

Indian thought in emerson thoreau and whitman essay sample

[Religion](#), [God](#)



VEDANTA philosophy was one of several thought currents from abroad that reached New England in the early decades of the 19th century and contributed to the thinking of Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson's interest in the sacred writings of the East probably began during his Harvard days and continued throughout his life. He knew Laws of Manu, Vishnupurana, the Bhagvad- Gita, and Katha Upanishad: There are numerous references to these scriptures in his Journals and Essays. Thoreau, too, was introduced to Oriental writing while still at Harvard. His initial contact was with an essay on Oriental poetry by Sir William Jones; in 1841, at the age of 24, he began an intensive study of Hindu religious books. In the January 1843 issue of The Dial, Thoreau published selected passages from Laws of Manu. From a French version of the Sanskrit Harivansa, he translated a story, "The Transmigration Seven Brahmans," and in The Dial of January 1844, he published excerpts from Buddhist scriptures under the title "The Preaching of Buddha."

Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists, interested in the concept of "selfhood," found in Hindu scripture a well-elaborated doctrine of Self. Hindu scripture tells us that the central core of one's self (antaratman) is identifiable with the cosmic whole (Brahman). The Upanishad state: "The self within you, the resplendent, immortal person is internal self of all things and is the universal Brahman." Concepts similar to this cardinal doctrine of Vedanta appear in the writings of the Transcendentalists. But there are many ideological similarities among Oriental literature, the neo-Platonic doctrines, Christian mysticism, and the philosophy of the German Idealists such as Kant and Schelling. And, since the Transcendentalists were acquainted with all of

these writings, it is not always possible to identify specific influences.

Nevertheless, the striking parallels between Transcendentalist writing and Oriental thought make it clear that there was a spiritual kinship.

In "Plato; or, the Philosopher," Emerson writes that "the conception of fundamental Unity" - the "ecstasy" of losing "all being in one Being" - finds its highest expression "chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Geeta, and the Vishnu Purana." In this essay, Emerson quotes Krishna speaking to a sage: "You are fit to apprehend that you are not distinct from me.... That which I am, thou art, and that also is this world, with its gods and heroes and mankind. Men contemplate distinctions because they are stupefied with ignorance.' '.... What is the great end of all, you shall now learn from me. It is soul, - one in all bodies, pervading, uniform, perfect, preeminent over nature, exempt from birth, growth and decay, omnipresent, made up of true knowledge, independent, unconnected with unrealities, with name, species and the rest, in time past, present and to come. The knowledge that this spirit, which is essentially one, is in one's own and in all other bodies, is the wisdom of one who knows the unity of things.'"

In formulating his own concept of the Over-Soul, Emerson might well be quoting Krishna once again: "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but in the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject

and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read....”

Some of Emerson’s poetry resembles Vedanta literature in form as well as in content. A striking example is the poem “ Brahma.” This is “ Brahma” in its entirety:

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the lain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven,

But thou, meek lover of the good!

Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

The first stanza is essentially an adaptation of these lines from the Katha Upanishad:

If the slayer think I slay, if the lain think I am slain, then both of them do not know well. If (the soul) does not slay, nor is it slain.

The second and the third stanzas echo the following lines of the Gita:

I am the ritual action, I am the sacrifice, I am the ancestral oblation, I am the sacred hymn, I am also the melted butter, I am the fire and I am the offering.
I am immortality and also death.

I am being as well as non-being.

In some respects, Henry David Thoreau was even more than Emerson attracted to Oriental thought and philosophy. For while Emerson found the Hindu doctrines of soul congenial to his own ideas about man's relationship to the universe, Thoreau found in Hindu scriptures a way of life with which he felt a profound affinity.

When Thoreau began his intensive study of Hindu scriptures, he wrote in his Journal, " I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated upon the table-land of the Ghauts.... The impression which those sublime sentences made on me last night has awakened me before any cockcrowing.... The simple life herein described confers on us a degree of

freedom even in perusal... wants so easily and gracefully satisfied that they seem like a more refined pleasure and repletteness." Later, in his first book he said: " Any moral philosophy is exceedingly rare. This of Manu addresses our privacy more than most. It is a more private and familiar, and at the same time a more public and universal work, than is spoken in parlour or pulpit nowadays. As our domestic fowls are said to have their original in the wild pheasant of India, so our domestic thoughts have their prototypes in the thoughts of her philosophers. Most books belong to the house and street only, and in the fields their leaves feel very thin.... But this, as it proceeds from, so it addresses, what is deepest and most abiding in man. It belongs to the noontide of the day, the midsummer of the year, and after the snows have melted, and the waters evaporated in the spring, still its truth speaks freshly to our experience....."

Thoreau sought throughout his life to live a life of meaning - a life in which he would understand the truths of his own nature, his relationship with other men and his relationship with Nature and with the Universe. In the Bhagavad-Gita Thoreau found clues for his quest which he transposed into his Journals: " The man who, having abandoned all lusts of the flesh, walketh without inordinate desires, unassuming, and free from pride, obtaineth happiness." " The wise man.... seeketh for that which is homogeneous to his own nature."

We know too that Thoreau's reading led him to an interest in Yoga. He wrote in a letter to a friend: " Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the yoga gather in

Brahma the certain fruit of their works... The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation.... Divine forms traverse him.... and, united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matter.... To some extent, and at rare interval, even I am a yogi." And in Walden, Thoreau describes a state of mind that has a close resemblance to the experience of the yogi. It is similar also to the transcendental Self of the Upanishads which as Sakshi or spectator merely looks on without participating in the pageant of the world.

" By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from the actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature... I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it..... [I] am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play... of life is over, the spectator goes his way."

When Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, he was almost universally condemned for the formlessness of his poems and the grandiosity of his heretic philosophy. But Emerson made it a point to write a letter to the author: " I am very happy in reading it.... It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy Nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament were making our Western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I

have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well." The ideas that Emerson referred to as "incomparable things said incomparably well" Thoreau was later to characterize as "wonderfully like the Orientals." For the long opening poem of *Leave of Grass - "Song of Myself"* - contains Whitman's exultant concept of "myself" in which he expresses the essence of Vedantic mysticism.

Mysticism, as it is understood by the Vedantist and as it finds expression in "*Song of Myself*" is a way of embracing the other, the objective world, in an inclusive conception of Selfhood. It is a way of finding the World in the Self and as the Self. Like the "Cosmic Form" described in the Gita and the Dynamic Self of the Upanishads, Whitman's "Self" sweeps through the Cosmos and embraces it:

What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what axe you?

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less
And the good on bad I say of myself I say of them.

And I know I am solid and sound, To me the converging objects of the
universe perpetually flow, All are written to me, and I must get what the
writing means. And I know I am death less."

The critic Malcolm Cowley points out that Whitman's mysticism has its counterpart in modern Indian writing too. Sri Ramakrishna writes, "The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness [Divinity], the Image of Consciousness, the altar was

Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the door sill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness.... I saw a wicked man in front of the Kali temple; but in him I saw the power of the Divine Mother vibrating." Earlier in the 19th Century, Whitman had written:

I hear and behold God in every object.....

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then, In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass; I find letters from God chopped in the street, and everyone is signed by God's name.'

While there are innumerable points of similarity in thought and experience between Whitman and Oriental scripture, in some respects Whitman goes against the mainstream of Indian Philosophy. " Unlike most of the Indian sages, for example, he was not a thoroughgoing idealist. He did not believe that the whole world of the senses, of desires, of birth and death, was only maya, illusion, nor did he hold that it was a sort of purgatory; instead he praised the world as real and joyful. He did not despise the body, but proclaimed that it was as miraculous as the soul. He was too good a citizen of the nineteenth century to surrender his faith in material progress as the necessary counterpart of spiritual progress. Although he yearned for ecstatic union with the soul or Oversoul, he did not try to achieve it by subjugating the senses, as advised by yogis and Buddhists alike; on the contrary, he thought the ' merge' could also be achieved by a total surrender to the senses."

Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman – they were all good citizens of the nineteenth century and of the West. In the bulk of their work, all three writers built on native American material and embodied American attitudes, especially the concepts of individualism and self-reliance. Perhaps the most fitting commentary on their relationship to Indian literature was made by Gandhi after reading Emerson's Essays: " The essays to my mind contain the teaching of Indian wisdom in a Western ' guru'. It is interesting to see our own sometimes differently fashioned."