spirit over death. The physical event enables us to give up the body as a last offering to God. It is the last tribute on earth to be paid to the whole. In death the very being of the finite self is cancelled. Thus if we look at death in its setting, it loses its sting and the grave its victory. Death becomes the messenger of God.¹ In the present war the surface appearances may make one despair of humanity. God's image, man, is torn to shreds and pieces. But if we, without being led away by first appearances, take a calm and balanced view, we shall see in this war not merely the throes of death and disease, but the birth-pangs of a new internationalism based on self-sacrifice and disinterestedness. Hitherto civilisation has based itself on cannibalism.

¹ Gitanjali, 86.
"Whenever some ancient civilisation fell into decay and died, it was owing to causes which produced callousness of heart and led to the cheapening of man's worth; when either the state or some powerful group of men began to look upon the people as a mere instrument of their power; when by compelling weaker races to slavery and trying to keep them down by every means, man struck at the foundation of his greatness, his own love of freedom and fair-play. Civilisation can never sustain itself upon cannibalism in any form. For that by which alone man is true can only be nourished by love and justice."¹ We trust, as a result of this war, that the vogue of the philosophy which makes man a machine, and interprets civilisation in terms of mechanics, will give place to a philosophy of spirit and a civilisation based on love and justice. We trust that the sacredness of human nature and its right to the opportunities of self-development will be recognised not merely in Europe, but in the whole world. We refuse to believe that the desolation and madness of Europe have no other ends than themselves. The war,

¹ Sādhanā, pp. 111-112.
according to Rabindranath's philosophy, has come to point out the unstable mechanical nature of the existing civilisation and prepare the way for a more spiritual one.

What is the place of suffering in the world? Rabindranath tells us that the individual suffers whenever his desires are not satisfied. But he does not care to know whether his desires represent the needs of his real being, or those of his selfish nature. He is really helped by God's refusal of the many desires of his superficial self: "Day by day thou art making me worthy of thy full acceptance by refusing me ever and anon, saving me from perils of weak, uncertain desire."¹ In Rabindranath Tagore we also come across passages where he makes out that the suffering and misfortune of the world are the opportunities employed by God to draw man's attention to his real destiny.

Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night.²

When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thunder.³

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¹ Gitanjali, 14; see also Fruit-Gathering, LXXXV.
² Gitanjali, 27.
³ Ibid. 36.
The rain has held back for days and days, my God, in my arid heart. The horizon is fiercely naked—not the thinnest cover of a soft cloud, not the vaguest hint of a distant cool shower.

Send thy angry storm, dark with death, if it is thy wish, and with lashes of lightning startle the sky from end to end.¹

It is out of love that God sends us suffering. "God says to man, 'I heal you therefore I hurt, love you therefore punish.'"² In The King of the Dark Chamber, Sudharshana feels that the very possibility of union with God has become unthinkable to her on account of her sin. But her lord says: "It will be possible in time . . . the utter and bleak blackness that has to-day shaken you to your soul with fear, will one day be your solace and salvation. What else can my love exist for?"³ Compare with this, "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." He gives us "stripes, that would cleanse away evil." Pain and trouble purify the soul. The metal shines the brightest when it passes through the furnace, e.g., love will be all mirth and jollity, without any seriousness, if it runs perfectly smooth. "Love must be called from its play to drink sorrow

¹ Gitanjali, 40. ² Stray Birds, 63. ³ Dark Chamber, p. 111.
and be borne to the heaven of tears."\(^1\)

Love will be the "cold apathy of death," unless there are blows of pain in it.\(^2\)

And applying his doctrine, Rabindranath says that the Western soul, which is being deadened by greed and materialism, can be delivered from its present sin and weakness only by suffering.

To the interviewer of *Evening Wisconsin*, an American paper, Rabindranath said: "Only by suffering and sorrow shall you be freed from your crushing load. I do not know in what form it will come to you, but it is the only way. Only by great suffering and terrible humiliation shall you be made whole."\(^3\)

Suffering is not only the penalty but also the sign of man's disobedience of God's laws. The whole universe is ordered by the divine immanent reason. Destiny is no blind power, but providence. God is, no doubt, a loving God of mercy, but He is also a God of justice. His love expresses itself by means of laws. As He does not break His laws for the sake of His suppliant, He seems hard and pitiless.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) *The Gardener*, 68.  
\(^2\) *Fruit-Gathering*, XXXVIII.  
\(^3\) *Modern Review*, 1917, p. 372.  
\(^4\) Cf. "Tell thy sins to Him who is most just, being pitiless, most pitiful, being just too" (Oscar Wilde, *A Florentine Tragedy*).
"No one has ever been able to move him." ¹
In the same strain Surangama says: "May he ever remain hard and relentless like rock—may my tears and prayers never move him!" ²

VIII

Sin is selfishness. It is the failure of man to be true to his real self. It is the revolt against the spirit in man, the divine in him. It is the rejection of the all. "It is our desires that limit the scope of our self-realisation, hinder our extension of consciousness, and give rise to sin, which is the innermost barrier that keeps us apart from our God, setting up disunion and the arrogance of exclusiveness. For sin is not one mere action, but it is an attitude of life which takes for granted that our goal is finite, that our self is the ultimate truth, and that we are not all essentially one but exist each for his own separate individual existence." ³

Evil is the assertion of the false independence of the self. It is the antagonism of the individual to the world-whole, which is the ground and truth of the individual self. It is

¹ Dark Chamber, p. 129. ² Dark Chamber, p. 129. ³ Sādhāna, p. 111.
the assertion of the superficial self against his true self. It represents the division of self against self, the self which is his shadow against the self which is his reality. "What you are you do not see, what you see is your shadow." ¹ Egotism is the root-cause of evil. When selfish standards are set up, distinctions between mine and thine are introduced; man becomes a slave to the fancied goods of wealth and property, not objects of real worth but phantoms raised by the selfish imagination.

    I came out alone on my way to my tryst. But who is this that follows me in the silent dark?
    I move aside to avoid his presence but I escape him not.
    He makes the dust rise from the earth with his swagger; he adds his loud voice to every word that I utter.
    He is my own little self, my lord, he knows no shame; but I am ashamed to come to thy door in his company.²

    Our selfish desires are our fetters, and our possessions our limitations.³ "The mist is like the earth's desire. It hides the sun for whom she cries." ⁴ Selfishness is the mist which obscures our vision and makes us forget

¹ Stray Birds, 18. ² Gitanjali, 30.
³ See Gitanjali, 7, 8, 9, and 29; and Fruit-Gathering, XI.
⁴ Stray Birds, 94.
our true being. In our selfishness we think that finite objects can satisfy the infinite craving within. When we seek false ends we become bound by our desires.¹ Our real needs are not satisfied by what we come to possess. There is still the burden weighing on the heart, still the thirst for God, the hunger for the infinite and the transcendent. This is a sign of our finiteness and impotence. We really seek the good, but in our ignorance mistake the wrong thing for the good. Evil as evil is no man's aim. Through ignorance and selfishness we believe the path to blessedness lies in the possession of riches. We cannot imagine the degree to which man is materialised. He goes to the ends of earth to heap up riches. He gets it, but is not contented. No man with a soul in him can find consolation in money or the things that it can buy. The Katha Upanishad says: "No man can be satisfied by riches alone." At the present day this is forgotten, and the one thing that interests us is how to grow rich or make fortune at a stroke. It matters little if other people go under in this rush and hurry for

¹ See Gitanjali, 31.
money-making, if the path trodden by this money madness is strewn by numberless victims. Man fancies that he is enjoying himself in the boundless welter and confusion which result when self conflicts with self and spirit is crushed under matter. But those who gain wealth are as miserable as ever. They vie with one another in the huge wealth of their summer palaces, the cost of their motor buses, and the high prices of their wines. The scramble for the good things of the world may go on till the crack of doom, but the soul will not be satisfied. Peace and quiet will be still distant, the bliss of repose unknown, the vexations of the spirit unquenched. Man has aims which do not perish at death. Were he completely material, he could be satisfied by matter. In man there is the undying essence of spirit "that triumphs over Time, and is and will be when time shall be no more."¹ His soul cannot be satisfied by matter. "The tragedy of human life consists in our vain attempts to stretch the limits of things which can never become unlimited,—to reach the infinite by absurdly adding to the

¹ Carlyle.
rungs of the ladder of the finite." The need of the soul is for infinite satisfaction, but so long as it is finite and selfish, so long as it sets itself against the world, the ideal cannot be reached. The self will always be limited by what is outside it. It may go on acquiring objects in an endless manner, but is no better after the conquest of the world than before it. The limit is still there. Acquisition of objects has only resulted in the added pain of weariness. Pessimism is the result. Schopenhauer is right in holding that the asserting of the individual in his exclusive individuality only increases his misery. The way out of this condition is for the individual to give up his exclusiveness through devotion to an end beyond himself. If human nature is so limited that the absorption into a larger end is impossible for it, then the fate of man is pitiable indeed. In that case, an intelligible ethic, logic, and metaphysic will all become impossible. Incidentally, Rabindranath refers to the misfortune which is overtaking India. While the West is waking up to the enormity of the defect, India is fast falling a prey to it. She is slowly

1 *Sādhana*, pp. 150-151.
exchanging her ideals of spirit and indifference to material conditions for those of materialism and enjoyment. The educated classes with their fear of poverty and rush for gold are the worst sinners in this respect. They are on the inclined plane which leads to loss of life and destruction of spirit. Many are living on the edge of a precipice, and more are breaking down from the strain of the pursuit of pelf and place. Certainly the world is suffering from a fell disease. He is not wrong who said that the world was suffering from appendicitis. Those favoured by fortune in this competition for wealth have only a cynical smile for men of Rabindranath’s type who devote their attention to spiritual things.

Men going home glance at me and smile and fill me with shame. I sit like a beggar maid, drawing my skirt over my face, and when they ask me, what it is I want, I drop my eyes and answer them not.¹

Those who have everything but thee, my God, laugh at those who have nothing but thyself.²

No man can gain immortality by wealth, says the Upanishad. Wealth is only a means and not an end. But when it becomes the

¹ Gitanjali, 41.       ² Stray Birds, 226.
end, and when it is in the saddle and rides mankind, man is degraded. For when man makes his weapons his gods and "when his weapons win he is defeated himself." The mind of man cast in the spiritual mould should not sink to the worship of the golden image. That cannot satisfy its real longing. Our prayer should be: "Master, give me the least fraction of the wealth that disdains all the wealth of the world." 2

What is true of individuals is true of nations. Selfishness here too is the root of evil. Patriotism devoid of considerations of humanity is nothing but selfishness on a larger scale. The individual wants wealth, the nation wants earth. In both cases it is greed and hunger for matter. Imperialism is nothing but selfishness enlarged and nationalised. It is the outcome of selfish nationalism. It is an organised form of human greed and avarice. Alas! that nations should measure their greatness by their material wealth and extent of territory! They are not satisfied when their ambitions are reached. Alexander the Great sighed that

1 Stray Birds, 45.  
2 Fruit-Gathering, XXVII.
there were no more worlds to conquer. The war which is deluging Europe with blood points the same moral. The European nations have got all they wanted; all the good things of the earth, trade ports, etc., are theirs. They have lived unto themselves; grown rich beyond their dreams at other people's cost, and lacked nothing, and still they worry. There is no end to their ambition. We find them burning with the fever of acquiring new possessions, rushing to and fro like maddened animals stung by gadflies. "It is an endlessly wearisome task, this continual adding to our stores."¹ Satisfaction of the infinite cannot be reached by a summation of finites. The larger the outward acquisition, the greater the inner discontent. In the sea they feel thirst. There is water everywhere, but there is not a drop to drink. The Western nations forget God and walk other ways. They deny brotherhood both in their national organisations and international relations. Rabindranath points to the essential defect of the Western civilisation in these words: "You people over here seem to be all in a

¹ *Sādhanā*, p. 147.
state of continual strife. It is all struggling, hard striving to live. There is no place for rest, or peace of mind, or that meditative relief which in our country we feel to be needed, for the health of our spirits.” Speaking about the atmosphere of the tabernacle where the preacher, Mr. Billy Sunday, lectures, it is said: “It is the atmosphere of the circus rather than of the church. There is more entertainment in the tabernacle than there is theology. . . . As one young man put it, ‘I don’t go to the movies now—I go to the tabernacle. It’s more fun, and it doesn’t cost me anything.’”¹ When the house of prayer becomes a centre of gaiety, church-going the short cut to sensation, and religion amusement, it only shows how low and frivolous the mind of man has become. Even Western critics noticed this defect. We have Edward Carpenter’s cure for the disease of modern civilisation. Matthew Arnold noticed this weakness in these terms:

We glance and nod and hurry by,  
And never once possess our souls  
Before we die.

¹ Dr. Mulford in the Outlook, 18th April 1917, p. 706.
Life in the West is one long fever and struggle which know neither rest nor pause in the breathless rush and hurry for sensation and excitement, possession and conquest. It believes that mere movement is life, and that the more velocity it has, the more it expresses vitality.\(^1\)

IX

Being and becoming, stillness and strife, are inseparable aspects of reality. The Absolute includes harmony and peace as much as strain and tension. While the Westerner does not care for being or stillness, he is absorbed in the world of becoming and strife. “It is because of this insistence on the doing and the becoming that we perceive in the west the intoxication of power.”\(^2\) Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson remarks: “All America is Niagara—force without direction, noise without significance, speed without accomplishment.” To the Westerns Rabindranath’s advice is not to live sensationally. Love of novelty and sensation ought not to be the principle of life. The West, giddy with its

\(^1\) Tagore’s message to the women of America, *Current Opinion*, April 1917.

\(^2\) *Sādhana*, p. 126.
conquest over matter, needs periods of rest and contemplation. "In our country the danger comes from the opposite side." We lay stress on the being aspect. We do not care for the world of becoming, and so have the "intoxication of the spirit." The prevailing concern for the things of the spirit has led to an unconcern for the things of the world, and we are to-day reaping the fruits of age-long unconcern and other-worldliness. We have never cared to provide for the great masses of our population the necessary conditions of material existence, indispensable to civilised life. Here we have much to learn from the West. Rabindranath is equally vehement against the Western feeding of the flesh which starves the soul and the Eastern saving of the soul which slays the body. An integral harmony of the two is the ideal. A balanced attitude towards life demands leisure and solitude for thought and contemplation as well as work in the world. Random busyness as well as complete renunciation is a failure to live the life of man. We have to choose both the calm of contemplation and the

1 Sadhanā, p. 126.
stress of life, the joy of self-abandonment and the pride of creativity, and not either. “But true spirituality, as taught in our sacred lore, is calmly balanced in strength, in the correlation of the within and the without.”

Rabindranath is not unworldly in the sense that he has a contempt for the world, though the things of the world are treated by him as of little moment when compared with the things of the soul. He has no patience with those who wish to give the slip to life. “You love to discover that I love this world where you have brought me.”

He calls upon the mystical souls of India, the unpractical dreamers with no strength for action, to become apostles of work and social idealism. He who holds back from the work of the world is like him who runs away from battle. Life is no rest but a game, no parade but a battle. Rabindranath cautions us not to lose ourselves in reverie, but face facts and fight the battles of life. To the Indian ascetic Rabindranath’s advice is: “Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes

1 Sadhanā, p. 127.  2 Fruit-Gathering, LXXV.
become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow."  

Of course Rabindranath is aware that "he who is too busy doing good finds no time to be good."  

He is hard against the patriot of the present-day India who with a self-consciousness bordering on pride goes about slumming as slumming is the fashion, organising meetings as that is the way of the world, making speeches as that is the road to preferment. Busybodies who by such social "scavengering" draw a veil over their sickness of soul are really doing an injury to the eternal welfare of India's children. The true worker, who works for the joy of it, does his work so simply and naturally. "From the grasses in the field to the stars in the sky, each one is doing just that."  

"Either you have work or you have not. When you have to say, 'Let us do something,' then begins mischief."  

"He who wants to do good knocks at the gate; he who loves finds the gate open."  

Rabindranath advocates such an utter self-consecration to one's calling

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1 Gitanjali, 11.  
2 Stray Birds, 184.  
4 Stray Birds, 171.  
5 Ibid. 83.
that it has become unconscious. For the law of creative action and joy is such that "where man is at his greatest, he is unconscious." 1

It is only the pursuit of the integral ideal that can satisfy the infinite soul. Anything less than the whole is "false as a mirage, empty as a bubble." 2 It is absurd to see in the part the image of the whole. Sooner or later, the unsatisfying nature of the part will manifest itself. "We must come to an end in our evil doing, in our career of discord. For evil is not infinite, and discord cannot be an end in itself." 3 "Evil cannot altogether arrest the course of life on the highway and rob it of its possessions. For evil has to pass on, it has to grow into good; it cannot stand and give battle to the All." "No littleness can keep us shut up in its walls of untruth for aye." 4 "Mistakes are but the preludes to their own destruction." 5

As error and untruth must break down by the logical inconsistencies and contradictions which are inherent in them, if they are worked out to their consequences, even so evil will be found to conflict with itself, go against its own root-

1 Nationalism, p. 81.  
2 Dark Chamber, p. 113.  
3 Sādhanā, p. 84.  
4 Dark Chamber, p. 14.  
5 Ibid. p. 154.
principles, and confess itself inadequate for the aim it is intended to satisfy. Sin must break down against the All. Evil is an attitude which can never be consistently held. Only the infinite can satisfy the soul. "Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee," says Augustine. Nothing else satisfies it. Tauler declares: "The soul's desire is an abyss which cannot be filled except by a good which is infinite." So also Rabindranath: "Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite." "That I want thee, only thee—let my heart repeat without end. All desires that distract me, day and night, are false and empty to the core."¹ To overcome sin we have to repudiate our exclusiveness and rest our faith firm in the all inclusive whole. The consciousness of man gets its fulfilment when it is merged in the consciousness of God. Religion speaks to us of that love of God in which all our earthly relations are swallowed up. Only in such a relation of soul to God do we have a fruition of our desires. Our souls have rest and repose only in the infinite. This final condition is a state of utter delight or

¹ Gitanjali, 5 and 38.
perfect harmony where all discords are overcome, an eternal calm where the unrest of life is stilled. In such a state we have a transvaluation of all values.

When I think of this end of my moments, the barrier of the moments breaks and I see by the light of death thy world with its careless treasures. Rare is its lowliest seat, rare is its meanest of lives.

Things that I longed for in vain and things that I got—let them pass. Let me but truly possess the things that I ever spurned and overlooked.¹

Much we call great will lose its greatness. Much we call little will become great. We shall see the worth of man as man, and not rate it according to his wealth. In that kingdom, maybe, the child, the slave, and the harlot take precedence of the learned, the rich, and the king. We shall then recognise the real place of money as the medium of spirit, and matter as the vehicle of mind. We shall know that the things of spirit are real, and in the last resort the only real. The walls which divide man from man will become transparent; selfishness, which is the only sin, will appear to be the pursuit of a phantom. We shall then say, with the Princess in The King of the Dark

¹ Gitanjali, 38.
Chamber, "Nothing of this is mine, it is all yours, O lord!" ¹

The crucial point of distinction between Western Christianity and Vedantism is found in the relation of God to man. Western Christianity lays stress on man's sinfulness, guilt, and need of salvation by God. If man, who is naturally corrupt, should become transformed into a virtuous soul, it can only be by the influx of divine energy. But Rabindranath does not accept this doctrine of man's natural corruption. "It has been held that sinfulness is the nature of man, and only by the special grace of God can a particular person be saved. This is like saying that the nature of the seed is to remain enfolded within its shell, and it is only by some special miracle that it can be grown into a tree." ² The barrier between God and man is overthrown in Rabindranath's view as in the Vedanta system. The infinite dwells in man, and that is the glory of manhood. "And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment." ³ The infinite is in man, not in the sense that it is perfectly

¹ Page 199. ² Sādhanā, p. 74. ³ Gitanjali, 69.
realised, but in the sense that it is potential in him. Man is but the localised expression of God. The light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world is there though it does not shine through. Progress is the unfolding or the coming out with an ever-increasing and brightening radiance of the perfect light within. For it to shine through, the surrounding ignorance has to be cleared away.

There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness; and round
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in...
And to know, rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.

We require a removal of Avidya or ignorance, a breaking of the bonds of Maya or selfishness, and not an ingress of divine spirit from outside as the result of prayer to an offended God who yet loves man and has pity for his frailty. The light is present, wrapped up in a cloud of darkness and selfishness. Sin is the inordinate love of darkness, fancying it to be the real self. The dark and dusty soul believes itself to be enjoying what it refuses to God, to whom it
really belongs. It takes delight in its own darkness, and this delight is its death and destruction. The sinful soul believes that the wheels of time move forward for ministering to its needs and comfort. For it, the sun and moon shine, and the trees bring forth their flowers and fruit. When the false self-sufficiency disappears, the scales drop from the eyes and the man is saved. "When I give up the helm I know that the time has come for thee to take it."¹ He then feels that all creation is one with God as the centre. Michael Angelo is reported to have said that every block of marble contained a statue, and the sculptor brought it to light by cutting away the encumbrances by which the "human face divine is concealed." Even so we have to cut away the encumbrances, and remove the obstacles for the expression of the infinite. Deliverance is not by grace, but by the removal of ignorance and selfishness. "In the typical thought of India it is held that the true deliverance of man is the deliverance from avidyā, from ignorance. It is not in destroying anything that is positive and real, for that

Gitanjali, 99.
cannot be possible, but that which is negative, which obstructs our vision of truth. When this obstruction, which is ignorance, is removed, then only is the eyelid drawn up which is no loss to the eye.”¹

The barrier between God and man according to the Vedantic ideas is not impassable. Man can become as perfect as the father which is in heaven. The Taittiriya Upanishad says: “He who knows Brahma obtains liberation.” The Mundaka Upanishad says: “He who knows the supreme Brahman verily becomes Brahman.” But the West has never been reconciled to this idea of our unity with the infinite being. “It condemns, as a piece of blasphemy, any implication of man’s becoming God.” Rabindranath is quite strong on this point. “Yes, we must become Brahma. We must not shrink from avowing this. Our existence is meaningless if we never can expect to realise the highest perfection that there is.”² “We have known the fulfilment of man’s personality in gaining God’s nature for itself, in utter self-giving out of abundance of love. Men have been born in this world of nature,

¹ Sādhanā, p. 72; see also viii. ² Ibid. pp. 154-155.
with our human limitations and appetites, and yet . . . became one with their God in the free active life of the infinite." ¹ No Hindu can accept that what has been possible with Christ is impossible with other men. The perfection Christ attained is what all men might have if they would. God spoke through Christ but as He had spoken through the great men of all ages and countries. When the highest perfection is reached, the rhythm of man's life becomes one with that of the cosmic spirit; his soul then vibrates in perfect accord with the eternal principle.

X

Between the stern philosophy of Sankara with its rigorous logic of negation and the ascetic ethic of inaction, and the human philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, it is war to the knife. In the centuries of political depression which preceded Sankara's birth, when India was a prey to external invasions and internal anarchy, Buddhism with its gospel of asceticism made a strong appeal to the people of India, who had by then become

¹ Personality, p. 106.
weary of existence. According to Buddhism, action is the chief end to be avoided. The highest wisdom consists in withdrawing from the world into the depths of the soul. "To the Buddhist, this world is transitory, vile and miserable; the flesh is a burden, desire an evil, personality a prison." The great joy in existence gives place to an ascetic code. As the people were at strife with the world outside, they courted a religion which bade them seek peace inside. As the Greek in the worst days of his political career was thrown back on his own resources, finding no happiness in the world outside, even so the Hindu exchanged his balanced outlook on life for a one-sided abstract view—an individualism which fights shy of the world with its correlate of maya developed. An imperfect estimate of the values of the world was the result. Reflection became the sole end of man, and revolt against the world the means to it. The Indian thought that he should realise freedom by cutting off the encumbrances which made man depend upon the chances of the world, and secure peace in the solitary existence of the

self. It was Sankara's task to effect a synthesis, and make out that Hinduism could satisfy even souls trained in Buddhistic principles. We have in the philosophical synthesis left by Sankara a characteristic attempt to combine the central principles of Buddhism and those of the Vedanta religion in one whole. The ancient Indian sages were most at home in the world, and believed in an all-embracing divinity. But Buddhism finds no necessity for God in the world-process. While the ancient sages of India never advocated a withdrawal from the delights of the world, they protested against a life of sense, that of a typical voluptuary. Buddhism holds emancipation from the world to be the supreme end of man. Sankara, without touching the root-principles of Vedantism, grafted on to it the Buddhistic principles of *maya* and monasticism. The Buddhist spoke of the flux of the finite universe, and Sankara admits the world is *maya*. The anxiety to be loyal as far as possible to both Buddhism and Vedantism appears to be the explanation of much of the inconsistency of Sankara's philosophy. God or the Absolute he cannot give up as a
Vedantin. But when, with the Buddhist, he admits that the finite is illusory, his Absolute becomes something in which all is lost and nothing is found again. If change and multiplicity are regarded as unreal, then even permanence becomes reduced to an unreality. But the Vedantic Absolute clings to him, and he rightly views it as pure affirmation or fulness of being. Here and there we come across passages where Sankara holds to the right view of the relation between the world and the Absolute. But these have lost their force, as passages pointing to an opposite view are to be met with in almost every page of Sankara's writings, and as the interpreters of Sankara's system have practically ignored it. But there is no denying that the positive method Sankara intends to pursue as a Vedantin and the negative method he does sometimes pursue as an interpreter of Buddhism, end in conflict and contradiction.

Since Buddhism disturbed the old balanced outlook of the Aryan mind two thousand years ago, there has been a revolt of spirit against matter in India. After Buddhism became practically extinct in the soil, the school of
Sankara has kept the flame alive. Though Buddhism as a distinct sect disappeared from the land of its birth, the lessons of Buddhism remained an essential part of the religious teaching of India; for in the general evolution of Hindu philosophy the principles of Buddhism were assimilated by the Hindu doctrine. They got merged in the main current of Indian thought. A noble band of saints and sages, of sacred memory, have lived up to this ideal, sternly rebuking all contact with the sense-world, and stoutly refusing to live the life of the world. The ancient wisdom of India held renunciation to be only a factor and not the end in itself. The balanced harmony between the great affirmation and the great renunciation is emphasised by the humanist thinkers of the country. Rabindranath Tagore is the representative of the humanist school. The impression that Rabindranath's views are different from those of Hinduism is due to the fact that Hinduism is identified with a particular aspect of it—Sankara Vedanta, which, on account of historical accidents, turned out a world-negating doctrine. Rabindranath's religion is identical with the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads,
the Bhagavadgita, and the theistic systems of a later day.

Our conclusion is that in his *Śādhanā* and other works, Rabindranath, by his power of imagination, has breathed life into the dry bones of the ancient philosophy of India and made it live. His teaching is in no sense a mere borrowed product of Christianity; indeed, it goes deeper in certain fundamental aspects than Christianity as represented to us in the West. And if Rabindranath's religion is something "better than the Christianity which came into it,"¹ it only shows that the ancient religion of India has not much to gain from Western Christianity.

¹ *Quarterly Review*, October 1914.