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## Practical Vedanta and Engaged Emancipation: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Sri-Ramakrishna's Philosophy

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Keywords:** *Practical Vedanta, Maya, Liberation, Essence-function, Karma-yoga.*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we try to trace the roots of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy in pan Indic traditions beyond the classical post Śāṅkaran Advaita. We discuss how the key theme of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, namely dual emphasis on jnana and karma was inherited from such historical traditions. To do so, we discuss several of such traditions, including East Asian Mahayana, Tathagatagarbha literature, Trika, Tantra, Yogic Advaita etc. These traditions are shown to have left a clear influence on Sri Ramakrishna's vedantic philosophy.

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### Introduction:

'Engaged Emancipation' is a term coined by the editors of the volume, 'Engaged emancipation: Mind, morals, and Make-Believe in the Mokṣopāya', on the vedantic philosophy of the Yogavāsiṣṭha, and its cross-cultural transactions in the context of its socio-religious and spiritual milieu. The term is primarily used in that book to explore the notion of Jīvamukti a key concept in Vedantic philosophy, which albeit being nondualist, puts much emphasis on the requirement of Karma or action as integral to salvation. In this way it differs from the classical Advaita. This was not peculiar to this tradition, rather such a tendency can be traced back to many of its contemporaries and predecessors. Although Advaita Vedanta has played a major philosophical influence on the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, concept of practical Vedanta, that equates the service for the world to the salvation of self,

is markedly different from the classical Śāṅkaran system. For Sri Ramakrishna the Maya or Sakti is identical with Brahman, while he admitted the distinction between the inactive or nirguna Brahman and the world as the creation of maya, they don't have any ontological difference. But in Acarya Śāṅkara's system, māya, indescribable or anirvacaniya as it is, lacks this ontological identity. So, in classical Advaita, while maya is located in Brahman, it's upādhis on brahman are mithyā, not Brahman, however, Sri Ramakrishna, while admitting the apophatic negation of the former at a transcendental level, emphasized more on Brahman's existence as the only intelligible reality. While Acarya Śāṅkara accepts niskāma(desireless) karma as a means for cittasuddhi or mind purification, as kramasamuccaya, it is to be abandoned completely in Sannyasa as a requirement for the attainment of Brahmajnana. Acarya Śāṅkara therefore rejected saha-samuccaya or co-engagement in jnana and karma as engagement in the worldly life is avidya or an impediment to liberation in his system. But according to Sri Ramakrishna's view, desireless action is on the equal level as wisdom, and is necessary for liberation, as such worldly activity is also manifestation of Brahman. In this paper, we have tried to trace the transcultural roots of Sri Ramakrishna's vedāntic philosophy beyond classical Advaita, and also compare it with similar philosophical systems in a broader Asian context.

### **Essence function and the Buddhist heritage**

'Essence-function' or Tiyyong is a concept in East Asian Buddhism that integrates Essence or the absolute reality with function, which is its relative manifestation, therefore both being expressions of the same reality, enabling its practitioners to maintain a non-dualistic perspective in their worldly activities. This concept wasn't limited to Buddhism only, but was also heavily influential in the Confucian philosophy of Wang Yangming, one of the two dominant neo-Confucian schools. This concept that transcended religious and cultural boundaries has its origin in the Indian Buddhist concept of Prajna and Upaya, or wisdom and skillful means. The Mahayana Bodhisattva path combined wisdom and compassion, and led the Bodhisattva to strive for liberation of all sentient beings while giving up own Nirvana which at the same also manifested liberation itself, as the Prajnaparamita sutras claimed that Samsara and Nirvana are the same, denying their conceptual boundary as different perspectives of the same absolute reality. The four bodhisattva vows constitute the core practice in the different traditions of the Mahayana. Although these four great vows are extant in many different versions, they talk moreover about almost the same thing, i.e. integration of wisdom with compassion, as is seen in this following version cited for example, “Beings are numberless, I vow to enlighten them. Obstacles are countless, I vow to cut them down. Teachings are limitless, I vow to master them. The Buddha Way is endless, I vow to follow

through.” These vows put an equal emphasis on teachings or wisdom and serving living beings. This feature is not restricted to the sutras of the great vehicle but is also seen in the Early Buddhist Texts, such as, in the Agamas and Pali Nikayas. In the *Soṇadaṇḍa* sutta, for example, the Buddha explicates the factors of becoming a brahmin to the brahmin *Soṇadaṇḍa*. After analyzing five such factors of Brahminical conduct proposed by *Soṇadaṇḍa*, one by one, the Buddha shows that, only wisdom and ethics are indispensable in the character of a brahmin, or the ideal person. Both being equally necessary for salvation, as they are said to be complementing each other by the Buddha. Wisdom is ‘cleansed’ or is perfected by ethics, and also cleanses the moral conduct in turn. Much akin to the Kantian notion of practical reason, this sutta necessitates wisdom for ethical conduct, just like proper moral knowledge is required for correct implementation of that wisdom. Bhikṣu *Anālayo* has traced this theme in many such texts of the Early Buddhist canon, which is considered to be the record of pre-sectarian Buddhism, in his work *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*. Such texts are similarly shown to be giving equal emphasis on the wisdom of emptiness and *Karuna*.

Now in response to the much-anticipated question how compassion or moral conduct is compatible with the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness and non-self, various Buddhist philosophical sects have answered this differently, but some later Mahayana schools developed a novel solution to this question that aligns much with the Vedantic thought. Those schools admitted the presence of a universal self, namely, the *Tathāgatagarbha*, that is the womb of all sentient beings. In the sutras that teach the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, this notion of *sunyata* doesn't consider all dharmas as empty, but only those of the *klesas* and the *paratantrasvabhāva* or conditioned existence. In those sutras, the absolute is thus expressed in more positive terms of Buddha Nature or the *Tathāgatagarbha*, that is universally present in all beings. This positive aspect of reality is what manifests in the compassionate *bodhisattva* activity according to these sutras. The Buddha-nature or *buddha-dhatu* is inherently embodied in the moral-conduct of the *Bodhisattva*. *Maitreya's Ratnagoṭravibhaga* likewise equates the absolute reality of the *dharmakaya* with the apophatic notions of emptiness. Like the Upanishadic roots of *Gita's Karmayoga*, these Mahayana concepts also have their origin in ancient Indian Sramana movements, as shown before. Both the Hindu and Buddhist philosophical traditions inherited this Sramana-Upanisadic heritage. They later influenced *Gaudapada's* philosophy that is also considered as the source of classical Advaita philosophy.

### **Vijñānabhikṣu, Mokṣopāyaśāstra and Yogic Advaita**

They not only later influenced the tantric doctrines of the Vajrayana school but also had major impacts in later Indian philosophical movements like Yogic Advaita, Tantra, Kashmiri Saiva nondualism etc. In the seventy-fifth chapter of the *Yogavāsīṣṭha*, the sage Vasiṣṭha tells the king Rāma about examples of liberated persons from the past, such as Janaka, Buddha, Mandhata, Bali, Manu and the deities Brahma, Visnu, Siva, who were fully engaged in worldly activities, despite being fully liberated, or Jivanmuktas. Liberation was possible in their very life; despite they didn't resign from their worldly activities. The practice advocated in the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* is known as Yogic Advaita, where maintaining nondual awareness is fully possible while being engaged in mundane activities, unlike the classical Advaita which requires a complete resignation from any kind of Karma, here they are not seen as contradictory. This practice thus succeeds to fully integrate karmayoga into the vedantic practice of self-cultivation. Like the *Mokṣopāyaśāstra*, this concept of embodied liberation is also found in the works of Vijñānabhikṣu, the medieval Hindu philosopher from the Bhedābheda school of Vedanta and a commentator on the *yogasutras*. Vijñānabhikṣu, like Sri Ramkrishna, accepted the reality of the world of multiplicity in an Advaitic framework, that merely dissolves the conceptual boundaries between the brahman and the world, the absolute and the realm of plurality, not negating the latter's existence in ontological reductionism, unlike classical Sankaran Advaita, much akin to the relation between the substance and its finite modes in Spinoza's metaphysics, the modes being as real as the substance, in essential and ontological identity with it. The Maya and its creation, i.e. the world, are the integral parts of the Brahman in this system, so it poses no hinderance or contradiction to the realization of Brahman. This unique tradition known as Yogic Advaita is the conceptual background admitted by both of these traditions, influences of which has been traced, besides the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and the works of Vijñānabhikṣu, in Vidyaranya's *Jivanmuktiviveka*, *Pañcadaśī* and Madhusudana's *Gudarthadipika*, within the orthodox tradition of classical Advaita Vedanta.

### **Abhinavagupta's Pratyabhijna philosophy and its Tantric influence**

Many scholars, notably Alexis Sanderson, have observed that the medieval esoteric Saivite movements had many cultural and philosophical exchanges with the Buddhist schools, such influence is very prominent in the tantric Trika philosophy of Acarya Abhinavagupta. The nondualist Saivite school of Trika Shaivism originated around the later ninth century in Kashmir. Among its key preceptors were Somananda, Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. Somananda, the founder of the Pratyabhijna school and the author of *Śivadr̥ṣṭi*, upheld the practice of the householder within the society, rejecting reclusive and ascetic practices. According to him, the universe is a real appearance of the absolute being, Siva. The

school was further developed later by the acaryas Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. The central tenets of Trika school considered the Sakti as the inherent self-consciousness or autonomous will-power (Svatantra sakti) of Siva, the absolute reality. So, everything, including all abhasas originating from the will-power or Sakti of Siva are necessarily Siva himself. Upon realization of this supreme nature, the whole world and worldly activities are realized to be nondual with one's own self. Sri Ramakrishna had engaged in tantric practice in his youth, so Sakta tantrism, besides Vedanta, was a major influence for him. The Sakta schools also inherited this unique spiritual legacy from the intercultural exchanges with the Saivite and the Buddhist schools. He was also influenced by the philosophy of the Mokṣopāyaśāstra or the Yogavāsiṣṭha. This Kashmirian work as have been previously discussed bears the heritage of the Trika school, which is quoted frequently in the 'Kathamrita', his recorded sayings. Both of them inherited this Mahayana legacy. From this background, we have tried to show that Sri Ramkrishna's spiritual experiences from the exposure to these traditions enabled him to rediscover this philosophical legacy which played a key influence in his teachings and his cosmopolitan religious worldview. Below, some of his sayings paraphrased from the Kathamrita are cited as evidence of this influence.

“The primordial Sakti and the Brahman are identical, they are separately incomprehensible, just like snakes can't be conceived without crawling.” “Sakti and Brahman are one, worshipping Sakti is worshipping Brahman. When Brahman engages in creation perfection and destruction, she is called Sakti.” “Why are you going around saying Neti! Neti! Nothing can be said of Brahman but that she exists. Whatever we are comprehending is the property of that conscious energy of that primordial Sakti” “This primordial Sakti or Mahamaya covers the Brahman, whenever the cover dissolves, I return to what I was. But when this avarana or cover exists, it's improper to consider ourselves as Brahman, rather it's better to call her mother, like children call their mothers. That one mother, is manifest through twenty-four tattvas. We must take refuge in that Mahamaya” “Why should the world be mithya, those are rhetorical talks? Initially (in early stages of realization) Brahman appears as the negation of everything, but then his identity is seen with everything.” “For householders, Yogavāsiṣṭha is more appropriate, not the view of (classical) Vedanta.”

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have traced the cross-cultural roots of Sri Ramakrishna's universalist philosophy, which, while being primarily monistic, goes beyond the tradition of the classical Advaita schools. We



have shown, how the concept of engaged liberation was present in ancient Indian philosophies, in the Buddhist practices for example, besides the notion of Karmayoga in the Mahabharata. From this, we have examined the influence of this heritage in medieval philosophical schools like Yogic Advaita, Pratyabhijna and Tantra. Like the Buddhist essence function, the notion of Yogic Advaita as found in works of Vijñānabhikṣu and Yogavāsīṣṭha had a major influence in Sri-Ramakrishna's philosophy. The often-overlooked side of Sri-Ramakrishna's tantric practice has also been shown to be influenced by the medieval tantric traditions bearing the tantric heritage of the Pratyabhijna school. Finally, some quotes from his sermons are presented as evidence of the direct influence of these traditions, where themes such as Yogavāsīṣṭha, the identity of Brahman and Maya, refutation of the world negation of the classical Advaita etc are mentioned, quite explicitly.

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