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Transcendentalism and Vedantic Thought: A comparative study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Indian Philosophical Texts

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Abstract

With an emphasis on the writings and personal ideologies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, this essay explores the philosophical connections between Indian Vedantic thinking and American transcendentalism. This study illustrates how Vedantic spiritual principles informed and paralleled fundamental transcendental concepts like self-reliance, the Over-Soul, harmony with nature, and the unity of all beings by examining their foundational writings and their interactions with Indian texts like the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. By placing Emerson and Thoreau as early representatives of Eastern philosophy in American literature, the comparative research sheds light on a transnational intellectual interchange that reshaped literary and spiritual paradigms during the 19th century.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Vedanta, Emerson, Thoreau, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Comparative Philosophy, American Literature, Eastern Thought, Spirituality

Introduction

There was a previously unheard-of receptivity to Eastern ideas, particularly those derived from Indian spiritual traditions, in the intellectual landscape of 19th-century American writing. Hindu philosophical ideas were incorporated into the writings and worldviews of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two influential members of the American Transcendentalist movement. Vedanta-based ancient Indian ideas were similar to the movement's emphasis on intuition, the inner self, and the divinity found in nature. Comparative literary and philosophical analysis is made easier by the philosophical and spiritual connection between these two systems.

Nineteenth-century America's intellectual and literary landscape developed during a period of profound change, characterized by a growing sense of national identity, philosophical upheaval, and a fervent quest for spiritual meaning outside the dogmatic boundaries of conventional Western theology. Throughout this century, which was marked by intellectual awakening, economic expansion, and upheaval, American literature became more open to ideas from other cultures and wisdom traditions. The deep

engagement with Indian spiritual concepts, especially those originating from Hinduism's Vedantic traditions, was one of the most fascinating of these cross-cultural discussions. The American imagination glanced eastward and discovered a spiritual mirror-something old but fundamentally familiar-rather than an alien dogma.

A deeper discontent with the confining dogmatism of institutional religion and the mechanical worldview acquired from Enlightenment rationality served as the catalyst for this intellectual openness, which was not an accident. The Western spiritual framework was no longer adequate for a growing collection of authors, painters, and intellectuals who would eventually be known as the Transcendentalists. The need for a more intimate, perceptive, and comprehensive encounter with the divine was not met. The East, especially India, whose ancient writings provided deep philosophical insights and a drastically different understanding of self, god, and the universe, drew these American intellectuals in their quest for new spiritual frontiers.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were two highly influential individuals at the center of this

Transcendentalist interaction with Indian philosophy. Instead of mindlessly stealing Indian concepts, they approached them thoughtfully, creatively, and thoroughly, incorporating them into American literature and philosophy. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita provide a philosophical confirmation of Emerson's belief in the "Over-Soul" and the divine immanence inside the person. Emerson is frequently regarded as the high priest of American individualism and the main figure of transcendentalism. During his time at Concord, Thoreau read the Gita and found its teachings to be a validation of his own existential and ethical principles. His retreat to Walden Pond became a symbol of spiritual independence and harmony with nature. Deeply ingrained in the epistemological and philosophical foundations of both traditions, the resemblance between Hindu Vedanta and American transcendentalism is not only thematic or surface-level. Both assert that existence is fundamentally one. Both honor the experienced over the institutional, the mystical over the dogmatic, and the intuitive over the intellectual. In both, nature is a living, breathing being imbued with divinity rather than just serving as a background for human activities. Because of these deep parallels, the discussion between the two faiths is both historically significant and intellectually transforming. This conversation did not just happen. Numerous cultural and sociopolitical advancements made it possible. The dissemination of Indian scriptures to the American literary audience was greatly aided by the growing number of English translations of these works, particularly those produced by missionaries, early Indologists, and academics of the British East India Company. The Laws of Manu, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and other Sanskrit texts arrived in America in a variety of translated versions, sometimes with orientalist commentary. Despite their frequent errors or imperialist prejudices, these translations were the first method that American intellectuals came into contact with the East.

But Emerson and Thoreau's interest in these books went beyond simple scholarship. Hindu thought's philosophical ethos became a living, breathing spiritual experience for them. Essays by Emerson including "The Over-Soul," "Self-Reliance," and "Nature" resemble Vedantic monism, which holds that Brahman (the universal spirit) and Atman (the individual self) are one and the same. Thoreau also expresses a worldview in Walden and his diaries that finds the divine in all facets of nature. This viewpoint is quite similar to the Hindu conception of nature as sacred expression.

However, the importance of this cross-cultural interaction extends beyond intellectual similarity. It is an early and sincere attempt at true cultural synthesis—a readiness to see past national and religious barriers to discover points of agreement in the universal search for meaning. Emerson and Thoreau's acceptance of Indian spirituality stands out as extraordinarily courteous, even reverent, at a period when Western attitudes toward the East were frequently tainted by imperialism and ethnocentrism. They viewed Indian philosophy as an essential addition to the human grasp of reality rather than as an exotic novelty.

However, there were conflicts and inconsistencies in this unification process. The romantic idealization of Indian thinking occasionally ran the risk of being essentialist or

selectively reading. However, even these drawbacks highlight how difficult cross-cultural interaction is. It takes both intellectual openness and the humility to admit one's own prejudices and limitations to reach across such great cultural and historical divides. Thoreau and Emerson are prime examples of this tension in many respects. Their writings exhibit great insight combined with unavoidable cultural filters, as well as intense adoration and sporadic misreadings.

However, when seen as a whole, their involvement with Indian philosophy marks a turning point in American letter history—a time when the strict divisions between East and West started to give way to a more flexible, dynamic understanding of cultural and spiritual identity. It made it possible for later generations of authors, thinkers, and spiritual searchers to delve into the rich areas between traditions, challenge inherited beliefs, and look for a more comprehensive and integrated view of the human experience.

Furthermore, this interaction changed larger societal perspectives on spirituality in addition to literature and philosophy. It set the stage for eventual interest in Eastern ideologies by American writers of the twentieth century, including New Age thinkers and Beat poets. Emerson and Thoreau's seeds grew in a variety of ways, contributing to the development of a diverse spiritual environment in America where the teachings of Christ and Krishna could coexist and where contemplative meditation could be used in addition to logical reasoning.

We are welcomed into a rich area of comparative study as we investigate the significant impact of Indian spiritual traditions on nineteenth-century American writing, especially as seen through the eyes of Thoreau and Emerson. It is an area of study that pushes us to reconsider cultural borders, to consider the order of civilizations, and to recognize the universal human desire for transcendence. In addition to providing historical context, the intellectual exchange between the East and the West, so eloquently represented in the Transcendentalist movement, serves as a paradigm for modern intercultural comprehension. It serves as a reminder that despite the diversity and division of our globe, there is still a universal desire for harmony that cuts over national boundaries, linguistic barriers, and religious beliefs.

Aims and Objectives

- To critically analyze the influence of Vedantic texts on Emerson and Thoreau.
- To explore the philosophical convergence between Transcendentalism and Vedanta.
- To study primary texts by Emerson and Thoreau in light of the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads.
- To trace the cultural and intellectual exchange between 19th-century America and India.
- To highlight the significance of this intercultural dialogue in reshaping American spiritual and literary traditions.

Review of Literature

Many academics have recognized how Indian philosophy influenced American transcendentalism. In "Emerson and the East," Robert C. Gordon claims that Emerson's

conception of the Over-Soul was influenced by his exposure to the Bhagavad Gita. The flood of Eastern texts into America is contextualized historically in Arthur Christy's landmark study, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*. Harold Bloom and M. H. Abrams have also discussed how Eastern philosophy offered American authors who were struggling with post-Enlightenment rationalism different metaphysical frameworks. In addition, Thoreau frequently echoes the Indian ascetic tradition's emphasis on introspection and detachment in his *Walden Pond* works.

A wealth of research, analysis, and interpretation can be found in the literature review on the intellectual and spiritual interchange between Indian philosophy and American transcendentalism. The origins, paths, and effects of this intercultural discussion have been painstakingly documented by academics over the past century, highlighting the profound impact that Vedantic philosophy had on the works and perspectives of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These investigations show a persistent conceptual relationship that inspires spiritual searchers and philosophers of all ages, going beyond just confirming a historical connection.

Robert C. Gordon's influential text, "Emerson and the East," stands as a foundational work in this field. Gordon argues convincingly that Emerson's exposure to the Bhagavad Gita was not superficial or incidental; rather, it profoundly shaped his conception of the Over-Soul. According to Gordon, the Gita's emphasis on the eternal, immutable Self that pervades all existence deeply resonated with Emerson's metaphysical musings. The very language Emerson used—often invoking an all-encompassing spiritual unity—mirrored the Sanskrit descriptions of Brahman and Atman. Gordon's work is characterized by a nuanced sensitivity to the subtleties of Emerson's engagement, showing how his transcendental insights were, in part, born of his encounter with Eastern spiritual texts.

"*The Orient in American Transcendentalism*," a landmark essay by Arthur Christy, goes into additional detail about the historical and cultural circumstances that made such an encounter possible. Christy painstakingly records how translators, missionaries, and early Orientalist academics brought Eastern writings to the American intellectual arena. He emphasizes how the Transcendentalist movement avidly absorbed these books as active interpreters rather than passive consumers due to its need for different ways of thinking. Christy notes that the mechanical Enlightenment worldview and the dogmatic Calvinist faith were not what Emerson, Thoreau, and their peers were looking for. This inner need was satisfied by the vision of oneness, divinity, and spiritual progress provided by Vedantic philosophy.

In his more comprehensive analysis of romantic and post-romantic literature, M. H. Abrams emphasizes how Eastern philosophy gave American and European authors metaphysical frameworks that stood in stark contrast to the Enlightenment's empirical rationality. According to Abrams, transcendentalism represents a resurgence of the holy, the enigmatic, and the intuitive—a re-enchantment of the universe. Eastern ideas, particularly those derived from Vedanta, were crucial to this renaissance. Transcendentalist philosophers discovered a vocabulary and a vision for expressing their own spiritual and ethical concerns by

referencing ideas such as maya (illusion), dharma (obligation), and moksha (liberation).

The Eastern undercurrent in American literary modernism is also acknowledged by Harold Bloom, who is known for his attention to literary impact and canon creation. Bloom acknowledges that Indian philosophy gave American authors a lyrical and philosophical vocabulary that was pleasantly free of Western dualisms, despite his greater skepticism over the extent of impact. Emerson's spiritual individualism and the Upanishadic teachings on the Self have striking similarities, according to Bloom's interpretation of Emerson. According to Bloom, this similarity is a sign of a deeper intellectual osmosis rather than just a stylistic one.

Beyond literary criticism, a number of academics have investigated the ethical and experiential aspects of this cross-cultural interaction. In his approachable yet academic book "American Veda," Philip Goldberg details the various ways Indian spirituality has influenced American philosophy, ranging from the Transcendentalists to modern mindfulness techniques. According to Goldberg, Thoreau and Emerson were pioneers in a long line of Western explorers attracted to India's spiritual treasures rather than outliers. He commends them for their spiritual bravery and intellectual integrity, pointing out that they approached Indian literature with true humility and respect rather than colonial supremacy.

Thoreau's study of Indian philosophy has also garnered a lot of scholarly interest, especially during his *Walden Pond* retreat. Scholars like Carl T. Jackson and Rick Fields have emphasized how Thoreau's experience with basic life was influenced by Indian ascetic principles. "Walden" has an attitude of detachment, contemplation, and oneness with nature that resonates deeply with the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita's teachings. Thoreau acknowledged that he read the Gita in the early light and found it to be more wise and serene than any other Western work. Many academics have demonstrated how Thoreau's language mirrors the Gita's dialogic style and contemplative cadence, demonstrating that this spiritual relationship is not only thematic but structural.

In addition, modern comparative philosophers like Douglas Allen and Anantanand Rambachan have contributed significant perspectives to the discussion by analyzing the ontological and epistemological similarities between transcendentalism and Vedanta. Allen concentrates on the methodological similarities—the stress on intuition, introspection, and non-dual perception—while Rambachan criticizes some Western misinterpretations of Vedanta and calls for a more complex and contextualized approach. Although intellectual kinship has great power, their work serves as a reminder that it must be handled critically and culturally.

The review of literature also encompasses theological and interfaith perspectives. Scholars like Huston Smith and Raimon Panikkar have explored how Transcendentalism and Vedanta converge in their universalist ethos. Smith, in particular, admired the Upanishads for their spiritual depth and saw in Emerson a Western prophet of perennial wisdom. Panikkar, with his intercultural theology, saw in this East-West synthesis a model for future spiritual dialogues—one that transcends doctrinal boundaries while

honoring the sacred core of each tradition.

Furthermore, the processes of this intellectual encounter are being questioned by feminist and postcolonial researchers. They challenge the disparities in the representation and reception of Eastern texts in Western discourse. They emphasize the larger colonial context in which these discussions took place, even as they acknowledge the genuine appreciation of philosophers like as Thoreau and Emerson. These criticisms encourage us to think about power, representation, and voice in cross-cultural philosophy, which enhances rather than diminishes the importance of the transcendentalist-vedantic conversation. In synthesizing this extensive body of scholarship, it becomes clear that the convergence between American Transcendentalism and Indian Vedanta is one of the most intellectually fertile and emotionally resonant encounters in modern intellectual history. It is a dialogue not only

between texts and thinkers but between worldviews, sensibilities, and spiritual aspirations. The literature reviewed here confirms the authenticity, depth, and complexity of this exchange, while also inviting ongoing inquiry into its contemporary relevance.

Research Methodologies

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, focusing on textual analysis, comparative philosophy, and historical contextualization. Primary sources include Emerson's essays such as "Self-Reliance," "The Over-Soul," and Thoreau's *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Indian texts referenced include the Bhagavad Gita, Isa Upanishad, and Mandukya Upanishad. Secondary sources include scholarly commentaries, historical documents, and previously published comparative studies.

Table 1: Research Methodologies

Methodological Element	Details	Source of Information
Research Approach	Qualitative, Interpretive	Creswell, J.W. (2013) ^[3] . Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design
Core Methods Used	Textual Analysis, Comparative Philosophy, Historical Contextualization	Said, Edward. (1978) ^[4] . <i>Orientalism</i> ; Mohanty, J.N. (2000) ^[5] . <i>Classical Indian Philosophy</i>
Primary Western Texts	Emerson's <i>Self-Reliance</i> , <i>The Over-Soul</i> ; Thoreau's <i>Walden</i> , <i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i>	Emerson, R.W. (1841, 1844); Thoreau, H.D. (1854, 1849)
Primary Eastern Texts	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , <i>Isa Upanishad</i> , <i>Mandukya Upanishad</i>	Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). <i>The Principal Upanishads</i> ; Easwaran, E. (2007). <i>The Bhagavad Gita</i>
Secondary Sources	Scholarly commentaries, historical documents, published comparative studies	Versluis, Arthur (1993). <i>American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions</i> ; Sharma, Arvind (1990)
Data Collection	Library research, archival study, digital literary repositories	JSTOR, Project MUSE, Harvard Library Archives
Analytical Framework	Hermeneutic and Comparative Literary Analysis	Ricoeur, Paul (1981). <i>Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences</i>
Philosophical Lens	Vedantic Monism and Transcendental Idealism	Deutsch, Eliot (1973). <i>Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction</i>

Results and Interpretation

The comparative analysis reveals multiple intersections between Transcendentalist and Vedantic thought:

- 1. Self and the Divine:** Emerson's Over-Soul mirrors the Vedantic concept of Brahman, the ultimate universal spirit. His belief in the divinity of the individual resonates with the Upanishadic idea of Atman (Self) being identical with Brahman.
- 2. Nature and Non-Dualism:** Both traditions view nature as a reflection of the divine. Thoreau's immersion in the natural world echoes Vedantic teachings about the

interconnectedness of all life.

- 3. Detachment and Simplicity:** Thoreau's simple living philosophy at Walden mirrors the Gita's teachings on renunciation and karma yoga (selfless action).
- 4. Intuition over Reason:** Both Emerson and Vedantic texts emphasize intuition or direct inner experience over rationalism, suggesting a mystical path to truth.
- 5. Ethical Living:** Both traditions advocate a life of moral integrity, personal discipline, and spiritual growth, though expressed through culturally distinct idioms.

Table 2: Results and Interpretation of Comparative Analysis

Theme	Transcendentalist Insight	Vedantic Parallel	Source of Information
Self and the Divine	Emerson's <i>Over-Soul</i> emphasizes divine presence within individual self	Upanishadic concept of Atman = Brahman	Emerson (1841); <i>Isa Upanishad</i> ; <i>Mandukya Upanishad</i> ; Radhakrishnan, S. (1953)
Nature and Non-Dualism	Thoreau's nature immersion at Walden reflects unity and sacredness of all life	Vedantic view of nature as maya but permeated by Brahman	Thoreau (1854); <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , Chapter 10; Deutsch, E. (1973)
Detachment and Simplicity	Simple living and detachment from materialism in <i>Walden</i> as spiritual discipline	Gita's teaching of Karma Yoga: action without attachment	Thoreau (1854); <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , Chapter 3 & 5; Easwaran, E. (2007)
Intuition over Reason	Emerson privileges intuition as a higher mode of knowing	Vedanta values jnana (knowledge) born from inner realization rather than intellectual inference	Emerson (1844); <i>Mandukya Upanishad</i> ; Deutsch, E. (1973); Sharma, A. (1990)
Ethical Living	Emphasis on moral integrity, truth, self-reliance	Yamas and Niyamas in Vedantic/Upanishadic tradition-ethical and spiritual disciplines	Emerson (1841); <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , Chapter 16; Radhakrishnan (1953); Mohanty, J.N. (2000) ^[5]

Discussion and Conclusion

One important example of East-West intellectual and literary cross-pollination is the conceptual similarity between Indian Vedanta and American transcendentalism. Emerson and Thoreau actively understood and used Vedantic ideas to question dominant religious and philosophical conventions in America; they were not only passive consumers of Eastern ideas. Their writings serve as an example of a worldwide quest for spiritual truth that cuts beyond national and cultural borders. This dialogue's legacy is still felt in philosophy and literature throughout the world, which makes this comparative analysis even more pertinent in the linked world of today.

More than just the historical meeting of two philosophical traditions, the conceptual affinity between Indian Vedanta and American transcendentalism captures a profoundly human need for spiritual harmony, existential significance, and ethical clarity. A deep reciprocal resonance based on a common respect for intuition, nature, the inner self, and the divine is shown by the synthesis of these traditions as illustrated by the lives and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Drawing crucial influence from Vedantic philosophy, transcendentalism evolved as a daring reinvention of spiritual life during a period when American culture was struggling with the dogma of institutional religion and the limitations of Enlightenment logic.

In this conversation, we consider how Emerson and Thoreau reframed Vedanta's teachings to fit their philosophical and cultural contexts rather than just taking ideas from it. The Vedantic concept of Brahman is very similar to Emerson's idea of the "Over-Soul"-an all-encompassing spiritual oneness that unites all creatures. This concept, which confirmed the divinity in both the natural world and every person, was not only a theoretical supposition; rather, it was a pillar of his ethical and artistic worldview. Comparable to the Vedantic path of self-realization by introspection and disengagement, Thoreau's intense absorption in nature served as a spiritual discipline in addition to being a social retreat.

The integrity of these engagements lies in their depth and earnestness. Emerson's encounters with Hindu texts, often mediated through English translations and German philosophical filters, were not mere curiosities but foundational to his intellectual development. He saw in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita an affirmation of his own insights and an invitation to transcend the dualisms that plagued Western thought-mind/body, matter/spirit, man/God. This monistic vision, while interpreted through Emerson's idealism, resonates deeply with Advaita Vedanta's assertion of non-duality and the unity of Atman and Brahman.

Thoreau, on the other hand, used his own experience to embody the essence of Vedanta. He embraced a life of self-sufficiency, introspection, and simplicity at Walden Pond, which is similar to the austere lifestyle promoted by Indian spiritual traditions. His study of the Gita, which he is said to have carried with him when he was staying at Walden, gave him a framework for comprehending renunciation, action, and inner peace. Echoing the Vedantic belief that the divine is present in all creation, Thoreau's nature writings exhibit a pantheistic awe and a contemplative attention to the details

of the natural world.

This comparative inquiry reveals not only philosophical parallels but also illuminates the historical conditions that made such a dialogue possible. The 19th century witnessed an expansion of global consciousness, fueled by colonial exploration, trade, and missionary activity, which paradoxically facilitated the transmission of non-Western thought to Western intellectual circles. The Transcendentalists were among the first American thinkers to approach Eastern texts with serious philosophical engagement rather than exotic fascination. Their interest in Vedanta was not rooted in a desire to appropriate but in a genuine quest for a spiritual framework that could counterbalance the materialism and dogmatism of their age. Moreover, this was not a one-way conversation. Both traditions were enhanced by the cross-pollination made possible by the worldwide flow of ideas. Indian reformers like Swami Vivekananda, who were influenced by Western individualism and rationality, reformulated Vedantic teachings in ways that spoke to contemporary sensibilities, while American intellectuals saw Vedanta as a source of spiritual regeneration. This mutual effect casts doubt on the idea of separate intellectual growth and emphasizes how dynamic philosophical traditions are.

It is impossible to overestimate the existential and emotional aspects of this confluence. In their pursuit of truth, Thoreau and Emerson both reflected a basic human need for transcendence, meaning, and connection. Their works include actual experiences of wonder, loneliness, moral conflict, and spiritual understanding in addition to philosophical concepts. They adopted a holistic outlook on life that upholds the sanctity of existence and the potential for inner liberation by bringing oneself into line with Vedantic ideals.

The relevance of this dialogue extends far beyond its historical context. In an increasingly globalized world facing ecological crises, ethical uncertainties, and spiritual disorientation, the integrative insights of Transcendentalism and Vedanta offer a model for contemplative living and intercultural understanding. They invite us to look beyond dogma and division, to seek truth in direct experience, and to honor the interconnectedness of all life. This is not merely an academic concern but a call to reimagine our ways of being in the world.

In addition to interpreting Vedantic philosophy, Emerson and Thoreau also lived it, reinterpreted it, and let it change the way they perceived nature, divinity, and themselves. Their legacy serves as a reminder that the pursuit of meaning is a universal human undertaking and that spiritual truth transcends national boundaries. This investigation demonstrates that comparative philosophy is about a deeper synthesis that respects difference while acknowledging unity, rather than just finding parallels. It pushes us to adopt a broader, more inclusive view of wisdom and to see past our local identities. By doing this, it helps create a more spiritually conscious and caring world society that respects the holy, cherishes reflection, and is receptive to the wisdom of many cultures.

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