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## Tolstoy and Indian Religious Philosophy

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“It is impossible for there to be a person with no religion as it is for there to be a person without heart. He may not know that he has a religion, just as a person may not know that he has a heart, but it is no more possible for a person to exist without religion than without a heart” (Tolstoy)

### **Abstract**

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer was interested in the east. At the same time his great interest in the east can be traced in the works of Pushkin and Gogol Nekrasov and Schedrin and later to a still greater extent in the works of Chekov and Gorky and they stood up against foreign enslavement of the peoples of Asia and Africa. Tolstoy's correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian publicists Babu Bharti and Taraknath Das and others helped him to learn about India. Professor Rama Deva editor of the journal The Vedic Magazine sent number of Vedic Magazines and works relating to Vedas to Tolstoy This magazine became main source of Tolstoy's knowledge about the early period of the history of Indian Philosophy. In seventies and eighties, he began a thorough study of Indian philosophy. In this period, he was interested in Buddhism and in other teaching of India and this is testified to by a big list of publications in Tolstoy's notebook dated 9 th January 187. Later he became interested in Hindu Philosophy reflected in Rigveda and Vedas including Mahabharata and other Indian religious literature such as Upnishada, Panchatantra etc.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Mahabharata, Upnishada, Religious philosophy, Azbuka, Panchtantra, Bhagvad Geeta

Tolstoy studied Indian culture over many years in his Yasnaya polyana library are kept many books and journals about India with his marks. In the books about Tolstoy there are references that he turned to Indian philosophy and religion very early. Romain Roland in his book Tolstoy's life wrote that” the nineteen-year-old Tolstoy became acquainted with a Buddhist lama in 1847 and from him he learned the essence of the fundamental laws of all the ancient religions” .at the end of the fifties he associated with E.I Sytina the well-known

publicist and historian whose two sisters were interested in problems of Buddhism. According to E.I.Sytina Tolstoy often stayed to talk with his two sisters and they introduced him to the foundation of Indian philosophy

Buddhism attracted Tolstoy's attention, along with other eastern religions as a teaching containing humanitarian ideas of peace, good and love. That is why he refers to it favourably in his articles, diaries and letters. The teaching of equality was what chiefly attracted Tolstoy in Buddhism. All men originate from one mother nature, all are equal before her, affirmed the Buddha. Another attractive feature of Buddhist ideology for Tolstoy was the negation of God as the almighty supernatural being dominating men. Buddhism rejects this belief. This commanded the respect of Tolstoy who in his attitude to Christianity and other religions denied the idea of the personal God and the belief in mysticism and miracles.

The first mention of the Buddha's teaching in the works of Tolstoy dates back to 1879 which is the period of the turning point in the ideology of the writer. Having narrated in his *confession*. The story related by Tolstoy of the young happy prince Sakyamuni to the principle of life that man cannot live thoughtlessly but must have an aim in view, must remember his main purpose in life. In 1866 N.N.Strakhov sent Tolstoy the French edition of *Lalit Vistara*. It made a great impression on him. From that time onwards Tolstoy studied the literature about Buddhism with increasing care and referred to its teaching in the articles, diaries and letters, more frequently. According to him, the postulate "Do as you would be done by" pervaded Buddhism. By his interpretation the Buddhists profess the same ideas as he does, namely, that good and love are the main forces of human life. They also profess the same ideas of mercy, of simple living and disregard for riches, Buddhism condemns wars, violence, hatred, it appeals for brotherhood and equality among peoples at the same time Tolstoy rejected all that in Buddhism which lowers man in declaring him to be a victim of suffering and all that leads to pessimism and despondency. On 12th September 1884 he noted in his diary: "I read Buddhism the teaching. It is surprising. It is the same teaching. The only mistake is to save oneself from life completely. Buddha didn't save himself, but he saved the people. This he has forgotten, if there was nobody to save, there would be no life." Tolstoy resolutely rejects the later features and distortions which allow the ruling classes and the hypocritical priests to use Buddhism for their own ends. Thus in 1904 his article "Think it over" directed against the Russo-Japanese war.

Tolstoy in the beginning of 1886 planned to write a popular essay on the Buddha and he confirmed his wife about it "From today I have begun to write on Buddha. He interests me very much" at once set to work. but however the essay remained unfinished only a few drafts were made. Tolstoy's essay on Buddha has an interesting history. though his helpers tried their best over its completion but they did not satisfy him. However, Tolstoy did not give up the idea of creating a

popular book on Buddhism later on the thrice came back to it. In 1905 he included in the first edition of Book for reading his new short essay on Buddha, in 1908 he rewrote it for the second edition of the collection and at the beginning of 1910 he wrote a forward to the article by P.A.Boulanger Life and teaching of Siddharth Gautam named Buddha i.e. the most perfect was published in the journal Life for everybody (1910, No.3) Two months before his death Tolstoy once again came back to the legend about the Buddha .In his diary for September 1910 we find a sketch of subject which is certainly very close to the legend of the Buddha .

Tolstoy continued publishing on Buddhism towards the end of his life, including works such as an article called “The Buddha” for his anthology “The Circle of Reading,” and a translation of “Karma,” written by American Paul Carus. He turned vegetarian, became a champion of non-violence, and generally tried to live a simpler life – choices that show an affinity with Buddhist practise. However, this was not the only eastern religion that influenced Tolstoy's beliefs. he also took an active interest in Hinduism.

He was under impression of Hindu Vedic Philosophy in “A Letter to Hindu” (14 Dec.1908) He further said Hindu and Hindutva will one day rule the world because this is a combination of knowledge and wisdom.

Tolstoy often mentioned the Vedas and the Upanishadas in his diaries and letters and they were always accompanied by enthusiastic remarks. He says “I greatly revere the sages of India and although I am somewhat acquainted with their teaching I would like to know still no more” He not only studied the Vedas ,but also popularised them in Russia .In his Circle of reading ,The thoughts of wise men and other works collected under the title Indian wisdom he included many sayings from the Vedas and the Upanishadas Among them are Indian proverbs and maxims such as “Act during the day in such a manner that at night your sleep is untroubled ;act in your youth in such a manner that your old age is tranquil.” “Lay up for yourself such riches that thieves will not steal them ,where tyrants dare not encroach and wish will remain yours also after death –riches that never diminish and never decay.”

According to the English academic and Sanskrit scholar Bruce Wilkinson, “Tolstoy used to read the Vedic Magazine at his estate in Yasnaya Polyana.” He explains that “there are extracts from the Vedas and Upanishads (ancient Sanskrit texts) in 'The Circle of Reading'.” Tolstoy also read the two epics, “The Ramayana” and “The Mahabharata,” which have become central to national identity in many countries across Southeast Asia. He gave much importance to the social and ethical ideas found in the Indian epics .In the Mahabharata and Ramayana the personality of Man is of overriding importance .Tolstoy joyfully welcomed these human postulates of the ancient Indian epic .He admired the grandeur of the content and the encyclopaedic nature of the historical information to be found in these historic-heroic epics. He was particularly

attracted by the moral aspect of the poems. In the Mahabharata Tolstoy particularly knew and loved the sixth book, The Bhagvad Gita, which is often mentioned in his diaries and letters. In Tolstoy's letters and diaries and particularly in his later collections of reading we find many sayings from Mahabharata, Ramayana and Hitopdesha. In Tolstoy's collections we also come across ordinary popular legends sayings and proverbs which are probably still known today by the Indian peasant. Many of them had already been included by Tolstoy in his "Russian Books for Reading" published in the seventies after rewriting them as short stories intended for the young reader. Later on extracts from other classics and epics are represented in Tolstoy's collection along with fables and legends from the Panchtantra and Hitopdesha, those wonderful anthologies of folk stories and fables, from epic dialogues, the Puranas from the classic Tamil literature Kural from the books of Golden Rules and some other well known Indian writings.

Tolstoy not only selected and translated these works but he also carefully adopted them, not sparing either time or labour he attempted, However, to preserve the local colour, and the spirit flavour of the epoch so that Russian readers would come to know and love the ancient wisdom of India and its manly and heroic epics. Tolstoy did much work on Indian folk lore he translated and adopted Indian fables, fairy tales and legends for the young Russian reader. He studied Indian folk lore chiefly in the seventies when he was working on his Azbuka and the Russian book for reading, in which are to be found excellent Russian fairy tales and adaptations of the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine and folklore from other countries, the writer included twenty three Indian fables and fairy tales. Many Indian proverbs and sayings are included in his later collections for reading. In "A Letter to a Hindu," where Tolstoy replies to letters from the editor of the Free Hindustan journal seeking his support for the end of British rule in India, the Russian writer repeatedly refers to the Vedas, and shows a clear understanding of the sayings of Krishna. Tolstoy also makes references to Swami Vivekananda, one of India's greatest philosophers, and emphasizes the importance of religious principles in the freedom movement.

Tolstoy read about Shankaracharya his philosophy attracted Tolstoy in 1897 for the first time from V.V. Jonstons Article published in the sixth issue of the Russian journal "Problems of Philosophy and Psychology" then again in 1909 he read an Article "Plato and Shankaracharya" in Indian Journal "The Vedic Magazine" again shortly before his death in October 1910, he read one of the new books about this philosopher and noted with disappointment in his diary: "I read shri Shankara. The Fundamental metaphysical idea about the essence of life is good, but the entire teaching is a confusion worse than mine." It contains both a criticism of the weak aspects of the teaching of the Indian philosopher and a recognition of the weakness of his own teaching. Again Tolstoy was impressed by Ramkrishna Paramahansa because he belonged to a poor family and lived a

modest life in solitude .He was a man of the people with an original mind this is why Tolstoy highly appreciated him.He liked his high conception of the spiritual essence of man. He shared also Ramkrishna's ideas about the equality of the all religions in the search for 'Good'and particularly his moral principles Tolstoy began to spread this ethical teaching in Russia Later. On 13 Feb.1903 he read the journal Theosophischer Wegweiser underlined number of Rama krishna's Aphorism and noted in his diary "There is much in common with my conception" on Feb.1906 he received from P.A.Sergeenko the book Ramkrishna Paramahansa's sayings and said " Wonderful sayings ! Rama Krishna died 50 years ago .A remarkable sage"

From the literature about Rama Krishna Tolstoy selected nearly a hundred sayings and parables which he intended to publish in Russia.

Tolstoy was also attracted to Vivekanandas Philosophy which dates back to September 1896 and noted in his diary that he had read " A charming book on Indian wisdom" which included a series of lecture on ancient Indian philosophy in New York in the winter of 1895-96 secondly he read collection of Speeches and articles .Talking about Vivekananda with his relatives and friends Tolstoy commended the depth of the thought and the passionate conviction of the young Indian philosopher .But at the same time the writer affirmed that Vivekananda disappointed him very much " He writes about miracles which he himself preformed."

#### **Conclusion:**

How much Buddhism, Hinduism influenced Tolstoy is a matter of interpretation, but their principles are certainly present in the philosophy he created, known as *tolstovstvo*. Its core concept was that mankind should live in peace, harmony and unity, which is a very Buddhist ideal. The same is true of his rejection of luxury and his stance against the exploitation of peasants. However, he also supported the idea of surrendering to the inevitable, predestined flow of life's events –Like all great thinkers, Tolstoy was able to assimilate his influences and create a unique philosophy of his own.

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