

XVI. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Appreciation of India in His Own Words

Compiled by Gopal Stavig, *Prabuddha Bharata*, 106 (May 2001), pp. 269-72

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) the famous American essayists, transcendental philosopher and poet, had a great admiration for Indian knowledge, that is exemplified in his numerous praises of Indian literature and culture. He learned of Indian thought primarily from reading English language versions of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Law of Manu*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Bhagavata* and a few other translations. The following quotations are taken from Emerson's *Essays and Journals*.¹ The passages cited are subdivided into the topics of: Praise of India; Appreciation of Indian Literature; God and the Soul; Oneness and the Unity of Existence; Maya; Religious Knowledge; and Practice, and Fate, Karma and Reincarnation.

Praise of India

To this partiality the history of nations corresponded. The country of unity, of immovable institutions, the seat of philosophy delighting in abstractions, of men faithful in doctrine and in practice to the idea of a deaf, unimplorable immense fate, is Asia; and it realizes this faith in the social institution of caste. . . . If the East loved infinity, the West delighted in boundaries (*Essays*, IV: 52).

The favor of the climate, making subsistence easy and encouraging an outdoor life, allows to the Eastern nations a highly intellectual organization,--leaving out of view, at present, the genius of the Hindoos (more Oriental in every sense), whom no people have surpassed in the grandeur of their ethical statement (*Essays*, VIII: 239).

In the temperate climates there is a temperate speech, in torrid climates an ardent one. Whilst in Western nations the superlative in conversation is tedious and weak, and in character is a capital

defect, Nature delights in showing us that in the East it is animated, it is pertinent, pleasing, poetic. Whilst she appoints us to keep within the sharp boundaries of form as the condition of our strength, she creates in the East the uncontrollable yearning to escape from limitation into the vast and boundless; to use a freedom of fancy which plays with all the works of Nature, great or minute, galaxy or grain of dust, as toys and words of the mind; inculcates the tenet of a beatitude to be found in escape from all organization and all personality, and makes ecstasy an institution (*Essays*, X: 176-77).

In India, king, courtier, god, are represented as making the most romantic sacrifices--kingdom, goods, life itself--for knowledge and spiritual power (*Journals*, VII: 121-22).

We sigh for the thousand heads and thousand bodies of the Indian gods, that we might celebrate its immense beauty in many ways and places, and absorb all its good.

Trace these colossal conceptions of Buddhism and Vedantism home, and they are always the necessary or structural action of the human mind. Buddhism, read literally, the tenet of Fate, Worship of Morals, or the tenet of Freedom, are the unalterable originals in all the wide variety of geography, language and intelligence of the human tribes (*Journals*, VII: 122).

The Indian teachings, through its cloud of legends, has yet a simple and grand religion, like a queenly countenance seen through a rich veil. It teaches to speak the truth, love others as yourself, and to despise trifles. The East is grand,--and makes Europe appear the land of trifles. Identity, identity! friend and foe are one stuff. . . . Cheerful and noble is the genius of this cosmogony (*Journals*, VII: 129-30).

Appreciation of Indian Literature

By the law of contraries, I look for an irresistible taste for Orientalism in Britain. For a self-conceited modish life, made up of trifles, clinging to a corporeal civilization, hating ideas, there is no

remedy like the Oriental largeness. That astonishes and disconcerts English decorum. For once, there is thunder it never heard, light it never saw, and power which trifles with time and space. I am not surprised to find an Englishman like Warren Hastings, who had been struck with the grand style of thinking in the Indian writings, depreciating the prejudices of his countrymen while offering them a translation of the *Bhagvat* [*Gita*] (*Essays*, V: 258-59).

The new study of the Sanskrit has shown us the origin of the old names of God,--Dyaus, Deus, Zeus, Zeu pater, Jupiter,--names of the sun, still recognizable through the modifications of our vernacular words (*Essays*, VII: 166-67).

It is only within this century that England and America discovered that their nursery-tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and now it appears that they came from India, and are the property of all the nations descended from the Aryan race (*Essays*, VIII: 187).

But if these works still survive and multiply, what shall we say of names more distant, or hidden through their very superiority to their coevals,--names of men who have left remains that certify a height of genius in their several directions not since surpassed, and which men in proportion to their wisdom still cherish,--as Zoroaster, Confucius, and the grand scriptures, only recently known to Western nations, of the Indian *Vedas*, the *Institutes of Menu*, the *Puranas*, the poems of the *Mahabarat* and the *Ramayana* (*Essays*, VIII: 214)?

The earliest hymns of the world were hymns to these natural forces. The *Vedas* of India, which have a date older than Homer, are hymns to the winds, to the clouds, and to fire. They all have certain properties which adhere to them, such as conversation, persisting to be themselves, impossibility of being warped. . . . There is no loss, only transference. When the heat is less here it is not lost, but more heat is there. When the rain exceeds on the coast, there is drought on the prairie (*Essays*, X: 71-72).

The subtle Hindoo, who carried religion to ecstasy and philosophy to idealism, produced the wonderful epics of which, in the

present century, the translations have added new regions to thought (*Essays*, X: 243).

In India, it is colossal, and though occasionally confounding us from our want of all key to the apologue, often beautiful. The picture which the Mahabarat gives of the wars of the Suras and Asuras, of the churning the Ocean with the Meron mountain to obtain the drops of Amreeta, or liquor of immortality, is in the gigantic taste, but is pleasing, and the terrible earnestness of the belief in Fate lends an energy to the picture of all conflicts, such as those of the enemies of Hari. What can be more ... daring than the picture the Brahmins give of the beatitude of contemplative absorption when they declare, that 'Heavenly fruition is an impediment to felicity' (*Essays*, X: 546-47, footnote)?

The Oriental genius has no dramatic or epic turn, but ethical, contemplative, delights in Zoroastrian oracles, in *Vedas*, and *Menu* and Confucius. These all embracing apophthegms are like these profound moments of the heavenly life (*Journals*, V: 570).

As for "shunning evils as sins," I prefer the ethics of the *Vishnu* [*Purana*] (*Journals*, VII: 124).

I owed--my friend and I owed--a magnificent day to the *Bhagavat Geeta*. --It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. Let us not now go back and apply a minute criticism to it, but cherish the venerable oracle (*Journals*, VII: 511).

A grander legend than Western literature contains, is the story of Nachiketas (*Journals*, IX: 58).

We read the Orientals, but remain Occidental. The fewest men receive anything from their studies (*Journals*, IX: 116).

Well, when India was explored, and the wonderful riches of Indian theologic literature found, that dispelled once for all the dream about Christianity being the sole revelation,--for, here in India,

there in China, were the same principles, the same grandeurs, the like depths, moral and intellectual.

Well; we still maintained that we were the true men,--we were believers,--the rest were heathen (*Journals*, IX: 197).

The language and the legends of Arabia and India and Persia are of the same complexion as the Christian. *Vishnu Purana* bear witness . . . We say there exists a Universal Mind which imparts this perception of duty, opens the interior world to the humble obeyer.... It has been imparted in all ages. Religion is the homage to this presence (*Journals*, X: 100).

God and the Soul

BRAHMA [a poem]

If the red slayer thinks he slays, Or if the slain thinks 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 vanquished 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! Fine me, and turn they back on heaven (*Essays*, IX: 195).

Vedanta. The Internal Check. "He who eternally restrains this and the other world, and all beings therein; who, standing in the earth, is other than the earth; whom the earth knows not, whose body the earth is, who interiorly restrains the earth, the same is thy soul, and the Internal Check immortal." "The internal check is the Supreme being."-- Colbrooke's *Essays*, p. 341 (*Journals*, VII: 110).

The doctrine of the Triform came from India (*Journals*, VII: 127).

“From whom the sun rises, and in whom it sets again, him all the gods entered; from him none is separated; this is that.” “What is here, the same is there, and what is there, the same is here. He proceeds from death to death who beholds here difference.” “He (Brahma, or the Soul) does not move; is swifter than the mind: not the gods (the senses) did obtain him, he was gone before. Standing, he outstrips all the other gods, how fast soever they run.” “He moves, he does not move. He is far, and also near” (*Journals*, IX: 56).

“Know that which does not see by the eye; and by which they see the eyes, as Brahma, and not what is worshipped as this.” “Know that which does not think by the mind, and by which they say the mind is thought, as Brahma, and not what is worshipped as this.” “The soul declared by an inferior man is not easy to be known, but when it is declared by a teacher who beholds no difference, there is no doubt concerning it, the soul being more subtle than what is subtle, is not to be obtained by arguing” (*Journals*, IX: 57).

Dream. “When he sleeps, then becomes this Purusha unmingled light. No chariots are there, no horses, no roads; then he creates chariots, horses, roads; no pleasures are there, no tanks, no lakes, or rivers; then he creates joys, tanks, lakes, rivers; for he is the agent” *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* p. 224 (*Journals*, IX: 302-03).

Oneness and the Unity of Existence

In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. The raptures of prayer and ecstasy of devotion lose all being in one Being. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavat Geeta*, and the *Vishnu Purana*. Those writings contain little else than this idea, and they rise to pure and sublime strains in celebrating it.

The Same, the Same: friend and foe are of one stuff; the ploughman, the plough and the furrow are of one stuff; and the stuff

is such and so much that the variations of form are unimportant. “You are fit” (says the supreme Krishna to a sage) “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.” “The words I and *mine* constitute 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. As one diffusive air, passing through the perforations of a flute, is distinguished as the notes of a scale, so the nature of the Great Spirit is single, though its forms be manifold, arising from the consequences of acts. When the difference of the investing form, as that of god or the rest, is destroyed, there is no distinction.” “The whole world is but a manifestation of Vishnu who is identical with all things, and is to be regarded by the wise as not differing from, but the same as themselves. I neither am going nor coming; nor is my dwelling in any one place; nor art thou, thou; nor are others, others; nor am I, I.” As if he had said, ‘All is for the soul, and the soul is Vishnu; and animals and stars are transient paintings; and light is whitewash; and durations are deceptive; and form is imprisonment; and heaven itself a decoy.’ That which the soul seeks is resolution into being above form, out of Tartarus and out of heaven,--liberation from nature (*Essays*, IV: 49-51).

“But I, father,” says the wise Prahlada, in the *Vishnu Purana*, “know neither friends nor foes, for I behold Kesava in all beings as in my own soul.” It confers perpetual insight. It sees that a man’s friends and his foes are of his own household, of his own person. What would it avail me, if I could destroy my enemies? There would

be as many to-morrow. That which I hate and fear is really in myself, and no knife is long enough to reach to its heart (*Essays*, X: 120).

“A man and his wife” says *Menu*, “constitute but one person; a perfect man consists of himself, his wife, and his son” (*Journals*, V: 29).

Some men have the perception of difference predominant, and are conversant with surfaces and trifles, with coats and coaches, and faces, and cities; these are the men of talent. . . . And other men abide by the perception of Identity; these are the Orientals, the philosophers, the men of faith and divinity, the men of genius (*Journals*, VI: 493-94).

Maya

The Eastern sages owned the goddess Yoganidra; the great illusory energy of Vishnu, by whom, as utter ignorance, the whole world is beguiled (*Essays*, IV: 178).

The Hindoos, in their sacred writings, express the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity and of that illusion which they conceive variety to be. “The notions, ‘*I am,*’ and ‘*This is mine,*’ which influence mankind, are but delusions of the mother of the world. Dispel, O Lord of all creatures the conceit of knowledge which proceeds from ignorance.” And the beatitude of man they hold to lie in being freed from fascination (*Essays*, VI: 324).

In the history of intellect no more important fact than the Hindoo theology, teaching that the beatitudes or Supreme Good is to be obtained through science; namely, by perception of the real and the unreal, setting aside matter, and qualities and affections, or emotions and persons and actions as *Maias* or illusions, and thus arriving at the contemplation of the one Eternal Life and Cause and a perpetual approach and assimilation to Him; thus escaping new births or transmigration.

The highest object of their religion was to restore that bond by which their own self (Atman) was linked to the Eternal *Self*

(Paramatman); to recover that unity which has been clouded and obscured by the magical illusion of reality, by the so-called Maia of creation (*Essays*, VI: 426, footnote).

Such are the days,--the earth is the cup, the sky is the cover, of the immense bounty of Nature which is offered us for our daily aliment; but what a force of *illusion* begins life with us and attends us to the end! We are coaxed, flattered and duped from morn to eve, from birth to death; and where is the old eye that ever saw through this deception? The Hindoos represent Maia, the illusory energy of Vishnu, as one of his principle attributes (*Essays*, VII: 172).

This belief that the higher use of the material world is to furnish us types or pictures to express the thoughts of the mind, is carried to its logical extreme by the Hindoos, who, following the Buddha, have made it the central doctrine of their religion that what we call Nature, the external world, has no real existence,--is only phenomenal. Youth, age, property, condition, events, persons,--self, even,--are successive *maias* (deceptions) through which Vishnu mocks and instructs the soul. I think Hindoo books the best gymnastic for the mind, as showing treatment. All European libraries might almost be read without the swing of this gigantic arm being suspected. But these Orientals deal with worlds and pebbles freely (*Essays*, VIII: 14-15).

MAIA [a poem]

Illusion works impenetrable, Weaving webs innumerable,
Her gay pictures never fail, Crowds each on other, veil on veil,
Charmer who will be believed By man who thirsts to be deceived.
Illusions like the tints of pearl, Or changing colors of the sky,
Or ribbons of a dancing girl, That mend her beauty to the eye
(*Essays*, IX: 348).

The doctrine of the Imagination can only be rightly opened by treating it in connection with the subject of Illusions, And the

Hindoos alone have treated this last with sufficient breath in their legends of the successive Maias of Vishnu. With them, youth, age, property, condition, events, persons, self, are only successive Maias, through which Vishnu mocks and instructs the soul (*Journals*, IX: 302).

Maya (Illusion) of the Hindoos. Rudra says, "O thou who, always unalterable, createst, conservest, and destroyest this universe, by the aid of Maya, that energy in numerous forms which, powerless when it reposes in thy bosom, makes believe that it is distinct from thee, and gives to the world an apparent reality"-- *Bhagavat Purana* vol. ii, p. 127 (*Journals*, X: 159).

Maya. The assistants said: "In the road of birth, there is no shelter;--which great miseries make difficult; where the god of death presents himself as a frightful reptile; where they have before their eyes the mirage of objects; where the opposite affections (of pleasure and pain) are precipices; where they fear the wicked as ferocious beasts; where grief is like a fire in the forest;--how should a caravan of ignorant beings, loaded with the heavy burden of the body and the soul, tormented by desire,--how, O God who givest asylum, should it ever arrive at thy feet?" The *Veda* says: "The world is born of Maya" (*Journals*, X: 159).

Religious Knowledge and Practice

"That is active duty," says the Hindoos, "which is not for our bondage; that is knowledge, which is for our liberation: all other duty is good only unto weariness" (*Essays*, IV: 138).

Everything is superficial and perishes but love and truth only. The largest is always the truest sentiment, and we feel the more generous spirit of the Indian Vishnu,-- "I am the same to all mankind. There is not one who is worthy of my love or hatred. They who serve me with adoration,-- I am in them, and they in me. If one whose ways are altogether evil serves me alone, he is as respectable as the just man; he is altogether well employed; he soon becometh

of a virtuous spirit and obtaineth eternal happiness” (*Essays*, IV: 139).

The Hindoos write in their sacred books, “Children only, and not the learned, speak of the speculative and the practical faculties as two. They are but one, for both obtain the selfsame end, and the place which is gained by the followers of the one is gained by the followers of the other. That man seeth, who seeth that the speculative and the practical doctrines are one” (*Essays*, IV: 267-68).

“A man” says the *Vishnu Sarma*, “who having well compared his own strength or weakness with that of others, after all doth not know the difference, is easily overcome by his enemies” (*Essays*, VI: 235).

The Indian *Vedas* express when they say, “He that can discriminate is the father of his father” (*Essays*, VII: 317).

If the man is not ashamed of his poverty, there is no joke. The poorest man who stands on his manhood destroys the jest. The poverty of the saint, of the rapt philosopher, of the naked Indian, is not comic. The lie is in the surrender of the man to his appearance; as if a man should neglect himself and treat his shadow on the wall with marks of infinite respect (*Essays*, VIII: 169).

The great Indian sages had a lesson for the Brahmin, which every day returns to mind, “All that depends on another gives pain; all that depends on himself gives pleasure; in these few words is the definition of pleasure and pain” (*Essays*, X: 57-58).

“Time,” says the Indian Scriptures, “drinketh up the essence of every great and noble action which ought to be performed, and which is delayed in the execution” (*Essays*, XI: 309).

Put in the Sermon to Scholars the brave maxim of the *Code of Menu*: “A teacher of the Veda should rather die with his learning than sow it in sterile soil, even though he be in grievous distress for subsistence” (*Journals*, IV: 57).

“The words ‘I and mine’ constitute ignorance.” “When I hear a king sending word to another by his ambassador, ‘This earth is mine;

resign your pretensions to it,'--I am at first moved to violent laughter; but it soon subsides to pity for the infatuated fool" [*Vishnu Purana*] (*Journals*, VII: 127, 129).

"Until man is able to compress the ether like leather, there will be no end of misery, except through the knowledge of God" *Upanishad* (*Journals*, IX: 56).

Truth is the principle, and the moral of the Hindoo theology,-- truth as against Maya which deceives Gods and Men; Truth the principle, and retirement and Self-denial the means of attaining it. And they stop at no extreme in the statement (*Journals*, X: 162-63).

In India, a Brahmin may be very poor, and perform daily menial tasks for the English, as porters or servants, but the natives still kneel to him, and show him the highest respect (*Journals*, X: 163).

"This world is no place for the man who doth not worship, and where, O Arjoon! Is there another"--*Bhagavad Geeta* (*Journals*, VII: 68, X: 187)?

"You" said the Brahmin Mandanis to the King (Alexander the Great), "are the only man whom I ever found curious in the investigation of philosophy at the head of an army"--Strabo (*Journals*, X: 235).

Fate, Karma and Reincarnation

Led the Hindoos to say, "Fate is nothing but the deeds committed in a prior state of existence" (*Essays*, VI: 12).

Life itself is an interim and a transition; this O Indur, is my one and twenty thousandth form, and already I feel the old Life sprouting underneath in the twenty thousand and first, and I know well that he builds no new world but by tearing down the old for materials (*Journals*, VI: 419-20).

The Indian system is full of fate, the Greek not. The Greek uses the word, indeed, but in his mind the Fates are three respectable old women who spin and shear a symbolic thread,--so narrow, so limitary

is the sphere allowed them, . . . But in India, it is the dread reality, it is the cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world: it is the abysmal Force, untameable and immense. They who wrestle with Hari, see their doom in his eye before the fight begins (*Journals*, VII: 123).

“What living creature slays, or is slain? What living creature preserves or is preserved? Each is his own destroyer or preserver, as follows evil or good”--*Vishnu Purana* (*Journals*, VII: 127).

References

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* ed. Edward Emerson (12 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mufflin and Co., 1904); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals* eds. Edward Emerson and Waldo Forbes (10 vols.; Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1909). The volumes of the *Journals* cited in the text were written in the following years: IV (1836-38), V (1838-41), VI (1841-44), VII (1845-48), IX (1856-63) and X (1864-76). For Emerson's longer references to Indian scriptures not covered in this article see: the *Upanishadic story* of Nachiketas (*Essay*, VIII: 349-52); *Narayana* (JO I: 157); *Vishnu Purana* (JO VII: 108); and the *Rig Veda Sanhita* which praises Agni, Indra, the Maruts, the Aswin twins, Varuna and Vishnu (JO VIII: 547-49).