

[Emerson's Enduring Dialog With Dharma](#)

Category : [January 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 1990

Emerson's Enduring Dialog With Dharma

"Crime and punishment grow out of the one stem," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay, Compensation. "Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it, Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be served for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed."

Compensation was Emerson's interpretation of the well-known Hindu law of karma. Those who were unaware that Emerson's dominating impact upon literature was stamped with a strong Hindu influence might have considered such perceptions to be the fruits of his own deliberation. They certainly were - but only after years of careful delving into the Vedas and Upanishads, The Laws of Manu, The Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is unquestionably one of America's most influential thinkers. Long before Swami Vivekananda's famed sojourn in North America, Emerson - along with Thoreau, Whitman, Blake and others - introduced Eastern thought to the Western mind, ploughing the fields fifty years before Vivekananda and others seeded them.

Emerson's lofty thought was permeated with an infatuation with oriental philosophy - especially Hinduism. This enticed him away from an early career in the Christian ministry into a mystic search that his creative writing only partially appeased, even though it decidedly altered the course of Western thought for more than a hundred years to come.

In an essay entitled Emerson as Seen from India, written shortly after Emerson's death, Pratap Hunder Mozoomdar, a leader of the Brahma Samaj declared: "Brahmanism is an acquirement, a state of being rather than a creed. In

whomsoever the eternal Brahma breathed his unquenchable fire, he was the Brahman. And in that sense Emerson was the best of Brahmans. He shines upon India serene as the evening star. He seems to some of us to have been a geographical mistake."

Another author and scholar, Herambachandra Maitra suggests that the Massachusetts mystic gave Hindus assurance and faith: "Emerson appeals to the Oriental mind. He translates into the language of modern culture what was uttered by the sages of ancient India in the loftiest strains. He breathes a new life into our old faith, and he assures its stability and progress by incorporating with it [other] truths revealed or brought into prominence by the wider intellectual and ethical outlook of the modern spirit."

Not only is Emerson acknowledged by modern-day scholars East and West as one of the World's greatest writers, he is also considered to be a primary influence in the development of North America's current open-mindedness toward religious tolerance, psychic interests and ethical concerns. Emerson is the most quoted American in the 20th-century press and his works have been translated into dozens of language abroad. Even those who never heard of him venerate the American ideals he helped to forge, including personal achievement, character development and moral living. According to one critic, he continues to be "the least limited, the most permanently suggestive" of American literary artists.

Many Hindu religious leaders came to respect the work of Emerson. Swami Paramananda of the Ramakrishna Order, for instance, frequently quoted Emerson in his lectures and even wrote a book entitled Emerson and Vedanta.

Karma

Today it's easy to find translations of Oriental writings. When Emerson was alive, things were different. Such translations were few and imperfect. Additionally, international communication and travel was poor. In that day it was rare to even hear of Hindu writings and rarer still to be able to study them in depth. Yet, Emerson was able to gain much from "Hindu missionaries" like Ram Mohan Roy, who traveled to America in the early 1800's, specifically inspired to elucidate Hinduism in the West.

"When Confucius and the Indian scriptures were made known, no claim to monopoly of ethical wisdom could be thought of," Emerson joyfully proclaimed. "It is only within this century (the 1800's) that England and America discovered that their nursery tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and not it appears that they came from India, and are therefore the property of all the nations."

Emerson often presented Hindu principles in their original purity. Sometimes he would quote the scriptures directly. Through all of the elegance of his refined prose, there ever remained in his work an unpretentious commitment to the wisdom behind the words as if the core of his motivation was to leave behind diaries of personal practice and discovery rather than legacies of literary greatness.

"Always pay!" he exclaimed, heralding the truths of karma and dharma. "First or last you must pay your entire debt. Persons and events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt."

"Thou canst not gather what thou dost not sow; as thou dost plant the trees, so will it grow. Whatever the act a man commits, whatever his state of mind, of that the recompense must be received in corresponding body."

Emerson more than echoed ancient wisdom. It was his pleasure and a good portion of his genius to be able to expand upon or rather penetrate into the subject matter of his writings. In this sense his works were shared mediations.

"Every act rewards itself, or in other words, integrates itself, in a twofold manner," Emerson asserts. "First in the thing, or in real nature, and secondly in the circumstance, or in apparent nature. Men call the circumstance the retribution. The casual retribution is in the thing and is seen by the soul. The retribution in the circumstance is seen by the understanding. It is inseparable from the thing, but it often spreads over a long time and so does not become distinct until after many years. The specific stripes may follow late after the offense, but they follow because they accompany it."

Emerson, the Poet of Change

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a major poet, an essayist and a lecturer. He is considered one of the most significant leaders of the American Renaissance, which flourished at the middle of the nineteenth century. That period also featured the masterful work of other literary greats like Emerson's very dear friend, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

Emerson was the principle spokesman for Transcendentalism, a school of philosophy he helped to create which contends that there are mystic realities over and above those of our common worldly experience. He ahead a great influence upon the religious, aesthetic, philosophical and ethical movements of his day, and in his own manner he gave them a touch of pragmatism. He combined ancient classical humanism with Oriental metaphysics to ratify how own brand of monism.

"There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a free an in the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done. How easily these old worships of Moses, of Zoroaster, of Manu, of Socrates, domesticate themselves in the mind. I cannot find any antiquity in them: they are mine as much as theirs."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.