



## Emerson ideology regarding Hindu philosophy

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### Abstract

Hinduism is not properly understood in the United States. Hinduism is negatively and stereotypically portrayed with an eye for sensationalism. This has been pointed out by Sulekha contributors such as Rajiv Malhotra, Sankrant Sanu, Yvette Rosser and Vishal Agarwal. Described in this short article are essential features of Hinduism, written in a language for the common person. The concepts described here will help those who seek to explain Hinduism to American audiences. This article grew out of a speech the present author gave at the Unity Church of Christianity in Florida. Introduction Hinduism is among the world's oldest living traditions. The Hindu tradition goes back at least 5,000 years, perhaps even longer. Hymns composed in ancient times are recited even today. Example: Asato Ma Sad gamaya, Tamaso Ma Jyotir gamaya Mritor Ma Amritam gamaya OM Shanti, Shanti, Shantih Lead me from the Unreal to the Real; From Darkness to Light; From Death to Immortality. OM, Peace, Peace, Peace. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam.

**Keywords:** hymns, peace, asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya mritor ma amritam gamaya om shanti, shanti

### Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on 25th May, 1803 at Boston, Massachusetts. His father, the Reverend William Emerson was pastor of the prestigious First Church. His mother, Ruth Haskins Emerson, came from a wealthy family that had made its name in the West India trade. Gay W. Allen in his book *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* wrote:

Emerson's biography is a story of continuous struggle, physical and intellectual until middle age, and refinement of his ideas in successive lectures, essays, and poems. (IX)

Emerson's ancestors had been in America for seven generations, dating back to one of the early immigrants from old to New England. Emerson's mother was more devotional by nature than her husband. 'Even after her marriage, and with all the burdens of motherhood, she retired to her room every morning after breakfast for an hour for reading the Bible, meditation and soul searching.' (Gay 7) Emerson inherited from his father an unusually resonant voice and a sense of style in language. From his mother, he got an inhibited emotional life. 'Smiling would come easily to him, even when it concealed pain, but spontaneous laughter, seldom, and angry words from moral, not present, indignation.' (Gay 8)

Emerson was the second child of eight children born to Reverend Emerson and his wife. He had two elder brothers, four younger brothers and one younger sister. John and William were elder to him while Edward, Robert, Buleley and Charles were younger to him. His younger sister Caroline and elder brother John died in 1814 and 1807. Bulkeley was mentally retarded and would always have to be cared for. The other boys attended the same schools and shared the same pleasures and hardships. William, Charles and Edward always excelled in their studies. However, Emerson, stubbornly choosing his own pace, was only a mediocre student. And

unlike his brothers, Ralph Waldo seemed inattentive to his studies and receptive to distractions. This really worried his demanding father. All the children in the family have to do their share in the household chores. When they are free from their domestic duties or preparing lessons, 'the children were expected to read improving books as Charles Rollin's *Ancient History* or Jebb's *Sermons*.' They were not allowed to read novels but Emerson borrowed and read *Surreal* of Sir Walter Scott. Normal play was scarcely known to the Emerson boys. For relaxation, they memorized poems or verses of scriptures which they recited to their parents and to each other. For recreation in those early years, Emerson was expected to play within the fenced ground of the parsonage, with his brothers as playmates. They were not allowed to play in the streets as they might play with the rude boys. The Emerson boys were more dependent upon each other than is usual. This is because they lived in an almost closed society with each other. Emerson's father died in 1811. With the death of his father, the family's fortunes dwindled quickly. Emerson's aunt Mary Moody helped the family during this time. This aunt would become one of the strongest influences in the early life of Emerson. Aunt Mary Moody 'had an agile brain, a volatile character, and a very sharp tongue.' (Gay 17) However, in spite of her irritating and prickly nature she remained a source of inspiration and encouragement to Emerson.

### Philosophy of Rawlph waldo Emerson

Hinduism is not properly understood in the United States. Hinduism is negatively and stereotypically portrayed with an eye for sensationalism. This has been pointed out by Sulekha contributors such as Rajiv Malhotra, Sankrant Sanu, Yvette Rosser and Vishal Agarwal. Described in this short article are essential features of Hinduism, written in a language for the

common person. The concepts described here will help those who seek to explain Hinduism to American audiences. This article grew out of a speech the present author gave at the Unity Church of Christianity in Florida. Introduction Hinduism is among the world's oldest living traditions. The Hindu tradition goes back at least 5,000 years, perhaps even longer. Hymns composed in ancient times are recited even today. Example: Asato Ma Sad gamaya, Tamaso Ma Jyotir gamaya Mritor Ma Amritam gamaya OM Shanti, Shanti, Shantih Lead me from the Unreal to the Real; From Darkness to Light; From Death to Immortality. OM, Peace, Peace, Peace. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. The numbers below are approximate. Christianity: 1.4 billion (Catholics 800 m, Protestants 400 m, Eastern Orthodox 200 m.) Muslims: 1-1.2 billion Hindus: 800 million Buddhists: 400 million Jews: 20 million Hinduism survived 700 years of persecution on the hands of Islamic rulers and Christian missionaries. Under the British colonial rule (1757-1947), the Hindu religion was often debunked as a form of paganism and as being "primitive." The long colonial rule also impacted the land economically. Put simply, when India was subjugated by Islam, she was the richest country in the world. When the British left in 1947, she was among the poorest. A revival in Hinduism occurred during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo contributed to this renewal, among others. In spite of the negative portrayals of Hinduism in the media and textbooks, Hindu ideas are in resurgence and have a global reach. The so-called "New Thought" churches in the United States (such as Unity, Unitarianism, Science of Mind, Practical Christianity, Divine Science) derive their essential teachings from Vedanta.

Behind the diversity of existence, there is Unity; behind individual souls, there is the Self. All beings are unified in that One Self. The ultimate Reality is called Brahman (to grow, to expand). Guru Nanak described it as "Ek Omkar, Sat Naam"-One Reality, eternally True. The ancient teachers (the Rishis and Gurus) taught that the One Reality and Consciousness is beyond number, gender and definitions. They taught that this reality is seen in the cave of one's heart, and they described it as Sat, Chit, Ananda. Your own inner being, then, is an authentic path to enlightenment. Hindu thought, based upon inner experience, avers that we can say little constructively about the reality unknowable to the mind: we can say that it exists, that it is conscious, and that its nature is delight Sat: The one reality is beyond all time and space as a supreme transcendence. What it manifests, whether the macrocosm or the microcosm, is necessarily within its own being, much as an object floats in ethereal space. Sat is absolute, primal existence. As a manifestation, we can say that the One Reality is self-existent without a cause. It just is. Chit: The One Reality is fully Conscious Power. It is not inert or dead matter. It possesses all knowledge about the past, present and future. It is the source of all knowledge. It is the eye of the eye and the ear of the ear. The One Consciousness is not a passive reality. It is accompanied with Power. It is Chit-Shakti. Ananda: The One Reality lacks nothing; it contains all and encompasses everything. As it lacks nothing and possesses all, its nature is one of delight. The state of bliss is an integral part of the One Reality.

God is complete in Himself/Herself. He/she lacks nothing. God is not compelled to create. God creates for joy. Creation is an act of Ananda. God fulfills himself in his creation, just as an artist fulfills himself in his creative work. As God contains all, the creation is more accurately described as a manifestation. God becomes the creation. The creation is His Lila, a play. But we should not conclude that it is whimsical. There is a purpose in the cosmos which is both earnest and joyful. God dwells in each article of his creation He is in us, and we are in Him. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita that the universe is strung around his neck like pearls on a string. By me is this entire universe pervaded. All things are in Me, and I in them. Know that as the mighty wind blowing everywhere rests in the sky, all created beings rest in Me. I am the Father, the Mother, the Supporter and the Grand sire of the universe. (BG 9:4, 6, 17) God is not diminished by his creation. He is full and complete before creation and full and complete after creation. A Sanskrit verse says: Om Purnamadah Purnamidam Purnat purnam udacyate Purnasya purnamadaya Purnameva vasisyate Om. That (God) is complete. This (Creation) is complete. From the complete springs forth the complete. If the complete is taken from the complete, the complete remains.

A fundamental Hindu principle is one of Unity of all created things. Behind diversity, there is unity. Behind individual souls, there is the Self, one with the Divine. Not only human life but all created life including animal life is a unity. We spring from one source. Differences and divisions are unreal. The belief that we originate from one common source has ethical implications: it leads to a kinder and a gentler world. By its very nature, Hinduism is not a religion of a chosen people or an appointed community. It rejects the approach which divides humanity into believers and non-believers, kafirs and heathens. It regards such divisions as spiritually untenable. It expresses man's seeking for truth; therefore, it belongs to all. Hinduism's reach is not limited to humanity; its compassion reaches out to all, human and animal. It teaches compassion for all beings, on all planes. Modern science perceives man as having evolved from animals. Hindu Dharma sees God and the power and presence of God reflected in animals. The Hindu perceives all life to be manifested from one source, and hence all life is sacred. Widespread vegetarianism among Hindus is a practical expression of this belief in the oneness of all life. Vegetarianism grows from ethical and moral considerations.

#### **No Room for devil**

God is Ekam Sat, Advityam-One Truth, without a Second. There is no room for the existence of Devil or Satan. There is only one power and one presence in the universe, God the Omnipotent. Hinduism teaches Advaita, non-dualism. It says God alone is. This teaching is different from the teaching of Aonly one god. The concept of A god alone is different from the concept of A the only god. Christian and Islamic thought admits of a power co-equal with God, the Devil or Satan. The Satan is believed to be the trickster and a tempter; he is ever ready to delude the Christian flock. But if God is all powerful, it is not rational to posit a malevolent power co-equal with God. The Abrahamic religions claim that God is both all good and all powerful. But this cannot be. If God allows evil, then He is not all good. On the other hand, if God is unable to

remove the existence of evil, then He is not all powerful. Is Creation Accidental? Material scientists would have us believe that creation is an accident or the work of chance. Vedanta teaches that creation is the work of a Mighty hand. It is not a machine that somehow got started without purpose or goal. Creation is not an illusion or Maya. It is not a dream. It carries in itself the Word of God. In the words of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the 20th century Indian poet and mystic: This world was not made with random bricks of chance A blind god is not destiny's architect, A conscious power has drawn the plan of life, There is meaning in each curve and line. Jesus said a similar thing when he declared, "Your very hair are numbered."

Hinduism accepts the notion of evolution. Existence is not a finished product. God did not create the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Existence is a Truth of things unfolding by a gradual process of evolution. The Truth of Existence is its Becoming - Sri Aurobindo. Evolution is not the evolution of matter but of consciousness. Consciousness is the fundamental thing. Consciousness is the life force, the energy, the motion that creates everything in the universe, from the microcosm (the smallest) to the macrocosm (the largest). There is consciousness in matter, for example in the movement of electrons and protons within the atomic structure. The vegetable kingdom of trees and plants exhibits a certain degree of consciousness. Consciousness evolves into life in the animal. The mental plane in man is the highest expression of consciousness presently. But evolution does not end with Mind. There is the 'Higher Mind.' In deep contemplation, Rishis reach the higher mind. Man. Hinduism has the noblest, the most sublime conception of man. Man has a Divine origin. All of us come from God. There is the spark of the Divine at the very core of our being. Man is invested with a soul, called the Atman in Sanskrit. Atman is a spark of the Divine, it is a ray of the all-bright Sun; it is a drop from the celestial ocean. There is no such thing as death for the soul. Being a spark of the divine, the soul is immortal. That which is eternal cannot cease to be. When we die, it is the body that dies, not the soul. In this view, man has a middle ranking, above the animals but below the gods. Man is a transitional being. He is not a finished product. He is destined to grow into a more complete being, just as a seed is destined to grow into a mighty tree. In the English language the term "man" is related to "manual," meaning one's ability to work with hands. In Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, man is called "manush," which means "to think." Man is thus a thinking animal. Man in Sanskrit is also called "Purusha," a witness soul. The Hindu greeting "Namaste" acknowledges divinity in each other. Sri Aurobindo sings in Savitri, Canto 4: A death bound littleness is not all we are: Immortal our forgotten vastnesses Await discovery in our summit selves; Unmeasured breadths and depths of being are ours.

Hinduism teaches that man is the architect of his own life. Man is shaped according to his Faith, his deepest aspirations, and his yearning. Man becomes what he thinks, desires, and aspires to. In this view, the Spirit exists prior to Matter. If you wish to change your life, you have first to change your consciousness. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) writes:

The erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and

society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shall enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being. On this path there is no discontinuity, no break. There is no loss of effort. Even a little bit of faith protects a man from great fear (BG, 2:40).

Even though man is made in the image of God, this knowledge is veiled. Man forgets his Divine origin. This is Maya, illusion. In Hinduism, the cardinal problem of humanity is Ignorance, with a capital >I=. Once I heard a Tampa Unity Minister say: A Human beings are angels with amnesia. This statement by a Unity Minister gives an apt description of the Hindu view of the nature of the problem. Ignorance is removed by going within through meditation and contemplation. It is a personal effort. The Guru can show the way. Several methods or Yogas are developed for self-discovery. The Hindu prays for light of knowledge: Lead me from the Unreal to the Real; lead me from Darkness to Light. In Christianity and Islam, the two Semitic religions, mans problem is a Sin.

Sin consists in disobedience to Gods' commandments. On account of the sin of disobedience, man is consigned to Hell in eternity. Hence man needs a Savior. The aim of yoga is self-realization-to make real the Self.

The central fact is evolution of consciousness in nature from matter to life, from life to mind, and from mind to higher mind. If evolution of consciousness is granted as a central fact, then rebirth is a logical necessity. The soul grows through successive births. Perfection is not achieved in the course of a single life-time. Evidence of rebirth or re-incarnation is not lacking. At least half of humanity believes in reincarnation. This includes majority of the people in India, China, Japan, and countries of Southeast Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, parts of Indonesia, etc.). It is also worth noting that pre-Christian Celtic people of Europe believed in re-incarnation. They believed that the soul is permanent and that it does not die when the body dies. The belief in a single life and a single judgment is a Christian doctrine. Karma. Karma is the theory of Divine or cosmic justice. Good deeds produce good Karma, and bad deeds produce bad Karma. One's present station in life is the result of Karma earned in previous life or lives. Karma explains high and low birth. It offers a reasonable explanation for misfortune. It impels people to do well. Doing well has instrumental value. Why don't we remember our past lives? What is reborn is the soul, not the outer personality. Memory is a function of the outer personality. The soul carries with it the essence of the life's experience as it moves to a new birth.

The Hindu teacher is a seer, a Rishi, the person who sees, the one who is a witness to the Truth. The teacher is also called a Guru—one who removes the weight of darkness. The representative figure of Hinduism is not the missionary, or a crusader, as in Christianity, or a martyr as in Islam. Only those who are good, and are men of knowledge and wisdom are regarded as Asaints.

The characteristic preaching mode of a Hindu teacher (this is true of Buddhist teachers also) is a seated position, in calmness and serenity. He does not prance on the stage. He is not a sales person. He does not use threats of life in Hell to drive home his point. By its very nature Hinduism is

pluralistic and tolerant of diversity. Hinduism is not organized as a national church. It has no Pope or Ayatollah who exercises supreme religious authority. Hinduism is decentralized and is not hierarchical. The decentralization is both a curse and a blessing. Decentralization led to extreme diversity and variety. On the other hand, Hinduism survived the Muslim onslaught (1200-1700) because it was decentralized. Muslim rulers could not eliminate Hinduism by killing its head. Hinduism is not dogmatic. It preaches search for the Truth, not a particular belief system. Gautam Buddha was a critic of Hinduism of his times. He lived and taught up to the ripe age of 80. Other critics of Hinduism such as Sikh Founder Guru Nanak and Jain Founder Lord Mahavira lived full lives and taught without fear of being persecuted. Christianity and Judaism have existed in a predominant Hindu India for 2,000 years without being persecuted. Pluralism and tolerance of diversity are built into Hindu theology. India's long history is a testimony to its tolerance of religious diversity. Christianity came to India with St. Thomas in the first century A.D., long before it became popular in the West. Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland. In a recent book titled *Who Are the Jews of India?* (University of California Press, 2000), author Nathan Katz observes that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted. He describes three Jewish communities that have existed in India for centuries.

In the 7th century, Zoroastrians or Parsees from Iran (Persia) entered India to flee Islamic conquest. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay in Western India without a sense of having been persecuted. Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees (for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire). Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India, was married to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

8 Hinduism and Other Earth-Based Traditions Hinduism has much in common with other earth based traditions such as Native Americans, Taoists, Pythagoreans, Egyptians and Shintoists. It sees Divinity residing in Nature, in the hills, on the mountain tops, in the sacred rivers and in the vast ocean. As in other earth-based traditions, placers of pilgrimage are often on hill tops (Kedarnath, Badrinath), ocean fronts (Rameshwaram), forests (Vrindaban), and river banks (Varanasi). Many of the native and earth-based traditions were obliterated under Christian and Islamic pressure. Examples of cultural groups that have disappeared include: the European Celts, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Zoroastrians and the Native Americans. The Communists in China are now engaged in destroying Buddhism in Tibet and Confucianism and Taoism within the Chinese mainland. Hinduism is distinguished by the fact that it survived extreme persecution from monotheistic ideologies. The "New Thought" Movement As I said at the beginning, Hinduism is in resurgence today. Hindu spiritual teachings have a global reach. The New Thought churches in the United States (Unity, Unitarianism, Science of Mind, Practical Christianity, Temple of the Universe, Divine Science and others) derive a large part of their theology from Hinduism and Vedanta. Chanting and meditation are now commonly incorporated in their religious services. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are

generally regarded as the founding figures of the so-called "New Thought" movement in the United States. They spearheaded the 'Transcendalist' movement in the 1830s and 1840s. Many of their ideas were derived from Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Emerson: 'In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, and the Vishnu Purana.

In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial. The Unity Church of Christianity is a New-Thought church. It was founded by Charles and 9 Myrtle Fillmore in the 1880s. I attend Unity Church Sunday services. Each of the following Unity statements of truth recited at the Church finds its source in Hindu teachings.

1. God is absolute good, everywhere present.
2. Every human being has a spark of divinity within, the Christ Spirit within. Our essence is of God, and therefore human beings are inherently good.
3. As human beings we create our experiences by the activity of our thoughts. Everything that shows up in our lives has its beginning in thought.
4. Prayer and meditation is the best way we can heighten our connection with God.
5. Knowing and understanding unity principles is not enough—we must also live the truth that we know. The close association between Hindu spiritual teachings and the Unity principles is quite clear. Be it noted that Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, the founders of the Unity Church, adopted a vegetarian diet. The Church headquarters at Unity Village in Kansas City serves only vegetarian meals. This is in keeping with Hindu veneration for all life. Sanatan Dharma is not a relic of the past. The Vedic teachings have relevance for modern age. Satyameva Jayate. Truth verily wins.

### **Translated Gita into English**

The historical meetings of East and West have passed into commemorative tapestries of discourse leaving many knotted and tangled strands along with a host of innovative patterns as well. The Bhagavadgita is now part of the established "Wisdom of Old," an approved icon of a non-Western "core curriculum" in a number of major universities and is enshrined as a "classic text" in contemporary yoga centers. And even if it remains largely unread in these centers (or in core-curriculum courses for that matter, where it may receive two whole class hours of attention), "wisdom cards," containing sayings culled from the text, and like products, sold in New Age and ashram bookstores, help to maintain an aura of "Eastern Wisdom" around the work, a brand name that has become accessible and acceptable to certain communities. The more vital meetings of the moment are occurring between the North and South, both in India, Europe, and the Americas, the northern cultures that have stamped their schemas upon southern cultures for so long are being obliged to take a second look and are opening their doors to the possibility of a more whole humanity in which North, South, East, and West

meet and share from the same table. If you ask what this has to do with the reception of the “Gita” (as we shall call it) in the West, I might be tempted to say, “Very little.” But that would be too glib. In fact, I want to argue here that the “cannibalizing of the Gita by the West” is not, as some postorientalist scholars often contend, some horrific disregard of “the other,” but is rather a very natural, proper, and even Indian thing to do, to assimilate what comes to you and recast it in another pattern, one which is your own. Somewhere in the middle of all this sits Ralph Waldo Emerson, still, the Emerson, who walking in the woods becomes a “transparent eyeball,” the Emerson who eschews the past while echoing the past, the Emerson who chalks out self-reliant freedom while relying upon his Unitarian community for sustenance. Emerson’s reception of the Gita, may be better viewed as a fulcrum on which East and West, past and future have balanced themselves, than as one level event, for it serves as a turning point in the evolution of Yoga in the West. Perhaps more than a single turning point, even, the Emerson reading and reception of the Gita may be envisioned as a particular pattern in the loom of globalization. At worst, this strand becomes what Quinten Anderson labeled, “the imperial self,” an aggrandized form of Protestant-based “me religion,” or Robert Bellah’s personal nightmare of “Sheilism” in which the individual picks and chooses among bits of culture as she pleases constructing her own form of designer religion. At best, however, Emerson and his band’s interest in, reception of, and re-casting of the Gita marks an historic opening to the universal religion of freedom, the tradition of conscience that Emerson so epitomized.

### Conclusion

The focus on the individual as the moral arbiter of action and center of attention may be part of the “protestantization” of the Gita, popularized by both M.K. Gandhi, whose guide to action became his “inner voice,” and Aurobindo Ghose, whose early visions of Krishna while in prison, later became expressed as a more amorphous “Divine.” Like Emerson, Aurobindo eschews the temporal Gita for a universal one. The fourfold varnashrama system, for example, is seen as “a rightly ordered expression of the nature of the individual being through whom, work is done. The outer Krishna becomes the inner voice. T.S. Eliot, another significant Western reader of the Gita on the other hand (and the first Western reader to my knowledge to note that the text is a philosophical poem), mentions Krishna by name in little Gidding, saying, “I think this is what Krishna meant.” Eliot’s move, casting the voice of Krishna in a poetic meditation on time and eternity that is largely informed by his Christian perspective, represents a different contemporary strategy. It casts the Gita’s voice, Krishna’s voice, as part of a universal wisdom that is congruent with the message of the Western savior. The focus of the world moves toward the individual and to the problem of aligning the individual with a higher will, with an absolute knowledge, in face of the loss of absolute systems of knowledge, of trust, and authority. Interpretive authority moves from the Brahmin priests, who in a sense abdicate their power by surrendering their texts to the British (for a price I would imagine) and over to the solitary man, the new Arjuna, before getting swept up again by nationalist tides, beginning

with Aurobindo, who in a sense puts these two sensibilities together, and on to Hindutva and the rest. One can argue, and indeed the most well-known Indian commentators such as Ramanuja and Madhva have argued that the “ultimate” verse of the Gita, its final upadesha, *sarva dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja*, “abandoning all varieties of dharma surrender to me alone,” is clear and transparent in its giving final authority to the supreme being. Shankara, however, read this somewhat differently, and so did Emerson, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and even Kerouac, who went on a search as a Dharma Bum, for a missing father he would never find. Please note the “somewhat differently here.” After all, these are only minor contentions in face of the enormity of the absolute, and the principal narrator of the Gita clearly states that all beings follow his path. What might be significant then, is not so much “Who is Krishna? Rather, one might ask, “How does Krishna reveal himself in a new different time and a different place?” And while I cannot emphasize how serious an issue this is; the focal point of, the reality of, the centrality of Krishna, I cannot also point out how this message is not ubiquitous in Indian, even in classical Indian readings of the Gita, particularly the Vedantic reading that arguably carried the day and that is more aligned with contemporary universal notions of a perennial philosophy. Because of the Shankaras, (and the later Shivanandas and Maharishis), Emerson and those who followed him; theosophists and neo-Hindus, can let the person Krishna slide, much to the frustration and chagrin of both Krishna fundamentalists and Hindu fundamentalists. On one hand, this sleight of hand overturns the paternal authority of dharma and may give rise to an “imperial self” as Anderson called it, a self that is a law unto itself and that seems to have much more in common with the Gita’s sixteenth chapter’s description of the asuric (demonic) nature than with any spiritual paradigm. On the other hand, however, it also gives rise to the Oversoul, a meta-historical self that confronts the assumed authority of linear history which is ultimately but the most plausible consensus narrative of those who hold cultural power. The move from time-bound subject to the Oversoul slices through and exposes the narrative of time and progress for what it is; a narrative as opposed to an episteme, and this is significant. The fulcrum moving toward Arjuna is so strong however, that it becomes less and less conceivable, as it was to Emerson, that Krishna can be more than a particularized version of the Oversoul, one whose voice cannot contradict the voice of conscience which is his true voicing. The Tradition of Conscience Emerson did to some degree step out of the ethnocentric perspectives of his era and used the Gita to validate and spark his imagination. The Gita became one way out from under the thumb of the father, the church, the Boston Brahmins, but the last thing Emerson needed was a new father, a new church, and new Brahmins, hence his refusal to join the utopian Brooke Farm community. The Gita contributed toward Emerson’s meta-historical ideal, as did Plato, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Mme De Staël, and his contemporaries Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Whitman, Alcott, and others. Ultimately, Emerson’s taking what suits him from the Gita is not much different than Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, or the Maharishi for that matter, showcasing the Gita to suit their theological agendas. The Bloomian argument that only the strong readings

survive is suspect, simply because what is considered strong in one community might not be in another or in another period. Along with the “age of Arjuna,” the key figure in this drama is Krishna of course. And how ironic that Krishna is an embarrassment to contemporary sensibility which is why the Bhaktivedanta fundamentalist reading of “The BhagavadGita as it is” remains highly marginalized. Krishna was an embarrassment to Emerson and his ilk, who preferred the vagaries of an open aired divinity to another personal God who would crack the whip. Any yet, Krishna remains as the puzzling narrator of the Gita, as well as its protagonist. Whether envisioned as an incarnation of Vishnu or valorized as the seed of love in everyone’s heart (theosophy) or placed on a pantheon along with Christ, Buddha, and Sri Yukteswar (Self Realization Fellowship), it is not easy to write out the main character of the play. I asked a Vaishnava swami if he thought that Krishna could appear in business suit, and he said absolutely. And while spirit-men wearing business suits and bowler hats adorn popular Daoist temples in Shanghai as ancestors of the city; it is not likely to see this happening in India. And one can only wonder if Krishna, like Jesus, would have left the visible world so conclusively if he knew what his followers would make of him. These are rhetorical questions. But the texts remain to be reconstituted by ongoing communities and generations. Perhaps one can only say, seriously and respectfully, “We have met.” Emerson opens a banquet of the past spreads the table widens the aperture of a common human inheritance. Could anyone have imagined that the Gita would ultimately be integrated into the American experience through yoga soy chai lattes? With Emerson, one might fall off of a cliff – Nietzsche did, carrying his copy of Emerson with him, but with Krishna it is easy to become a subservient server of authority. Both paths have their pitfalls and both have their attainments. And as empowered words shift over localities and centuries, the song is heard and sung again, and the dharma is lived. This is Yoga. And in Emerson’s case and I would argue in the post-reformation Western world, yoga can only be the exercise of freedom, and Krishna can only appear as one’s conscience.

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