

# THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BRAHMAVIHĀRA AND ITS RELATION TO NATURE

Ridhyee Chatterjee  
PhD Research Scholar  
Department of Philosophy  
Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

**Abstract:** The concept of *Brahmavihāra* revolves round the series of four Buddhist virtues of sublime attitudes. These are *maitrī* (benevolence), *karunā* (compassion), *muditā* (empathy) and *upekṣā* (equanimity). The Buddhist concept of brahmavihāra may be referred to an ‘awakened state of mind’. In *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Buddha states that those who embrace these four immeasurable sublime virtues and apply it in this life are destined for a heavenly realm in their next life. An individual who realizes these principles, after this heavenly life, attains *nirvāṇa* (salvation). Indian philosophy is practical and realistic in so far as it attempts at decreasing human pain and suffering. They identified the reason of this suffering in ignorance about reality. Brahman is the only reality, so one must sincerely try to achieve Him and avoid all sorrow. Realising this is considered as the ultimate ethico-philosophical end of life and one must try to achieve it throughout one’s life. Prominent Bengali religious thinker and philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore deliberated on Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vaiṣṇavism, Christianity and Buddhism. He was particularly influenced by Buddhist teaching of self-restraint, moral conduct, and the ultimate goal of life or *nirvāṇa*. Tagore talks about the Buddhist concept of universal love or love for all. Tagore states that our daily worship of God is not really the process of surrendering ourselves to Him. But, it is the process which helps us in eliminating all obstacles to union with Him and extending consciousness towards Him in devotion and service, in goodness and love. All these are evident through his works.

**Keywords:** Brahmavihāra, Aṅguttara Nikāya, sublime virtues, nirvāṇa

The notion of ‘*Brahma-vihāra*’, being a very crucial and ultimate ethico-religious goal of human lives, exhibits tremendous impact upon humanity since attainment of ‘*Brahmavihāra*’ or ‘Ultimate Reality’ is the aim of every individual being. But, how to achieve this ‘Ultimate Reality’? What are its justifications? How does it help to upgrade human as well as non-human existence? How is it related to *Brahmavihāra*?

Rabindranath Tagore introduces the concept of *Brahmavihāra* and further probes into the relationship between man and the universe and sets the goal for this relationship. He mentions that, the state of realizing our relationship with the God can provide us with our self-realization. The ultimate end of human life is the fulfillment of humanity and unification of the man with the universe. The Upaniṣads state, “Man becomes true if in this life he can apprehend God; if not, it is the greatest calamity for him”.<sup>1</sup> But attainment of Brahman involves freedom and fulfillment, which is another name for comprehension. For, as the Upaniṣads state, “The being who is world-conscious, is Brahman.” Brahman again is “the all feeling being in our souls”.<sup>2</sup> He is all-conscious in space, or the world of extension; and he is all conscious in the soul, or the world of intension.<sup>3</sup>

Mahāvaiyākaraṇa Ācārya Bharṭṛhari, authored the famous text *Vākya-padīya*, in which he commences the book with Brahmakānda as he was an Advaitin and Brahmanic. Accordingly he mentions—

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillan Company, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Carnegie, 2012, *The Incomplete Guide to Yoga*, United Kingdom: Winchester Books, p 23.

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillan Company, p. 25

“Anādi nidhanam Brahma Śabdattvam Yadaḥśaram

Vivarttatéharthabhāvéna prakriyā jagato yatāh”<sup>4</sup>

He defines Brahma as eternal (anādi) and beginningless (nidhan-rahita) without end, unchangeable (akṣara) and known as the essence of words (śabdattava), and from Him, the Universe comes out as the meaning (artha).

However, certain Indian schools of philosophy from the objective view point, identifies this ultimate reality as Brahman. The word ‘Brahman’ is derived from the root ‘Bṛh’ which means ‘to grow’ or ‘to evolve’. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, Brahman is defined from which all these beings are born, by which they live, and into which they are re-absorbed.<sup>5</sup> All beings, all Gods, all worlds, all organs are contained in the Universal Self, the Brahman. This is the Brahman, the self-luminous, the immortal, the support of all the worlds, the highest and leaving nothing beyond it. The original thinkers of the Upaniṣads stated ‘That thou art’ (tat tvam asi) is the great saying (mahāvākya) of the Upaniṣads. ‘I am Brahman’ ‘Ātman is Brahman’. ‘I am that’, ‘I am the non-dual bliss’. The Absolute is ‘Pure Existence’, ‘Pure Knowledge’ and ‘Pure Bliss’- all in One. It is called sachhidānanda. It is Satyam (Truth), Jñānam (Knowledge) and Anantam (Infinite). The Advaitins expressed Brahman as nitya (eternal), suddha (pure), buddha (knowledge) and mukta (free).

According to Tagore, the way to attain Brahman is the way of “being enveloped” by Him. This state of attainment and unification with the Brahman is the state of *Brahmavihāra*. As Buddha admonishes us to free ourselves from the confinement of the life of the Self. He preached that we have to maintain and preserve a relation of unlimited love with everything, without animosity or desire to kill. He states, “To live in such a consciousness while standing or walking, sitting or lying down till you are asleep is *Brahmavihāra*. In other words, *Brahmavihāra* stands for “living and moving and having joy in the spirit of Brahma”.<sup>6</sup>

The life and teachings of Buddha reveals his love for the nature. His birth, the Enlightenment, the *Pañcasilas*, the principle of *Dependent Origination*, the concept of *Brahmavihāra*, the *Four Noble Truths* and *Nirvāna* – all these are suggestive of his love for nature. It should be noted that, Buddha himself used to take care of the ecological perspectives of our nature. He informs Sāriputra, one of the two chief male disciples of Gautama Buddha:

“so kho aham Sāriputra sat ova abhikkamāmi,  
sat ova patikkamāmi, yāva udaka-bindumhi  
pi me dayā panchchupaththitā hoti...”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, it indicates, “My compassion was such that I used to travel keeping in view even small living beings. I used to shower this grace upon water as well. I was alert during my walks, in odd circumstances, so that not even small insects should be injured.”<sup>8</sup> Buddha delivered sermons and formulated various rules and regulations, specifically for hermits and recluses, in order to make them feel indebted to the invaluable gifts of nature and keep away from destroying the environment. This is a sort of training in ecology for the Buddhist monks who were advised not to pollute water or green grass. To destroy vegetation or dig earth amounts to injury, as these are all full of insects.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism cares for the life of all creatures giving precedence to man over the rest. This particular view is very similar to the views of western philosophers like Aristotle and St. Aquinas. Since both believed that only human beings have moral standing. Since human beings possess an intellect capable of thinking and non-

<sup>4</sup> K. Raghavan Pillai, 1971, *The Vākya-paḍīya*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sri Vidyananda, *The Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2007, tr., Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, Chennai: Samata Books, pp. 80-115.

<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillian Company, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Majjhima- Nikāya, Mahāsihanāda Sutta*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> The Vinaya Pitaka is full of illustrations which exhibits the ecological concerns and thus maintains a balance between the living and the non-living things as well. *Vinaya*, 1v, 2005- 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvagga*, 1, 78.

humans lack this capacity, hence they can have no moral standing. Buddha treated the killing of human beings most heinous. But he was against the killing of other animals as well.

The problem of environmental pollution due to modern technology and industrialization known to us today was unknown in ancient India. The nature of ecology in ancient India was revered and worshipped as a religious and spiritual entity. Not only certain plants (such as, tulsī, beetle leaves, banyan, neem, peepal, banana, coconut, lotus, sandalwood, beetlenut tree, shami tree) etc. were considered as sacred but animals and birds (such as, cows, bulls, lions, tigers, snakes, crocodiles, rodents, elephants, owls, ducks, peacocks, peafowl, pigeon) were also worshipped since time immemorial. Some of the people believed that nature is controlling their life. When an individual thinks himself to be a part of nature, he thinks it necessary to preserve the nature, then only he maintains good relation with nature or respects the Mother Nature. The Buddhist approach towards the natural environment and man's relation to nature are conducive to creating a congenial atmosphere for life on earth. Since Buddhism endorses a mutual and friendly relation between man and nature it seems that, what if the four divine sentiments are applied and extended to the nature and the animal world also?

The concept of *Brahmavihāra* is understood as entering into and getting enveloped in the spirit of Brahma. The spirit of Brahma is stated as, “*yaścāyasminākāśē tejōmayōh amṛtamayah puruṣa sarvānubhūh*”<sup>10</sup> i.e, the being who is in his essence the light and life of all, who is world conscious, is Brahma. Consequently, getting enveloped by this spirit means to be immersed in his consciousness, body and soul. Brahman is the all-encompassing spirit that ensconces the individual, just as the mother embraces her child with all her body and soul when we can feel this over-whelming spirit, in all our consciousness, feeling and activities, then we will be united with Brahma and have *Brahmavihāra*. Infact, *Brahmavihāra-bhāvanā*,<sup>11</sup> is the culmination of the four divine sentiments, viz, *maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā*, which has occupied a central position in Buddhist life and forms an essential preliminary in the field of mental training in Buddhism. *Maitrī* or loving kindness may be “...practiced in the three realms: as it is directed towards the living beings, towards all things and phenomena or towards no particular objects.”<sup>12</sup> This message is conducive to solve many of the ecological hazards. *Karuṇā* or compassionateness or sympathy towards all the beings including human beings, non-human beings and nature, similarly fulfills the emotional requirement correcting ecological crisis arrived at through attitudinal crisis. One may practice the *Bodhisattava* ideal with the vow that “all actions I perform shall always be for the benefit of the living beings.”<sup>13</sup> *Muditā* or empathy is meant for all irrespective of being human or non-human. It is a state of pure joy and bliss which is unadulterated by envy and selfishness. *Upekṣā* or equanimity is the the power of resistance and self-renewal, with an unwavering mind. It purifies the mind capable of counteracting the defilements of incomprehension and abhorrence. Thus, it seems that all these four sublime virtues consist a universal concern for all living creation. Briefly speaking, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is implementation of actions so as to achieve ecological balance i.e, balance between man and nature.

However, from the ethical point of view, these principles constitute the moral foundation of man and are indispensable to his happiness and peace. For, these principles are absolute principles of deletion of all kinds of jealousy, enmity, conflict and confrontation and admission of absolute affection and friendship. This state of mind as governed by these four principles is the state of mind as governed by these four principles is the state of *Brahmavihāra*, in this world. Both subjugation of nature and man are condemned in Buddhism. There is a mutual relation between man and nature.

The term *Brahmavihāra* is variously rendered as ‘Brahma-abode’, ‘Divine states’, ‘Supreme conditions’, ‘Sublime mode of living’ etc. The word ‘Brahma’ is to be understood to mean Sublime, Excellent, or Highest. It indicates a reality which is faultless, clean and pure. A person, who achieves this kind of purity and excellence,

<sup>10</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillian Company, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey B. Aronson, 1980, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> *Santideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya*, C. Bendall (ed.), St. Petersburg: 1897-1902, 2ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Bodhi Sambhāraka*, verse. 36.

gets identified with the Brahma and achieves *Brahmaṣṭhiti*. This state of bliss is designated as *Brahmavihāra*. The Buddhists indicate, that a person of highest excellence, live with pure thoughts and lives like a Brahma. This highest mode of living is identified as *Brahmavihāra*. In the Buddhist system, the *Brahmavihāra* with the higher meditation leads to 'Nirvāna', as the ultimate goal. For Tagore, our daily worship of God is not really the process of gradual acquisition of Him, but the daily process of surrendering ourselves, removing all obstacles to union and extending our consciousness towards him in devotion and service, in goodness and love.

The Upaniṣadic notion of *Brahmavihāra* is advised as "Be lost altogether in Brahman, like an arrow that has completely penetrated its target".<sup>14</sup> Thus, to be conscious of being absolutely enveloped by Brahma is not an act of mere concentration of mind. It must be the aim of whole of our life, thought and deeds. In all our actions, we have to feel that impetus of the infinite energy and be glad. The way of *Brahmavihāra* is the fullest realization of self. The self is not to be confused with the ego. Our egoistic impulses constitute the lower self. Self-realization means transcendence of the lower self by the higher self. This transcendence is possible by developing a personality which is conscious of the principle of essential oneness with the infinite Brahman. Regarding the ideal of *Brahmavihāra*, Tagore states, "This is the ultimate end of man, to find the one which is his soul, the key with which he opens the gate of the spiritual life, the heavenly kingdom".<sup>15</sup>

The views of Upaniṣad and Buddha on *Brahmavihāra*, and Tagore's interpretation of it have been mentioned very precisely in order to make it obvious that in today's individualistic and materialistic life, how *Brahmavihāra* is to be considered as our ultimate end of life. In Indian ethico-religious theories, there are advices for restraining our materialistic cravings. Many Indian philosophical systems, have correctly pointed out that our ignorance about reality produces material cravings, which induces us to perform *sakāma karmas*. The result of *karma* binds us to the shackles of transmigration of soul and rebirth. To get rid of the misery attached with these phases, one must renunciate all material and worldly desires; perform only *niṣkāma karmas*, so that one can be near the end of *Brahmavihāra*. It is the state of absolute cessation of misery and pain, since the soul is liberated from the *bhava-chakra* and gets identified with the Brahman. It is a blissful existence of being ensconced in Brahman.

The world is a perfect gift of joy, a permanent token of love from God to us. But we fail to understand the true value of the world since we fail to reach out and realize that love. We have taken up a narrow utilitarianistic standpoint from where we judge the world as only a commodity, not as a gift of God. We have made the world into a battlefield for fierce competition among ourselves to scramble for its riches. The underestimation of world is similar to the cannibalism where man looks upon man as his food. In such a world, the practical application of *Brahmavihāra* cannot thrive or flourish or be actualized in its true sense.

Our body is not something to be condemned but something to be grateful for because it is the most miraculous thing in existence. It has no conflict and moves with inner synchrony and moreover our soul is not opposed to our body. If our body is the house, our soul is the guest. Men are rational animals. Now, this rationality must confiscate the animalistic instinct and enforce control over bodily appetites. We may add a new dimension to spirituality. Nowadays in this materialistic world, materialism is no longer opposed to spiritualism; it is basically to demolish all religions from earth. The notion of spiritualism or spiritual hedonism may be coined as I think hedonism as very earthy 'Eat, drink be merry' – that is earthy hedonism. In spiritual hedonism there is more. 'Eat, drink and be merry' and the Divine thoughts of God, added to it. Spiritual Hedonism exists when religion is alive, when it dies, hedonism disappears and religion becomes antagonistic to everything man can enjoy. In Western ethics, Kant has advised us to renunciate the animalistic self and be a rational person through performing duty for duty's sake. He has identified Supreme Good as virtue cum happiness.

<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillian Company, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1913, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillian Company, p. 37.

The good relation between man and nature brings development in the society since good relationships are based on pure knowledge. Owing to this value, man has good feelings like *maitrī*, *karunā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā*. In this process man maintains good relation with nature. Due to this knowledge man has self-realization. That is, he realizes his own nature as well as the external world. Once he realizes this, he gets himself identified with nature. Hence, with a mutual relation between man and nature, reconciliation of social development and preservation of the nature is possible. Thus, only a new religion of love, freedom and realization can celebrate. It can bear fruits of love, trust and enjoyment for others and consequently it will lead us to Heavenly Abode of Peace i.e., *Brahmavihāra*.

Notes:

Here the concept of Brahmavihāra has been borrowed from Buddhist philosophy and Tagore's philosophy and his understanding of the Upaniṣads. There is no such word as Brahmavihāra in the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads endorses the concept of Eternal Brahma.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aronson, Harvey B., *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1980.  
 Carnegie, Charlotte, *The Incomplete Guide to Yoga*, United Kingdom: Winchester Books, 2012.  
 Pillai, K. Raghavan, *The Vākya-paḍīya*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1971.  
 Tagore, Rabindranath, *Sadhānā: The Realisation of Life*, New York: The Macmillian Company, 1913.  
 Ray, Niharranjan, Rabindranath, *Tagore: A Centenary Volume (1861-1961)*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961.  
 Das, Sisir Kumar, eds., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004.  
 Tagore, Rabindranath, *The Religion of Man*, London: The Macmillian Company, 1930.  
 Vidyananya, Sri, *The Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, Chennai: Samata Books, 2007.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Arnold, Sir Edwin, *Light of Asia*, Singapore: Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, 1996.  
 Arvill, Robert, *Man and Environment: Crisis and the Strategy of Choice*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976.  
 Ashwini, Kumar, *Ecological mind in evolution*, New Delhi: Indian Institute of Ecology and Environment, 1955.  
 Banerjee, N.V., *The Spirit of Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann, 1974.  
 Bodhi, B., *The Connected Discourse of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyukta Nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2000.  
 Chatterjee, Satish Chandra, *Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, Calcutta: Calcutta University, 2003.  
 Foltz, Bruce V. and Frodeman, Robert, eds., *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004.  
 Ghosh, I.M., *Ahimsa: Buddhist and Gandhian*, Delhi: Indian Bibliographies Bureau, 1988.  
 Gokhale, B.G., *Buddhism and Ashoka*, Baroda: Padmaja Publications, 1948.

- Heyd, Thomas, ed., *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Humphrey, Mathew, *Political Theory and the Environment: A Reassessment*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001.
- Jamieson, Dale, *Ethics and the Environment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Jamieson, Dale, eds., *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001.
- Keller, D.R., ed., *Environmental Ethics: The Big Question*, London: Blackwell Publishers, 2010.
- Lillie, William, *An Introduction to Ethics*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 2003.
- Low, Nicholas, ed., *Global Ethics and Environment*, New York: Routledge Publishers 1999.
- Marietta, Don E. Jr, *For People and The Planet: Holism and Humanism in Environmental Ethics*, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Rolston III, Holmes, *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth*, New York: Routledge Publishers, 1996.
- Ronald, Sandler L., *Character and Environment: A Virtue Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Wenz, Peter S., *Environmental Justice*, New York: Suny Press, 1988.
- Wilks, Sarah, ed., *Seeking Environmental Justice*, New York: Rodopi Publishers, 2008.
- Zimmerman, Michael E., ed., *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Right to Radical Ecology*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.

