

Reading *Gitanjali*: A Study of Yeats' Poem Eleven

"Before I describe them, I want to ask and answer, very briefly, what a philosophical tradition is...and why it is better to study them together, as they are studied here, rather than separately or successively" (Scharfstein, 1).

Metaphysics is the philosophy of our mediated selves. It is the study of how we reason and define cognition. Metaphysics is not the study of reason or knowledge; moreover it is an ontological study of being, mediating, understanding, and the relationship between those concepts. The study of cognitive states dates back prior to the reasoned philosophical traditions of it. What is defined, today, as Mysticism can be understood as a precursor to the philosophical traditions of Metaphysics. Mysticism, as scholarship, is the experiential knowledge of states of being. Mysticism is based far more on experience than on reason. Nonetheless it is a study of cognitive states of being.

What is being? Or rather what is the study of cognitive states of being and reasoning that existence, or the knowledge of its experience? The divide, or rather the development, of metaphysics and mysticism is one of scientific reasoning and experiential documentation; both to better understand *cognition as being*.

Understanding our states of consciousness and how they function by logic or intervention forms the base of both scholarships. Both are in some form a comparative analysis. While metaphysics is analytical, mysticism is observational.

Metaphysics is a philosophical tradition built upon the concepts and ideals before itself in order to form a school of thought, which aims to forward those ideas about *being*. It is, to an extent, a categorical system of understanding cognition. The method of inquiry is largely based on a comparative logic. Metaphysics compares process, methods of mediation, and knowledge to understand states of being. The comparative logical study of metaphysics is an attempt to reason what is and *how we may know it as being*. "Metaphysical cognition must contain nothing but judgments a priori" (Kant, 72). Methodologically, cognition as being is simply the logic of knowledge. The study of metaphysics does not aim to inquire about the acquisition of knowledge, but rather about the act of certainty. It seeks the truth-value that is attributed to the study of logic for the knowledge of cognition a priori. Two forms of judgments a priori form other comparative parameters for the development of metaphysical cognition: analytic and synthetic. "[There] is in them a distinction according to content, by virtue of which they are merely explicative and add nothing to the content of the cognition, or amplitude and enlarge the given cognition; the former can be called analytic judgments, the latter synthetic judgments" (Kant, 72). Understanding judgments as analytic or synthetic helps reason that which is truly known a priori. As in logic studies truth-value is achieved within comparative parameter of cognitive processes.

Mysticism, on the other hand, often stems from religious traditions and is built upon a method of personal inquiry. That is not to say that the scholarship of mysticism is in anyway less valid, but rather to highlight the difference in method

and purpose. Moreover mysticism does not seek the truth-value of the knowledge of being. It is a practice of multiple interrelated cognitive states. The understanding gained through mysticism is one about states of consciousness and cognition beyond perceived states. Mysticism aims for an understanding of the natural comparatively to the supernatural. It does not always engage with the supernatural, but it is a study of the self in relation to mediums beyond the known. The value of scholarship is derived by experience of a specific quality and record of those experiences.

Understanding *cognition as being* differs greatly by the experiential traditions of scholarship built around them. If metaphysics can be understood as a philosophy developed from religious traditions of mysticism, then the context of its culture becomes an important factor in understanding that development. The scholarship of personal inquiry is only as good as the context in which it is placed. In other words, each culture, philosophy, and religion develops by a prior set of experiences, assumptions and terms, and thus looks within its own phenomenology to define the others. Although it is possible to study philosophical traditions together it is also important to contextualize them within the cultures that they have developed in.

Mysticism, as a tradition, developed independently within many cultures. It is, however, majorly divided into two traditions: West and East. More often than not this partition, vernacularly, refers to Judo-Christian Mysticism and the Asian

Mysticism, or the Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Taoist, etc. These positions, or schools of thought, are disciplinary ideologies passed from one relevant set of experiences and methods to the next. The practice of any course of mysticism is nonetheless defined by its inexpressible experience. These experiences cataloged and contextualized within a specific culture create its tradition. Western mysticism then becomes quantifiable through its traditional study within churches, monasteries, and schools. Eastern mysticism, on the other hand, does not follow the same delineated path. The mystics of the east, through western scholarship, are often qualified by their otherness.

And, therefore the philosophies of the East are often qualified by their mysticism.

Mystic traditions of the east do influence its philosophical developments.

Mysticism and metaphysics, though not directly linked, influence each other and inform the developments of each within almost all traditions. In the case of western tradition they developed through written scholarship as much as by their oral means. In most eastern traditions oral cultures carried a larger weight in passing and developing scholarship. The development of western metaphysics can be outlined through philosophy or mysticism. Eastern metaphysics, however, is tied directly to its mystical beliefs and due to the nature of its oral culture is harder to outline directly through comparative studies similarly. While western and eastern mysticism can be studied comparatively through the lens of the other, western and eastern metaphysics cannot.

Neither western nor eastern metaphysics is tied directly to its mysticism such that it cannot be understood without the other, however in understanding metaphysics comparatively it is important to consider the cultures they developed within and therefore the difference of methodology and scholarship. And so it becomes nearly impossible to study eastern and western metaphysics in a one to one comparison. Western and eastern philosophies are two very large cannons to construct this study against. The limited case study that follows is one that hopes to compare an example of Indian philosophy through the lens of western mysticism and the basic parameters of metaphysics.

It is important to note that Indian philosophy in no way exemplifies the whole of eastern philosophy. Indian philosophy is a philosophy that feeds largely from Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. It also considers Sikhism, and Sufi traditions. Indian philosophy is largely different from Chinese philosophy as the latter is oriented far more in its character text. Linguistically these traditions differ greatly by orientation of language. Take for example how reading hieroglyphs differs from reading Latin. While both are "dead" languages, the larger parameter of translation and comparison would be further complicated by interpretation, orientation, and grammar. This space of interpretation does not exist to the same degree between Indian and western philosophies because Indian languages developed with the same orientation and similar grammatical roots. Moreover, most modern Indian Philosophy is prolifically written in English or Sanskrit. Thus the experience of mysticism becomes the largest the space of translation between Indian

philosophies and western. All translation comes with a loss of meaning and representation, which should always be remembered within comparative studies. The space of translation, here, features otherness and a tradition of loss in representation(s).

"I notice in these men's thought a visible beauty and meaning as though they held that doctrine of Nietzsche that we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things" (Yeats, 9).

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the first seminal Indian authors to be read widely outside of India. Tagore is much more than just a writer; his work is the passageway to Indian philosophy and mysticism. Tagore wrote prolifically about his mystic experiences, through his poetry, literature, and philosophy. His works were the first to have been distributed and read widely enough to create a voice for Indian scholarship. *Gitanjali* presents one of the first collections of Indian mysticism widely shared and read. It is a translated collection of Tagore's vernacular poetry. True to its oral culture, within Bengal, almost everyone knew of it and openly recited it, without the requirement of text. W. B. Yeats had the collection recorded and translated for dissemination. Yeats' translation comes in no particular order, and without titles, like much of Tagore's lost poetry.

With the dissemination of Tagore's voice an otherness presented itself. The translation of the vernacular "texts," as with any translation, created a relationship of loss and representation. *Gitanjali* became a collection of poetry interpreted as a reflective representation of India. The effect of this othering, to a degree, prompted the writing of *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*, an unofficial guide to understanding Indian philosophy. Through *Sadhana* Tagore tries to bridge the space of loss and representation by building a case for understanding Indian ordinance. Although he had not intended *Sadhana* to be an academically philosophical reference, it acts as one here to better understand western philosophy comparatively to Indian, moreover Hindu Vedanta. The case study that follows is an attempt to better comparatively understand the development of Indian metaphysics through a selection of *Gitanjali* read through *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*. By better understanding the relationship of Indian mysticism to its metaphysics this reading hopes to begin understanding Kantian metaphysics¹ as a comparative lens to approach Indian philosophy.

11

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of the temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy god is not before thee!

He is there were the tiller is tilling the hard ground and the pathmaker is making stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

¹ There is a long tradition of Metaphysical study within the Western Philosophical Tradition, that can be read and understood widely; however the case study here will focus on Immanuel Kant and his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* due to the similar nature of developing Indian Philosophy to categorically analyze.

Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bond with us all for ever.

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in seat of thy brow (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27).

In poem eleven (as numbered and ordered for publication and reference) Tagore explores the first steps of recognizing the self and so the truth of *being* and *knowledge*. Understanding consciousness within the framework of Hinduism, and its following traditions, is about understanding the balance of the self and the world. Therefore understanding *cognition as being* within this framework starts with understanding the dichotomy of the individual and the universe as one. Finding self-being is key in understanding consciousness, however the route to the self is through the world around the self. "When man's consciousness is restricted only to the immediate vicinity of his human self, the deeper roots of his nature do not find their permanent soil, his spirit is ever on the brink of starvation, and in the place of healthful strength he substitutes rounds of stimulation" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 11). Complete knowledge of the self-being cannot be acquired through stimulation, such as chanting and singing. One has to look outside, just as much as they look within to find knowledge of the true self-being. This is the basic idea that Tagore adopts within the first stanza, and that which is read again and again throughout his poetry and voice.

The dichotomy of the individual and the universe is found within the oldest of Indian “texts:” Brhadaranyaka Upanisad. This book of the Upanisads² sets the foundation for understanding all Indian mysticism and Indian philosophy. Although some parts were added post latter Upanisads this book features an explanation of the relationship of *atman* and *brahman*, akin to an understanding of mind-body-spirit.

Mind, body, and spirit are universally understood as how thought, consciousness, and cognition exist/develop. The mind-body dualism is universally accepted, and while the existence of a soul can be questioned it is universally accepted to be an explanation of being. In Hindu traditions of mysticism the mind is a tool by which one can reach the soul, and the body is simply a vessel. The body is of brick and mortar, like a temple. It will, with time, return to the earth. The soul, or *atman* is the self. It is within the darkness of the temple, only seen through the reflection of the Whole. “... it is one’s self (*atman*) which one should see and hear, and on which one should reflect and concentrate. For by seeing and hearing one’s self, and by reflecting and concentrating on one’s self, one gains the knowledge of this whole world” (Olivelle, 29). The practice of seeing and hearing can be conducted within a temple, but to find the self one must reflect and concentrate on the self within the whole world and recognize the Whole as *brahman*. “The radiant and immortal person in the earth and, in the case of the body (*atman*), the radiant and immortal

² Due to the nature of ancient “texts” from within this tradition, the authors of the Upanisads are unknown; moreover they are a collection passed on with great clarity of diction, in Sanskrit, from one generation to the next. The text used here is an English translation by Patrick Olivelle.

person residing in the physical body – they are one's self (atman). It is the immortal; it is brahman; it is the Whole" (Olivelle, 30). "These ancient seers felt in the serene depth of their mind that the same energy which vibrates and passes into the endless forms of the world manifests itself in our inner being as consciousness; and there is no break in unity" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 21).

Understanding the dichotomy of the individual and universe, in its simplest form, is about understanding *atman* and *brahman* and its layered relationship. Brahman and atman are one in the same. They are reflections of each other, endless and ephemeral. Brahman is everywhere, it "is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and the pathmaker is making stones. [It] is with [atman] in sun and in shower, and [its] garment is covered with dust" (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27). Brahman is, "the immortal; it is the Whole." Brahman is the universe. Brahman is self. "I am brahman" (Olivelle, 15). "[T]he same energy which vibrates and passes into the endless forms of [atman and brahman] manifests itself in our inner being as consciousness" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 21). The energy of atman, or the self-being, is connected to the energy brahman, or the universe. The foundation of this energy is in creation; it is in understanding the concept of *aham brahmasmi*, or I am brahman.

The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad outlines the creation of the universe through death, and in doing so it creates an inherent immortality within the universe, an immortal energy. This immortality is found in understanding *aham brahmasmi*. "In the

beginning this world was only brahman, and it knew only itself (atman), thinking: 'I am Brahman.' As a result, it became the Whole. Among the gods, likewise, whosoever realized this, only they became the Whole. It was also the same among the seers and among humans" (Olivelle, 15). Death created atman and as atman recognized itself it recognized itself as brahman, as the energy of the universe. "It is his self (atman) alone that a man should venerate as his world. And if someone venerates his self alone as his world, that rite of his will never fade away, because from his very self he will produce whatever he desires" (Olivelle, 17). The atman recognized as brahman is immortal energy. In thinking of the universe as an other the atman disconnects its energy from the Whole and thus loses it immortally free consciousness. "[When] we become merely man, but not man-in-the-universe, we create bewildering problems, and having shut off the source of their solution, we try all kinds of artificial methods each of which brings its own interminable difficulties" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 9-10). The "disconnected" atman therefore forms the problem of self. The problem of self refers to the state of atman when it only recognizes self and looks only upon itself in uniqueness without knowledge. This is the self perched upon the holy mantle, without sense of the soil in which brahman and creation exist. Once atman realizes brahman as self it need not look for deliverance as it recognizes itself as bound to creation, the energy of which is forever. Therefore the knowledge of *aham brahmasmi* is the means of recognizing life energy and consciousness, for Indian mysticism.

There are multiple levels of understanding the self-being within the excerpt above. On the surface the poem is about recognizing self in every man, by stepping outside the methodologies of performative action and acting alongside the collective. Further it explores the division of physical and ephemeral properties. And still furthermore it features the multiple layers of the atman-brahman dichotomy. These three layers highlight the mystical scholarship of *Gitanjali* within a specific field of study. It also highlights some of the differences of interpretation and understanding inherent within reading outside of its field. Nonetheless, with an understanding of *Gitanjali* within its own field it becomes possible to better understand it within the basic structure of mystical scholarship as well.

A decade before Tagore's *Gitanjali* was published, William James delivered a series of lectures, entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, trying to outline and understand human nature through experiences within a large comparative context, among which were lectures on Mysticism and its qualities. James outlines four key qualities in understanding mystic experiences: Ineffability, Noetic quality, Transiency, and Passivity. All four of these qualities, for James, demarcate an understanding of the "mystical states of consciousness" (James, 413). Ineffability, "[classifies] a state of mind as mystical is negative" (James, 414). In other words ineffability refers to a quality within the experience that cannot be replicated, mediated, or understood for/by those that have not experienced it first hand. It is the element of anonymity. It can only be known to those that have experienced that state of consciousness themselves. The noetic quality of a mystical state

refers to the idea that although the experience is subjective, for those that experience them the knowledge gained by it becomes an objective factual experience to them. In other words, "[they] are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after time" (James, 415). The latter two qualities are less of a requirement to denote a mystic experience, but are often found characteristics nonetheless. Transiency and passivity refer to the characteristics of the phenomenon themselves. Mystic states, although may be entered voluntarily, are experienced passively and cannot be sustained over prolonged periods. These four qualities, ineffability noetic transiency and passivity, demarcate the mystical experience.

Furthermore, James lays out some groundwork for understanding Indian scholarship in light of Western academia (across all mediums): "In India, training in mystical insight has been known from time immemorial under the name of yoga" (James, 436). Yoga is the practice of discipline across various states of being. James samples the stages of yoga within his lecture, from which a case can be built for further understanding the mysticism of India within the later framework of mysticism itself. James concentrates on two key concepts of yoga: *samadhi* and *dyana*. "...All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state of Samadhi" (Vivekananda, 436). Samadhi is a high state of yoga, attained through practice or dyana:

There seem to be four stages recognized in dhyana. The first comes through concentration of the mind upon one point. It excludes desire,

but not discernment or judgment: it is still intellectual. In the second stage the intellectual function drops off, and the satisfied sense of unity remains. In the third stage the satisfaction departs, and indifference begins, along with memory and self-consciousness. In the fourth stage the indifference, memory, and self-consciousness are perfected" (James, 437).³

James outlines these steps as both practices of Hinduism and Buddhism as an approach to Nirvana, never being able to attain it within these steps alone.

Samadhi is also better known as the *first* of the four steps of dhyana, as four stages, within the practice of yoga. Dhyana explores the states of superconsciousness.

Yoga as a mystical experience meets the first two qualities that James outlined, however as a sustained practice fails to meet the later two. Yoga is an ineffable experience with a noetic quality, but by virtue of its own defining factors it is neither transient nor passive. Yoga is a sustained practice that generates over time. As one reaches higher states of dhyana it becomes more and more passive, yet it becomes less and less transient. Yoga, as outlined here, can also be understood as a practice of bridging the atman-brahman dichotomy.

Although it is impossible to fully communicate the experience of each stage of dhyana, it is possible to understand the stages as steps of experiencing the concept of *aham brahmasmi*. The four stanzas of Tagore's poem outline the four steps of dhyana. The first step of dhyana is concentration on one point, or,

³ In an effort to keep consistency within William James' Mysticism framework the definitions for samadhi and dyana reflect his work and research.

"chanting and singing and telling of beads" (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27). The first step of dhyana is an active practice that is based upon the sustainability of the practitioner. It is a learned practice but not by way of experience. In other words, although the method is handed down in tradition the experience is unique to the one that experiences this state of consciousness. The first stanza, however, calls for the practitioner, or yogi, to press forward to the next stage, "Open thine eyes and see thy god is not before thee" (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27). In recognizing brahman reflected in front of atman the satisfaction of unity becomes the second experience of dhyana. This state expands the noetic quality of the experience along with its ineffability; however it begins to lose its transiency as the self-being accepts this experience as knowledge. As atman realized brahman their energies begin to connect. Furthermore as atman recognizes itself as brahman an indifference for self identification begins to present itself, as well as a recognition of self-consciousness as consciousness of self-in-universe; "taken [upon the] bonds of creation" (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27). As yogis approach the last stages of mystic experience, much of the experience is ineffable, noetic, and passive, however it becomes much less transient. "The fundamental unity of creation was not simply a philosophical speculation for India; it was her life-object to realise this great harmony in feeling and in action" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 7). Moreover this, "unity of creation," begins to form a foundation for metaphysics, or an understanding of being (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 7)

As with the qualities of mysticism, metaphysics also begins with the negative. The problem of self is perhaps the best starting point to understand the metaphysics that evolved from the mysticism and practice of Upanisad scholarship. Up to this point the importance of recognizing atman as brahman has been explored in understanding the problem of self the opposite concept will become the starting point.

"It is our ignorance which makes us think that our self, as self, is real, that it has its complete meaning in itself" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 72). Tagore calls man out of the dark within his temple within the first stanza of poem eleven, however if the self fails to see outside itself it falls within the trap of the problem of the self. The poem thus sustains as a reading for the first development of metaphysics. What does the problem of self mean for metaphysics? And what does Tagore's mysticism offer? For mysticism the problem of self creates, "bewildering problems, and having shut off the source of their solution, we try all kinds of artificial methods each of which brings its own interminable difficulties" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 9-10). In other words, having shut off from brahman, atman reverts to the simulation of chanting, singing, and meditation, or artificial methods that indefinitely loop without generation. In the case of metaphysics the problem of self forms the space to build an understanding of the self through pure knowledge. "This peculiarity, whether it consists in the difference of the object, or of the sources of cognition, or of the kind of cognition, or of some if not all of these together, is the basis of the idea of the possible science and of its territory" (Kant,

71). Moreover this problem of self, means that the self must rediscover, "cognition a priori, or from pure understanding, or pure reason" (Kant 71). Rediscovering cognition a priori within this framework would mean rediscovering brahman from pure reason, or rediscovering cognition from dharma.

"Dharma is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all working things. Dharma is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 74). It is neither based of physical experience nor inner experience. Dharma is not a form of action; moreover it is inaction. In other words the self does not recognize dharma as a course of finding cognition, but is delivered to cognition by its reason. "[The] generation of cognition a priori, both according to intuition and according to concepts, and finally the generation of synthetic propositions a priori in philosophical cognition, constitutes the essential content of metaphysics" (Kant, 76). In Kantian metaphysics synthetic propositions are ampliative, while analytic are explicative. Analytic propositions bring reason to understanding but they only clarify concepts by inherently explaining their subjects, or beings. Synthetic propositions are of interest here because they help reason cognition by recognizing it a priori. Dharma acts as "synthetic proposition a priori in philosophical cognition," via its own inaction.

Dharma is generative, as was death creative. From death and inaction the world reasoned itself into creation. Dharma is inactive; it generates reason within itself through the same process as death reasoned atman and thus brahman. The

problem of self, metaphorically speaking, is the problem of the yogi chanting in the darkness of the temple with eyes closed. The atman searches by repetition for the uniqueness of self-cognition without realizing the knowledge in front of his eyes. When faced with the problem of self, awakening to the world does not equal awakening to brahman and the knowledge of *aham brahmasmi*; but one awakens to dharma, "the tiller is tilling the hard ground and the pathmaker is making stones," the inherent action generated from inaction. In other words, the action of the tiller and the pathmaker is not to be confused with dharma, but accepted as yet another metaphor for understanding dharma as the choice of inaction. Those that choose the path of dharma are not bound by the repetition of simulation, but carry on through the generative knowledge of the inaction of the denial of the holy mantle. This denial affords them the acknowledgement of creation. Or rather, it generates the knowledge of the energy of cognition.

Meditation, as Yoga, is an analytic proposition, it does not generate cognition but is the explanation and practice by which different states of cognition are achieved. Dharma (which also acts alongside Yoga, in another context) is synthetic. "The sacrifice by which a thing attains its fulfillment is not sacrifice which ends in death; it is the casting-off of bonds which wins freedom. When we know the highest ideal of freedom which a man has, we know his dharma, the essence of his nature, the real meaning of his self" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 75). In other words through dharma it is possible to realize the concept of *aham brahmasmi*, and find cognition of being

through pure generative reasoning. Dharma forms the philosophical scholarship for metaphysics within the cannon of Indian Philosophy.

"Words are maya where they are merely sounds and finite, they are satyam where they are ideas and infinite. 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 paramatman" (Tagore, *Sadhana*, 85).

Bibliography:

- Tagore, Rabindranath. Gitanjali. New York: Scribner, 1977.
-- Sadhana: The Realization of Life. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1993.
- Upanisads. Trans. Patrick Olivelle. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York:
The Modern Library, 1994.
- Kant, Immanuel. Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics. Ed. Gunter Zoller.
New York:Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. A Comparative History of World Philosophy. Albany:
State University of New York Press, 1998.