Martin Buber and Rabindranath Tagore: A Meeting of Two Great Minds

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Although India’s myriad-minded literary genius, Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941), and the eminent, highly revered Jewish philosopher and religious thinker, Martin Buber (1878 - 1965), met only three times, they had the utmost respect for each other’s philosophical and political views. Notably, Buber had a profound interest in and affinity for Indian spirituality. He discussed the Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy quite extensively in several of his important works. As Martin Kämpchen has pointed out, “Tagore and Buber are men fashioned by a culture of ‘the East’ and both had intense contact with Europe. In fact, Martin Buber was born in Vienna and lived in Germany for many years until he emigrated to Israel” (1991: 97). Despite their religious and cultural differences, both Buber and Tagore had much in common, especially their philosophical views about humanity, education, and pedagogy. In this essay, I explain where Buber and Tagore’s philosophical ideas converge, especially concerning humanity and education. I also discuss how they respect each other’s political views despite their differences. I conclude this essay by discussing Buber and Tagore’s similar approach to unify their respective nations and, finally, how they shared the same destiny when both of them were labeled as idealists, and how their nation building efforts were considered
utopian by compatriots in their respective countries.

**Buber and Tagore: On Humanity**

The profound influence of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue has been felt not only in philosophy and religious studies but also in the fields of communication, education, sociology and politics. Buber has inspired us to explore our understanding of the nature and practice of dialogue in greater depth. Although words and languages fascinated Buber, he never saw them as ends in themselves. For him, they were instruments of relation. In his magnum opus, *Ich und Du (I and Thou)*, Buber expressed the belief that dialogue is at the heart of every human existence. According to him, we all live in a world of two-fold reality. (Buber, 1970) One “fold” is based on our interactions with objects in this world that are both humans and otherwise. In this mode of living, which Buber characterized as the “I-It” relation, we use and experience the other person as an object for our profit or self-interest. (ibid.) But the second “fold” occurs when we become fully human persons by entering into genuine relationships with others; when we meet another and make “the other present as a whole and unique being as the person that he is” (Buber, 1965/1998: 69). The second fold, which Buber characterized as the “I-Thou” relation, is based on respect, empathy, mutuality, and directness. The “I-Thou” dialogue between two individuals is marked by honesty, spontaneity, non-manipulative intent, and love in the sense of responsibility of one human for another. Thus, his “I-Thou” relation is one in which an individual is appreciated in all her/his uniqueness and is not objectified. For Buber, it is the dialogic relationship of “I-Thou” that helps humans attain their completeness by understanding one another in a spirit of authenticity.

Although Tagore did not directly address the Buberian notion of “I-Thou” relation, he wrote extensively about the need to make genuine connections with others in rich and profound ways. Tagore explored the idea of approaching the other person as a soul instead of as a means to our end. American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, explained quite perfectly Tagore’s notion of genuine relations, which is like Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship in the following manner:

The word “soul” has religious connotations for many people, and I neither insist on these nor reject them. Each person may hear them or ignore them. What I do insist on, however, is what Tagore meant by this word: the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human
relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation. When we meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built on respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects. (2010: 6)

Tagore’s understanding of soul echoes Buber’s idea of dialogue. Their ideas reorient toward the humanizing dimensions of social relations (I-Thou) rather than the instrumental (I-It) relations. Furthermore, Tagore’s notion of love coheres with Buber’s ideas about the I-Thou relation when Tagore wrote: “the fact can never be ignored that we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love.” (2004: 376). Tagore reminded us about the spirit of oneness in this world: “Joy is the realization of the truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover.” (2004: 159). This interconnectedness that Tagore wrote about is the same as Buber’s notion of I-Thou relations.

Both Buber and Tagore believed that it is in establishing genuine relations with others that we get to be complete beings. According to Buber,

\[ I \]n the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, preeminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other—together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation. (1998: 61)

The emphasis on a wholeness of engagement extended from other individuals to the world around us. For Buber, it was “only by looking at the world as a world can man grasp being as a wholeness and unity” (Friedman, 1955: 80). This is done not by observing our world as an object from a distance; neither can it be accomplished by classifying and generalizing what we observe as science does or by analyzing it with logic but through entering into a relation that is without any reservation or preconditions. Similarly, Tagore stated:

\[ M \]y world exists in relation to me, and I know that it has been given to the personal me by a personal being. The process of the giving can be classified and generalized by science, but not the gift. For the gift is the soul unto the soul, therefore it can only be realized by the soul in joy, not analyzed by the reason in logic. (2004: 220)
Buber was of the opinion that it was in the realm between humans that truth emerged from authentic dialogue. (Friedman, 1955) Explaining Buber's position on truth as it is revealed in dialogue, Friedman stated, "all real living is in meeting and in establishing relations; it is a question of the authenticity of what is between men, without which there can be no authentic human existence." (1995: 86) For Tagore, truth was revealed through human interaction and our existence in this world of relations was critical to what we know and feel. Tagore asserted, "all our knowledge of things is knowing them in their relation to the Universe, in that relation which is truth. A drop of water is not a particular assortment of elements; it is the miracle of harmonious mutuality, in which the two reveal the One." (2004: 5).

Buber and Tagore on Education

Both Buber and Tagore had a lot in common concerning education. Buber was strongly opposed to education that was mechanical, stifling of creativity and restraining of individual freedom. According to Buber, there are two basic ways to educate:

[In the first approach], a man tries to impose himself, his opinion and his attitude on the other in such a way that the latter feels the psychical result of the action to be his own insight, which has only been freed by the influence. In the second basic way of affecting others, a man wishes to find and to further in the soul of the other the disposition toward what he has recognized in himself as the right. (1965/1998: 73)

For Buber, the true teacher does not seek to influence each other by imposing her/his beliefs, values and so on. Instead s/he helps the pupil see each other's perspective without any kind of imposition or manipulation. The true teacher lets the pupil realize her/his potential by letting the issues and ideas to unfold rather than imposing or forcing one's ideas or perspective on the other.

Tagore was also strongly critical of the education of the Indian children, which he characterized as an "education factory, lifeless, colourless, dissociate from the context of the universe, with bare white walls staring like eyeballs of the dead" (Tagore, 2004: 333–334). Instead of nurturing children's creative imagination and making the whole learning experience joyful, Tagore observed that traditional education stifled wonder and was anything but joyful. Like Buber, Tagore believed that the primary goal of education was not to force students to absorb information,
which they would later forget for lack of relevance to the world around them. The goal of education, for Tagore, was to help reveal what the students knew instead of forcing the teacher’s ideas on them. Echoing Buber’s sentiments, Tagore averred that real education helped unfold what the students already know by means of engaging in a genuine dialogue with them. Tagore emphasized the freedom of the individual, which included “emotional and imaginative, as well as scientific and rational and self-development” in education (Nussbaum, 2007: 89).

Buber believed that a true teacher represented the ideal of openness to one’s self, to others and, ultimately, to life. For Buber, the real education of a pupil depended on the strength and tenderness of the relationship between the teacher and her/his pupil. He reminded us that an ideal teacher encouraged and cultivated sympathy for all life on this earth. The teacher’s job is to foster compassion among her/his pupils for the suffering other and to instill in them the desire to do something to help reduce their pain and suffering. According to Buber, the ultimate goal of education is deeply spiritual, which aids in liberating people from political oppression. For Buber:

Education becomes the spiritual force which overcomes the prevailing state of open or hidden exercise of power over human souls—the politicization of all human life spheres—through a new reality of genuine, creative human and national community. (qtd. Friedman, 1981: 279)

According to Tagore, real education prepared students who can think for themselves and for the welfare of others and who are not afraid of constantly challenging themselves to explore new ideas from other cultures and ways of life. Tagore was of the opinion that “‘cultivation of feeling’, which involves an expansion of sympathy for other beings is at the heart of real education” (O’Connell, 2010: 69). Akin to Buber, Tagore’s idea of education was emancipatory. The ultimate goal was to liberate people who were historically oppressed and marginalized.

Buber was keenly interested in the workings of children’s minds. The child, according to Buber, is dominated by two autonomous instincts: the “originator instinct” and the “instinct for communion”. For Buber, these two are the keys to education. The Buberian originator instinct is the intrinsic drive of the child to form and shape the world around her/him. The positive instinct can never become greed because it is not aimed at “having” but merely at “doing”. However, the originator instinct, according to Buber, is not sufficient since it does not lead to mutuality and
sharing. Therefore, a child also has the “instinct for communion”, which is the longing for the world to reveal itself to us. Buber believed that harmony in a person could only be cultivated through trust in communion. Hence, the task of the educator was to channel the child’s presence into her/his own life—into communion.

Likewise Tagore considered it critically important to fathom a child’s mind. He believed that the subconscious mind of a child was more active than the conscious part and this is why Tagore considered it especially important that children be engaged in different kinds of activities that would help stimulate their minds and gradually arouse interest and curiosity. Tagore wrote: “The human mind is in the embryo stage in childhood and school boys should live in surroundings which protect them from all disturbing forces. To acquire strength by absorbing knowledge both consciously and unconsciously should be their sole aim, and their environment should be adapted to this purpose.” (2004: 82)

Buber encouraged learning not only from books but also from nature—the chirping of birds, the rustling of the trees, the blossoming of flowers, the stars in the night sky, all served God in joy. A vast majority of Buber’s writings addresses his experience of inclusion and empathic engagement with nature, for example, with a tree, which is “bodied against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way” (qtd. Friedman, 1981: 329). Buber exhorted us to make strong connections with nature without trying to analyze it by comparison and contrast. Instead, he wanted us to appreciate nature in its wholeness and unity. For example, when he was writing about ways of receiving a tree, he urged us to surrender to it wholeheartedly “until you feel its bark from the trunk like the striving in your muscles; until your feet cleave and grope like roots and your skull arches itself like a light-heavy crown; until you recognize your children in the soft blue cones [...]” (Friedman, 1981: 159). For Buber, who possessed an innate quality of fostering personal identification with nature, the true teacher also appreciates and nurtures wonder and the zest for life.

Tagore also argued for education that would help develop sensitivity in a student by directly experiencing nature. By helping to foster a close affinity with nature, students would be able to realize that there is no barrier between their live and the life of nature. This feeling of oneness with nature would eventually help in developing empathy and the ability to connect with one’s environment. As Tagore wrote:

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence [...]
From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest education for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates[...]. Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment. (Tagore, 2004: 116 - 117).

Both Buber and Tagore were of the opinion that the primary role of education was transformative; changing the hearts and minds of students in order for them to relentlessly strive to create world communities that are founded on peace and universal brotherhood and sisterhood. For Buber, who had gone through the horrors of Nazism, the Holocaust, the two World Wars and more, the goal of education is to enable people to live in peace and harmony. In his “Education of Character”, Buber said that education is:

a step beyond all the dividedness of individualism and collectivism [...] 
genuine education of character is genuine education for community [...] 
He who knows inner unity, the inner most life of which is mystery, learns to honour the mystery in all its forms. (1947/2002: 138)

Similarly, Tagore, who lived during the Boer War (1890 - 1892) World War I (1914 - 1918), and the British colonization of India and other nations, strongly believed that the primary goal of education was to foster peace and goodwill among nations by helping people to attain their fullness by attaining the spirit of universalism. It was Tagore’s view that “education to be real must be of the whole man, of the emotions and the senses as much as of the intellect. Man in his fullness is not limited by the individual but overflows in his community” (Kripalani 193). In order to promote peace and harmony in the world, Tagore believed that education should help students respect the diversity of cultures and the pluralistic nature of truth by exposing them to different points of view. Tagore wrote:

All that is great and true in humanity is ever waiting at our gate to be invited. It is not for us to question about the country to which it belongs, but to receive it in our home and bring before it the best we have. (qtd. Das Gupta, 2004: 69)
Tagore and Buber on Zionism

It was in 1921 when Buber saw Tagore for the first time, when he attended one of Tagore’s public lectures in Darmstadt, Germany. Buber wrote to his friend, Louise Dumont, about his encounter with Tagore, whom he found to be “lovable, childlike and a venerable” individual “with a touchingly beautiful faith” (qtd. Mendes-Flohr 3). It is recorded that in the meeting with Buber, Tagore had expressed his profound appreciation of the Jewish people for their love of peace and intellectual accomplishments. Tagore shared with Buber his sympathy for the Zionist settlement in Palestine but entertained serious doubts about its alignment with Western powers. Buber was also concerned about the implications of the unbridled westernization of Zionism. Yet he disagreed with Tagore, saying that Tagore was “removed from the reality of the hour in which we live” (ibid. 4). Buber confided in his friend, Louise Dumont, that he didn’t agree with Tagore’s views on Zionism. Buber wrote; “Tagore wanted to relieve the burden of the Jews in Palestine by getting them to lay aside modern Western techniques. But we must bear the full weight of our burden and either carry it to the heights or plunge into the abyss with it.” (qtd. Friedman, 1981: 262).

Buber met with Tagore again in Düsseldorf in 1926 when he attended Tagore’s lecture. He wrote to Louise Dumont once again; “how much the sound of his [Tagore’s] voice and his glance brought alive his younger (or elder) brother, Martin Buber. His personality, more than his thoughts, made a deep impression. Thus he left behind healing strength [...] How much this man must be suffering from the idiocy of Europe[...].” (qtd. Kämpchen, 95)

At Tagore’s request, Buber and Tagore were to meet for the last time in Prague, again in 1926, to discuss Zionism and Jewish settlement in Palestine. Tagore expressed his deep concern that Zionism was likely to weaken the Jewish people’s reverence for the spirit and universalism that he considered as the “finest, most valuable characteristics” of the Jewish people (qtd. Friedman, 1981: 342). Buber agreed with Tagore about the potential danger that Jewish people faced if they were to embrace a “narrow-hearted nationalism” of the Western nations under Zionism. Although the danger was quite real, Buber responded by saying that to evade this danger by abandoning the Zionist project would possibly expose the Jewish people to possibly more harm: “If in this pressing historical hour one flees from danger,” Buber told Tagore, “one loses the capacity for advancing further, becoming
paralyzed, and expires.” (qtd. Mendes-Flohr 6) Buber clarified his position by stating that the threat of danger must be confronted on two fronts: “internally, to fill Zionism [...] with that inherited treasure, reverence for the spirit and universalism, and thus to install the antidote within it [against narrow-hearted nationalism].” (ibid. 6) Buber also opined that Zionism needed to form a spiritual alliance with the Orient on the external front. While Tagore agreed with Buber’s ideas, he once again expressed his hope that the Jewish people would sever their ties with the West, rejecting their “machines and canons” and opposing it with the “genuine meditation of the East, demonstrating to the Occident the emptiness and meaninglessness of its freneticism and teaching it, together with the Orient, to immerse itself in the vision of the eternal truth” (Friedman, 1981: 343). Buber gently indicated that such a radical rejection of the West is “a chimera, an exalted but ultimately untenable vision” (qtd. Mendes-Flohr 7). Buber politely reminded Tagore that there was no choice for the Jewish people but to embrace the West but at the same time not forgetting for a moment Western civilization’s ugly side by directly confronting it in order to avoid its pernicious consequence and, then, Buber entreatingly added, “and in this we need your brotherly help”. In response, Tagore held out his hand to Buber. Buber recounted that special moment with Tagore, which was silent yet very poignant: “I am sure he [Tagore] felt no less than I did that amidst all the perils inherent in the history of nations there remains, inviolable, that fact of facts: human brotherliness.” (qtd. Kämpchen 96)

These meetings show us how to have a productive dialogue with someone whose views differ from ours. These two intellectual and spiritual giants demonstrate that it is quite all right to disagree with another’s perspectives and still enjoy a strong sense of connection. This is precisely what happened in those magical moments that Tagore and Buber shared in Prague. They engaged in genuine dialogue that was marked with respect, mutuality, and directness, and even though Tagore did not fully agree with Buber, by holding Buber’s hand he showed respect for their kindred spirits.

**Conclusion**

Buber’s I-Thou relation and Tagore’s notion of loving relations go beyond the narrow confines of ethnicity, nation, or religious community. Both were proud and loyal sons of their respective nations. Both were also world citizens possessing a global perspective. Buber appealed to his own people to eschew the militaristic, jingoistic, parochial form of Zionism and, instead, explore ways to co-exist in peace
and harmony with the Palestinians. He worked tirelessly to educate the Jews to transcend their political and religious differences with the Arabs in order to live with each other in peace and harmony. It was Buber's dream that Jews and Arabs one day would live in peace in a joint nation. He stated: “We do not aspire to return to our ancient homeland in order to dispossess another people or to dominate it.” (qtd. Yaron 141) In a letter to Gandhi, Buber wrote:

I belong to a group of people who, from the time when Britain conquered Palestine, have not ceased to strive for the achievement of genuine peace between Jew and Arab. By genuine peace, we inferred and still infer that both peoples should together develop the Land without one imposing his will on the other. (Martin Buber’s open letter to Gandhi regarding Palestine, February 24, 1939)

Like Buber, Tagore sought to unify Indians to fight against all kinds of prejudices and bigotry that divided the Indian nation on the basis of religion, caste and class. He spent his entire life urging the people of his beloved India to embrace the spirit of universal harmony and loving kindness toward other fellow beings. Tagore’s writings consistently emphasized racial and religious harmony. For example, in the following beautiful hymn, Bharat Tirtha (The Indian Pilgrimage), he exhorted Indians to unify by overcoming differences of race, religion, and class:

Come Aryans, come non-Aryans, Hindus and Mussalmans—
Come today, Englishmen, come Christians!
Come Brahmin, cleansing your mind
Join hands with all—
Come downtrodden, let the burden
Of every insult be forever dispelled.
Make haste and come to
Mother coronation, the vessel auspicious
Is yet to be filled
With sacred water sanctified by the touch of all
By the shore of the sea of Bharat's great humanity!

He believed India could achieve this kind of unity in diversity only through the proper education of the people and the cultivation of freedom of ideas and imagination.

Both Tagore and Buber were strongly opposed to “hysterical nationalism”, which frequently generated conflict and war. Buber was not only deeply critical of what was happening in Germany at the time, but he was also against any kind of
extremism in the Zionist movement of the time and its political push for a Jewish state in Palestine. Buber's warned that Jewish immigration to Palestine had to take place in dialogue (I-Thou relation) with the local Arab population—and that the establishment of bi-National State was a desirable outcome. Any attempt to establish a Jewish state in a one-sided way (I-It relation), would lead to an extremely problematic situation. At the time, Buber's views were not well received and were brushed aside by his opponents in the Zionist movement. (Agassi) Buber was disenchanted with the Zionist politics that sought to oppress and suppress the Arabs in its quest for a national identity that led him to withdraw from active Zionist nationalist politics.

Coincidently, Tagore seemed to share the same fate as Buber. As pointed out by Das Gupta, the “other prominent nationalists dumped his [Tagore's] ideas of an inclusive nationalism as a 'poet's fancy,' a 'poet's whim' [...] Disillusioned with nationalist politics, he turned to his own responses to the many troubled questions of his times” (2013: 140 - 141). Despite the fact that many orthodox and radical nationalist leaders did not accept Tagore's ideas of nationalism, he never succumbed to the pressure to conform. He held on to his idea of his nation's future by “standing fast on the narrow causeway of his difficult middle path” (142).

In sum, Buber and Tagore were intellectually and spiritually kindred spirits, notwithstanding their political differences concerning Zionism and the future of Palestine. They deeply believed that life was essentially one of relations and that one is incapable of realizing herself/himself without communion with others. They viewed that the primary purpose of education was to foster peace and goodwill among nations and help ameliorate the conditions of people who are historically oppressed and marginalized. Even though Buber's and Tagore's ideas about peace and harmony were often not taken seriously by both liberal and orthodox nationalists in their respective countries, even the most bitter disappointments could not faze their unswerving political ideals and vision about universal humanity or blunt their critical minds. They remained unflinchingly critical of what they found to be socially and morally unjust in their respective communities. Although Buber and Tagore used their own cultural traditions to launch their criticisms, they did so by constructing alternative conceptions of these traditions. Both were wary of narrow-hearted nationalism and wrote extensively about the potential danger of such nationalistic sentiments. As Buber and Tagore had correctly warned us, we are now witnessing what the post-colonial critic, Arif Dirlik, has labeled as “native chauvinism” (1990) which is
spreading violence all over the world. It is with profound dismay that many of us also observe how this kind of nationalism serves as an opiate for people who have abandoned their sense of morality and justice and are ready to kill and die for its cause. It is in such challenging times that we may want to wake up from our moral slumber and embrace Buber's and Tagore's magnificent idea of a unified global community that is founded on peace, harmony, solidarity and justice while opposing belligerent nationalism, which is spreading like cancer all over the world, threatening the moral, spiritual and humanistic foundations of our existence.

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