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RABINDRANATH TAGORE: ON EDUCATION AND EDUCATORS

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On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless overhead and restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.

They build their houses with sand and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds.

They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. 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 sea surges up with laughter and pale gleams the smile of the sea beach. Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the smile of the sea beach.

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships get wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play. On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.
— Rabindranath Tagore

A brilliant, greatly gifted son of a distinguished Indian sage grew dissatisfied with his editorializing educational experience. When he was young, Rabindranath Tagore abandoned institutionalized learning and escaped his lessons, contending that his classes instructed but did not inspire and that he experienced greater spiritual sensitivity through life and nature. The poet speculated subsequently that had he cultivated a callous mind through conventional education by smothering himself in the dead leaves of books, he would have missed the beauty of the blue sky, seasonal flowers, and sympathetic friendship. Tagore relentlessly criticized the sterile scholasticism that thwarted the thrill of touching the

reality that he perceived everywhere. From his experience the poet concluded that young students do not need ready-made maxims, the pruning hooks of prohibitions, or doctrines derived from dusty books. His sensitivity toward nature so evident during his childhood was remembered:

I remember my childhood when the sunrise, like my playfellow, would burst in to my bedside with its daily surprise of morning, when the faith in the marvelous bloomed like fresh flowers in my heart every day, looking into the face of the world in simple gladness; when insects, birds and beasts, the common weeds, grass and the clouds had their fullest value of wonder; when the patter of rain at night brought dreams from the fairyland, and mother's voice in the evening gave meaning to the stars.

And then I think of death, and the rise of the curtain and the new morning and my life awakened in its fresh surprise of love.¹

A collection of poems called *Gitanjali* that secured for Rabindranath Tagore the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature contains an affirmation:

When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.

I have tasted on the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus am I blessed — let this be my parting word.

In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play and here have I caught sight of him that is formless.

My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come — let this be my parting word.²

Undergirding the steel structures within Tagore's educational philosophy was the epistemic claim that within the individual is the immortal Self that is identical with the Supreme Self; when a person experiences the Supreme Self, a person fulfills the purpose of human existence. The Supreme Self is not an abstract philosophical conception but a reality experienced immediately by individuals through expanded consciousness. Refusing steadfast to separate the Divine conveniently into self-contained, mutually exclusive categories or compartments, the eloquent poet rejected any dichotomy dividing the "sacred" from the "secular." Tagore said:

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *A Tagore Reader* ed. Amiya Chakravarty (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 326.

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 88.

In India, the greater part of our literature is religious because God with us is not a distant God. He belongs to our homes as well as to our temples. We feel His nearness to us in all the human relationship of love and affection, and in our festivities. He is the chief guest whom we honor. In seasons of flowers and fruits, in the coming of the rain, in the fullness of the autumn, we see the hem of His mantle and hear His footsteps. We worship Him in all the true objects of our worship and love Him wherever our love is true. In the woman who is good we feel Him, in the man who is true we know Him, in our children He is born again and again, the Eternal Child.³

In a world where adults emphasized how much children can learn from grown-ups, the poet never forgot how much adults can learn from children. Tagore rejected the belief that reality constitutes the fantasy of a dreamer who has never awakened. As a "universal man" espousing and exemplifying "universal religion," Rabindranath taught that nature reflects the Supreme Person, that divinity is immanent and behind the phenomenal creation, and that genuine education is experiential and not vicarious.

The philosophy embraced by this poet-artist secured expression through the educational institutions that he established. In 1901 Tagore founded a Shantiniketan school that implemented his ideals for effective education: freedom from the traditional restraints, classes conducted outside in the fresh air, and students representing all countries participating in a common experience. This small school eventually became Visva Bharati, India's celebrated World University. Tagore founded an experimental village, Shriniketan, which provided a viable model for the Indian village as a successful social unit.

In 1898 Rabindranath and his family settled in their estate house in Shelidah, where he assumed responsibility for educating his children. On December 22, 1901, he inaugurated the school at Santiniketan with five students and five teachers. The school was named Brahmacharya Ashrama.⁴ The principle and practice of teaching through some activity or craft was first developed at Santiniketan before Gandhi incorporated this educational methodology into this system of Indian higher education. Kripalani insisted that the school was the poet's *sadhana*, or "a

³ Tagore, *A Tagore Reader*, p. 29.

⁴ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 189.

new medium of creative striving for the good of his people, his one epic which he continued to work on till the end of his life and which grew with his growth, remaining unfinished.”⁵ Rabindranath probably believed that his school was hardly radical. After all, his educational philosophy was founded on India’s ancient literary traditions that was expressed in the centuries-old *Vedas*, the more contemporary *Upanishads*, and the classic Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. The distinguished philosopher-statesman Radhakrishnan reported that Rabindranath relied upon the pupils’ instinct and the ashrama atmosphere to ignite the students’ spiritual aspirations:

To him the ideal school “must be an *ashrama* where men have gathered together for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative but fully awake in its activities, where boys’ minds are not perpetually drilled into believing that the ideal of the self-idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept; where they are bidden to realise man’s world as God’s kingdom to whose citizenship they have to aspire; where the sunrise and the sunset and the silent glory of the stars are not daily ignored; where nature’s festivities of flower 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 partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life.”⁶

With passing time the small school for children at Santiniketan grew into a world-renowned university, a center celebrating Indian culture, a seminary for pursuing Eastern studies, and a meeting place for synthesizing Eastern and Western traditions. Tagore made his first public announcement confirming his intention to inaugurate the university during a special convocation conducted at Santiniketan on December 22, 1918; but the university was founded formally three years later. Rabindranath selected as the university motto an ancient Sanskrit verse: “Where the whole world meets in one nest.” When Visva Bharati was established and the grounds and the properties were transferred legally to the university, Rabindranath bequeathed to the school the copyright and the benefits from his Bengali books. The poet had dedicated to the school the finances that he received in win-

⁵ Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 190.

⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1918), pp. 209-210.

ning the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature for the song-offerings *Gitanjali*.

Because Santiniketan was fundamentally Indian, the institution embraced a genuine universalism that characterizes Indian culture. Situated approximately two miles from Bolpur, Santiniketan during Tagore's days was surrounded with a dry and treeless upland plain that was cracked with nullahs and adorned with low thorns. During the rains the barrenness became transformed into green paddy-fields. *Sal*-woods loomed against the horizon, and stately palms stretched toward the west. Occasionally a leopard or a pair of wolves approached. Inscriptions posted at the gate forbade the taking of life, bringing flesh or any idol within the *ashrama*, speaking slightly about any worship or deity, and indulging in any frivolous mirth. Thompson indicated the purpose that prompted Tagore's educational endeavor:

He sought a home for the spirit of India, distracted and torn in the conflicting storms of the age. . . .

But it was not simply a home for the spirit of India that he sought, but one for the spirit of all nations, for his mind was so universal in its sympathies that it could never rest content with a part.⁷

At Shantiniketan, according to Rhys, Tagore sought to develop "a House of Peace, a boys' republic, a school-house without a taskmaster, to serve as a model to young India."⁸ Although the poet desired intensely that the students combine Eastern spirituality with the social responsibility that characterized the Western countries, the school did not celebrate the Hindu festivals. But the young students enjoyed two long vacations, and they observed half-holidays for remembering the birthdays of great persons such as Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Chaitanya, and Ram-mohan Roy. Tagore and the school imposed no particular system of political or economic philosophy, but encouraged the students to read widely on these questions and to decide for themselves.⁹ Emphatically the poet insisted that the students experience nature:

⁷ Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 188-189.

⁸ Ernest Rhys, *Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), p. 107.

⁹ Basanta Koomer Roy, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Man and His Poetry* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1915), p. 174.

So let the children play under the open sky which is the playground of sunlight and clouds. Let them not be taken away from *Bhuma*, the Supreme Spirit. Let them see the sun unlock the day with bright fingers, and the tranquil glow of evening merge into the star-studded darkness of night. Let them see the six-act musical show nature puts on through the six seasons of the year.¹⁰

In *Personality*, lectures that were presented in the United States during 1917, Tagore explained that Santiniketan in the beginning represented something outrageously new and the product resulting from daring inexperience.¹¹ The school was not a consequence of any new educational theory but of a lingering memory of his unpleasant educational experience. The poet resented that "my mind had to accept the tight-fitting encasement of the school which, being like the shoes of a mandarin woman, pinched and bruised my nature."¹² Tagore believed that the best education does not simply impart information but makes life harmonious; childhood should be characterized by a spacious freedom from specialization often required by later social and professional convention. "Have not our books" he questioned seriously,

like most of our necessities, come between us and our world? We have got into the habit of covering the windows of our minds with their pages, and plasters of book phrases have stuck into our mental skin, making it impervious of all direct touches of truth. A whole world of bookish truths have formed themselves into a strong citadel with rings of walls in which we have taken shelter, secured from the communication of God's creation.¹³

Believing that economic abundance can become a golden cage in which children experience a diminished intellectual inquiry and emotional spontaneity, the poet described poverty as the first school in which a person receives the first lesson and the finest training. He was especially sensitive toward the arrangements that are manufactured by society for manipulating minds into special patterns of social conformity.¹⁴ Stimulated by an unyield-

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Towards Universal Man* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 73.

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 137.

¹² Tagore, *Personality*, p. 141.

¹³ Tagore, *Personality*, pp. 172-173.

¹⁴ Tagore, *Personality*, p. 152.

ing contempt for the narrowness prescribed by a rigidly determined future and a deep sadness at the tragedy of unfulfilled opportunity, he declared that children should not be educated in monastic seclusion, indoctrinated with theological dogmatism, or trained in an academic atmosphere contaminated with sterile scholarship. Recognizing the importance of a living aspiration in children, he articulated the importance of an ancient Indian tradition:

In India we still cherish in our memory the tradition of the forest colonies of great teachers. These places were neither schools nor monasteries, in the modern sense of the word. They consisted of homes where with their families lived men whose object was to see the world in God and to realize their own life in him. Though they lived outside society, yet they were to society what the sun is to the planets, the centre from which it received its life and light. And here boys grew up in an intimate vision of eternal life before they were thought fit to enter the state of the householder.¹⁵

These ancient teachers demonstrated that religion is not a fractional subject that can be dispensed through a fixed measure, but the truth of a person's complete being, a consciousness of personal relationship with the infinite, a true center of gravity for everyday living.¹⁶ Contending convincingly that the purpose of education must be freedom of the mind, he maintained that a school must be an *ashrama* where people have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature where life is not merely speculative or meditative, and where persons experience the relationship between the finite and the infinite. At Shantiniketan students and teachers grew together towards the emancipation of their minds to an expanded consciousness of the infinite, not through any mechanistic process of rote memorization but within an assisting unseen atmosphere of aspiration. Tagore inspired his colleagues in the community to seek "that ultimate truth which emancipates us from the bondage of the dust and gives us the wealth, not of things but of inner light, not of power but of love."¹⁷

In essays and lectures presented in the United States and Europe during 1920 and 1921 that were published as *Creative Unity*,

¹⁵ Tagore, *Personality*, pp. 155-156.

¹⁶ Tagore, *Personality*, p. 164.

¹⁷ Tagore, *Personality*, p. 158.

Tagore criticized Western education. "The Western education which we have chanced to know," he insisted,

is impersonal. Its complexion is also white, but it is the whiteness of the white-washed class-room walls. It dwells in the cold storage compartments of lessons and the ice-packed minds of the schoolmasters.¹⁸

Tagore maintained that a teacher cannot truly teach unless the teacher is still learning, just as a lamp can never light another lamp without continuing to burn:

A teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lessons to his students, can only load their minds; he cannot quicken them. Truth not only must inform but inspire. If the inspiration dies out, and the information only accumulates then truth loses its infinity. The greater part of our learning in the schools had been wasted because, for most of our teachers, their subjects are like dead specimens of once living things, with which they have a learned acquaintance, but no communication of life and love.¹⁹

He stated that schools should not distribute carefully labeled packages containing truth and serve as the authorized agents for facilitating that distribution; schools should nurture "truth in its living association with her lovers and seekers and discoverers."²⁰ The poet protested that schools should not degenerate into a "dead cage in which living minds are fed with food artificially prepared."²¹ Appreciating the enduring significance of intellectual life within a country, he acknowledged the creative centers where a high standard of learning is maintained, where the best minds are attracted naturally, and where a congenial climate permits persons to contribute their portion to the country's culture. Such centers "kindle, on the common altar of the land, that great sacrificial fire which can radiate the sacred light of wisdom abroad."²² He renounced the artificial arrangements with which foreign education dominates the national mind and restricts the important opportunity for creating a new thought-power through a new combination of truths. Denying any monopoly by European nations upon knowledge or truth, the poet claimed:

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), p. 170.

¹⁹ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 179.

²⁰ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 181.

²¹ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 180.

²² Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 184.

If we were to take for granted, what some people maintain, that Western culture is the only source of light for our mind, then it would be like depending for daybreak upon some star, which is the sun of a far distant sphere. The star may give us light, but not the day; it may give us direction in our voyage of exploration, but it can never open the full view of truth before our eyes. In fact, we can never use this cold starlight for stirring the sap in our branches, and giving colour and bloom to our life. This is the reason why European education has become for India mere school lessons and no culture; a box of matches, good for the small uses of illumination but not the light of morning, in which the use and beauty, and all the subtle mysteries of life, are blended in one.²³

Tagore observed that the great cultural renaissances occurred during those creative decades when people suddenly discovered the seeds of thoughts in the granary of the past. He noted that the language of art communicates the eternal voice of humanity that transcends speech and addresses everyone everywhere. To be brought up in ignorance about the language of intellect and the language of art is to be deprived of the knowledge that is the great inheritance of humanity that has been growing and waiting for every individual since the beginning of history. Yet he maintained that the "highest mission of education is to help us to realise the inner principle of the unity of all knowledge and all the activities of our social and spiritual being."²⁴

Deeply grounded within his native culture while synthesizing Eastern and Western traditions, Tagore transmitted an ancient Indian wisdom and avowed that India can teach the world. The innermost belief of India, he realized early, is to discover the one in the many and unity within diversity. The poet perceived accurately that a significant contemporary problem throughout the world is achieving unity without eliminating legitimate differences. Ancient Indian seer-sages nurtured spiritual unity within cultural diversity and understood that the power of unity surpasses the strength of intercultural conflict. "Our forefathers," he said, "did spread a single carpet on which all the world was cordially invited to take its seat in amity and good fellowship."²⁵ Rammohan Roy, for example, was firmly planted in India culture, and this grounding provided him with a standard for eval-

²³ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, pp. 184-185.

²⁴ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 191.

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Towards Universal Man* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 229.

uating foreign culture. Roy assimilated alien culture appropriately because he was not overwhelmed with its influence. Tagore advised:

Since India has this genius for unification, we do not have to fear imaginary enemies. We may look forward to our own expansion as the final result of each new struggle. Hindu and Buddhist, Muslim and Christian shall not die fighting on Indian soil; here they will find harmony.²⁶

Realizing the importance of intercultural communication of information, Tagore taught that when social change is introduced into a country through foreign sources, the established institutions might become neglected and eventually perish. Nations that have failed to create viable institutions to satisfy these changing conditions have inevitably declined and disappeared. A "universal man" teaching a genuine universalism, Tagore insisted:

The idea that our homeland is our own just because we have been born in it belongs to those who are fastened, parasitically, to the outer crust of life. Since the true image of man is in his deeper nature, whatever country he helps to create by his wisdom and will, devotion and action, becomes his real homeland. Even the Architect of the universe has to find Himself in His own handiwork!²⁷

Placing a primacy upon people rather than upon a particular place, the poet said: "The country is the creation of the people. The country is not the soil; it is the people's soil. . . . The country is not made of soil; the country is made of men."²⁸ Believing that age-old traditions survive strong international influences, he felt that an expanding vision of world community, like a steadily growing light, can illumine the people of the world. Tagore taught:

An argument can never finally quash another argument, age-old beliefs are not removed through counsel, but when truth appears like a tiny lamp lit in a corner, the darkness of the entire room is put to flight.²⁹

²⁶ Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, p. 66.

²⁷ Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, p. 255.

²⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *A Tagore Testament*, trans. Indu Dutt (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1984), p. 82.

²⁹ Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, p. 113.

Rabindranath Tagore acknowledged and appreciated the spiritual foundation undergirding a culture and civilization when the poet concluded that a country is great not when the nation amasses economic wealth and extends human knowledge, but when a citizenry goes beyond financial and intellectual accomplishments and nurtures a philosophy of life and the art of living. A civilization, he concluded, remains healthy and powerful when a creative ideal and the center of the culture unites the people into a rhythmic relationship. Teaching that simplicity of spiritual expression is the highest product of a civilization, Rabindranath believed that the basis of a spiritual culture is appreciation of the person as the ultimate value and innermost reality of existence. Stressing the inestimable importance of the individual, he professed a philosophy of personalism by maintaining that humans are greater than biophysical animals driven by egocentric instincts, are creative creatures endowed with an excessive spiritual energy that more than satisfies their needs.³⁰ Ever emphasizing that truth within the universe is a *human* truth, the poet's person-centered philosophy constituted a universal religious humanism that affirmed that truth resides in the individual mind and the universal mind, that a harmony between the objective and subjective dimensions of reality pervades the universe and reflects the Supreme Person, and that humans recognize the Supreme Person through love and sympathy. Persons comprehend humankind through a loving relationship with nature, understand the universality of personality by appreciating creative art, and realize the eternal within life by experiencing the reality of love. Central within Tagore's thinking was the essential truth:

Our society exists to remind us, through its various voices, that the ultimate truth in man is not in his intellect or his possessions; it is in his illumination of mind, in his extension of sympathy across all barriers of caste and colour; in his recognition of the world, not merely as a storehouse of power, but as a habitation of man's spirit, with its eternal music of beauty and its inner light of the divine presence.³¹

Through precept and practice, the seasoned mystic taught the immortality of an individual's influence. The poet knew that the

³⁰ Pravas Jivan Chaudhury, "Personalism of Rabindranath Tagore," *The Personalist* 40 (Summer, 1959), pp. 239-245. See Chandra Sekhar Vyan, "Tagore: The Personalist," *The Personalist* 42 (Autumn, 1961), pp. 514-523.

³¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Lectures and Addresses* (Madras: Macmillan Madras Limited, 1988), pp. 75-75.

"great men who appear in our history remain in our mind not as a static fact but as a living historical image."³² Their lives become blended into a noble consistence of legends that endure in the life of the ages; indeed, a person's actual life is his or her own creation, pervading the infinity of humanity. Through the passing centuries, humanity becomes enriched by successive saviors:

There will be a sunrise of truth and love through insignificant people who have suffered martyrdom for humanity, like the great personality who had only a handful of disciples from among the fisherfolk and who at the end of his career seemingly presented a picture of failure at a time when Rome was at the zenith of her glory. He was reviled by those in power, ignored by the crowd, and he was crucified; yet through that symbol he lives forever.

There are martyrs of today who are sent to prison and persecuted, who are not men of power, but who belong to a deathless future.³³

Tagore maintained that such individuals live lives that are never exhausted through a single system of rational interpretation. "They have to be endlessly explained," he said, "by the commentaries of individual lives, and they gain an added mystery in each new revelation."³⁴

The sanctuary and seclusion provided by Santiniketan created an educational environment in which Tagore, as well as his community, flourished. Santiniketan evoked a serenity and tranquility that the poet experienced nowhere else; these quiet environs were pervaded with an extraordinary friendliness and relaxed leisure. The morning dawn or moonlighted night found the poet roaming through the groves where poetry came to him naturally, where sweet-scented flowering shrubs and the growing creepers provided a temporary seclusion from pressing crowds and draining responsibilities. Thompson reported that Tagore's colleagues remembered the poet's wandering figure moving through the moonlighted mango groves:

He slept very little, often for only three or four hours; he rose about four o'clock, and usually retired at ten. Moonlight called him abroad always; and when moonlight coincided with a phrase of lyrical excitement, he would become 'beside himself', in a veritable ecstasy, and spend his nights drifting among the trees.³⁵

³² Tagore, *A Tagore Reader*, p. 259.

³³ Tagore, *A Tagore Reader*, p. 219.

³⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sadhana: The Realization of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), p. viii.

³⁵ Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 216.

Tagore's own words describe the mystic's experience. "Last night," he said,

in the silence which pervaded the darkness, I stood alone and heard the voice of the singer of eternal melodies. When I went to sleep I closed my eyes with this last thought in my mind, that even when I remain unconscious in slumber the dance of life will still go on in the hushed arena of my sleeping body, keeping step with the stars. The heart will throb, the blood will leap in the veins, and the millions of living atoms of my body will vibrate in tune with the note of the harp-string that thrills at the touch of the master.³⁶

Within this mystical mood, he dreamed dreams and envisioned visions while children asked the poet where night begins. And when the elderly saint eventually died in 1941, his immortality of influence might have been described appropriately with the statement of principles upon which Visva Bharati, the World University of India, was established on December 23, 1921:

To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view.

To bring together, as a step towards the above object, the various scattered cultures of the East, the fittest place for such endeavour being India, the heart of Asia, into which have flowed the Vedic, Buddhist, Semitic, Zoroastrian, and other cultural currents originating in different parts of the Orient, from Judaea to Japan; to bring to a realization the fundamental unity of the tendencies of different civilizations of Asia, thereby enabling the East to gain a full consciousness of its own spiritual purpose, the obscuration of which has been the chief obstacle in the way of a true co-operation of East and West, the great achievement of these being mutually complementary and alike necessary for Universal Culture in its completeness.³⁷

Like Santiniketan, Visva Bharati represented the lengthening shadow of this unique "universal man" whose universal religion and culture remained a legacy to humanity in a darkened, war-weary world.

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³⁶ Tagore, *Sadhana*, p. 144.

³⁷ Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 266.