

## THE AMERICAN YOGI

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### Abstract

*Spirituality is said to be an outlook where one connects with one's 'self' or 'spirit' to listen to the little voice inside which guides and shows him the correct path. There have been many people in almost all cultures, who have listened to their inner calling, their small voice and have made it their strength. One such person was the American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who has rightly been called an American prophet and seer. A Church Minister initially, Emerson rebelled against the monotonous and meaningless rituals of the Church and was made to resign. From then on, he started conceptualising his New Philosophy- one, which transcends all physical limitations and aims to find divinity within humans. He was the harbinger of divine wisdom into the hearts of men and women – the first person who asked people to listen to their own selves, because their spirit is capable of guiding them onto the true path to divinity. This rejected altogether the reliance on external sources and emphasised instead the supremacy of the 'self'. His New Philosophy was called 'Transcendentalism' which lays emphasis on the God within each of us. This paper traces the life and thought processes of this American seer who appealed to people to trust their own instincts and see themselves as an embodiment of the divine. It also tries to find instances of spirituality in his various essays and lectures.*

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, Self, Spirit, Emerson, Prophet, Transcendentalism, Divinity.*

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- Ekta Sawhney

In the history of human evolution, there have only been a few people, who stand out in terms of their achievements, their purity, their will to serve others and their determination to work for a cause. They stand out because they are willing to see the good in others and are brave enough to tell them so. They are divine, and so, they see divinity in others. These few have the power to transform the lives of the many people, who have lost themselves to the chaos of the world. One such person of true divine outlook was Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, the Rev. William Emerson was a minister at the First Church of Boston and was a strict disciplinarian. He tried to instil in his children a degree of moral virtue and a sense of right and wrong. He was a polished gentleman, purely Puritanical in his approach. Ralph Waldo Emerson's mother was a devout Christian lady. Before her marriage she used to keep a diary whence she would record her spiritual progress (Allen 7). Ralph Waldo met with a striking degree of personal loss in his young life. He was the fourth child born into the Emerson family; however, the first child died in 1800 and the second in 1807. His only remaining older sibling was his brother William. In 1811, just before Emerson turned eight, his father died. Three years later, his younger sister died. He had three younger brothers, all of whom made it into adulthood, but all of whom Ralph Waldo also outlived. Childhood for Emerson and his siblings was 'arduous, poverty-stricken and 'deprived.'

Brought up solely by his mother who had to her aid, his father's sister Mary Moody Emerson, the Emerson brothers supported each other. They all started teaching at the age of thirteen or fourteen and started taking turns in teaching and going to school. His mother sold her husband's library, gave her house on rent and worked as a maid.

At the time when Ralph Waldo was growing up, the strict philosophy of Calvinism was still prevalent in New England. It told of the story of man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and preached that as a consequence of the 'original sin' and the consequent fall from grace, God had sent corruption and evil into the world and subjected the entire humanity to his wrath. As opposed to this theory, the predecessors of Rev. William Emerson's First Church, Charles Chauncy said that both the Bible and "natural religion" reveal God to be benevolent and kind, wise and powerful. He also said that humans

possessed virtues as well as vices and by a change of heart any person could obtain God's pardon. Chauncy did not deny original sin but also said it to be remediable by man's own efforts. (Allen 63)

Emerson attended the Boston Latin School, entered Harvard in 1817 and graduated in 1820. Influenced by his father's predecessors and by his teachers at Harvard Divinity School, Emerson brought into shape his own philosophy of Spirituality. He was of the firm belief that goodness lies inherent in all of us. No matter how many errors have we made in our judgements in the past, but at the centre of our personality lies a spark of the divine that can never be blown away. Every person has this tiny spark, this small seed of spirituality within him, which, if properly take care of, has the power to transform all individual lives.

In 1829, Emerson became pastor of the Second Unitarian Church in Boston but had to resign because of a controversy related to the 'Lord's Supper'. That same year he married Ellen Louise Tucker, who died of tuberculosis seventeen months later. In 1832, Emerson left his church and travelled to Europe.

When Emerson came back to the United States on October 9, 1833 after spending around seven months travelling in Europe, he was glowing with a new vigour and vitality. He had cast aside his weariness of his past self and was at peace with himself and with the world. (Allen 220) He realised that the prevailing philosophy of Unitarianism could not give the required answers to many spiritually starved people like him. They felt the need for a movement that could bring them closer to Truth. Emerson had the idea of a new philosophy in his mind and this, he thought, was the right time when he could put his belief into practice, in the form of a new Philosophy- a new school of thought. This new Movement was called 'Transcendentalism'.

The Transcendentalists writers found that Nature represented all of humankind as well as God, and so they bestowed it with divine and healing attributes. They found in Nature a creative force which could inspire people to create good art. Following on the footsteps of the Romantic Movement, the Transcendentalists insisted on a complete break from conventions and customs. Breaking of bondages and non conformity became their slogan. They broke away with all traditions and propagated a broader outlook towards life and living. (Horton & Edwards 117). They emphasised on individualism and self reliance. Emerson, in his pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty met some like-minded people who collectively formed the "Transcendentalists' Club". Members included Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller as well as Theodore Parker.

Communion with Nature was one of the most important landmarks of Transcendentalism. (Wagenknecht 50). Emerson's essay 'Nature' (1836) encapsulates his

explicit thoughts on the power and ability of Nature to recover, regenerate and reconstruct. Nature is faithful to all those who trust her. It cleanses from sin which gives us an evidence of the divinity inherent in the Natural world. Emerson says in "Woodnotes" (1840-41)

Come, lay thee in my soothing shade,

And heal the hurts which sin has made (Wagenknecht 53)

Essays, poems, and lectures, whatever Emerson has penned down as his legacy, has to its very core the conviction that Nature is the supreme force, it is the final law. (Porte & Morris 97). The opening paragraph of Nature states the purpose of his life clearly and explicitly. He says: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism." (Horton & Edwards 99)

Emerson stands for independence and non conformity and this aspect of his personality is echoed thoroughly in Nature. He points out that, "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the Universe?" (Richardson 15) Emerson believed that God exists within our consciousness, thus we have no need for a teacher, clergyman, or, for that matter, a saviour, to achieve oneness with the Divine. His search for the ultimate truth, goodness and beauty led him to study the theory of Non Dualism or "*Advaita* Philosophy" found in many of the oriental writings and literature.

Non duality or *Advaita* is a term that means literally "not two". The concept points out towards the ultimate unity of all things. Mystics and great spiritual realizes have often described instances of great mystical union when they saw themselves as being one with the entire creation. This revelation has left them certain that the Creator and the Creation are one. Emerson had a moment of this non-dual awakening while he was walking through the woods one afternoon. This moment in his life is recorded in his Journals and in his essay 'Nature'. The moment is described thus,

Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of parcel of God. (Richardson 18)

The 'self' and the soul are inseparable in humans and Emerson advises to rely on the self soul to be active (Chari 304). He sees the soul as the presence of the divine in individuals. He urges them, therefore, to rely only on the self or the soul which receives and perceives revelations (Chari 304). Emerson's oversoul is invisibly visible- it is the divine current that runs above the life cycle of an individual. He says in Self Reliance, "As soon as man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action" (Chari 304).

Since his college days, Emerson had the view of God as a Universal life force, an all embracing Mind of which human consciousness is only a minute fragment. (Allen 161) He

had also preached in his sermons that “it is God working in you that instructs both you and me.” (Allen 161). For this inner voice, God’s voice he used one term very often, ‘soul’. He elaborated on this little guidance received from the soul and said that is heard best when one is in communion with ‘Nature’. As such, it echoes the concept of divinity in the woods and simultaneously, divinity in humans.

Emerson is of the view that it is only amidst nature that a person finds his true self. The plants, grass, trees, flowers, all remind him that he is a divine being, sacred lesson is learnt here, a gospel of love, learning and faith is taught amidst the woods. In his words, “Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years.”(Richardson 18)

For Emerson, “a man is a Good in ruins” (Richardson 53). But when the human mind will be attuned towards Reason, to find the truth through intuition, to worship nature and understand that he is no different from it, that is when the universe will freely flow through him, that is when he will see divinity within himself and others. Emerson says in “Prospects”,

Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only we can see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do....As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.(Richardson 56).

Thus, the spiritual eyesight that we gain through Nature will move us upward and inward – towards ourselves.

Emerson has faith in the infinite possibilities inside men. He said that “Every man is a new method and distributes things anew” (Wagenknecht 44). His essay on Self Reliance (1841) begins with an epilogue that stresses this fact.

Emerson’s self reliant person is one who believes in his own thinking, his own views. He listens to the inner voice, to the divinity that speaks to him from within. Speaking your own mind, expressing your own true self is one of the ingredients of self-reliance. Emerson says: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius.”(Richardson 150)

Emerson’s over soul is the “ocean of light” or “a reservoir of spiritual power available to all who opened themselves up to receive its benevolence”(Wagenknecht 206) This power, then enables its receivers to receive wisdom that is beyond the superficial reality of things. This perception is intuitive. It is hidden in the closed mind but is readily available as soon as a person opens up to receive it. He says in his essay ‘Over soul’,

Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable

may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. (Richardson 176)

According to Emerson, the worldly man lives in isolation, in fragments, in particles, oblivious to the fact that within him is the wisdom that is needed to make him whole. Within him is the whole universe, connected through a universal mind. He says in the essay, "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime, within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE." (Richardson 176) Emerson's Over soul is the supreme soul or the "*Param Atman*" as Emerson knew it to be, by his wide and detailed reading of the Hindu scriptures.

Emerson was deeply involved in the study of Indian *Vedas* and *Upanishads* which greatly impressed and appealed to him. One doctrine that particularly impressed him was the Hindu doctrine of *Karma*. In the *Upanishadic* and *Vedic* traditions, *Karma* means "the results or consequences of action", which state that obedience to the soul brings pleasure and happiness while disobedience or going against one's conscience, doing misdeeds, committing sins, leads to suffering and pain. (Anwaruddin 5) The Law of *Karma* according to the *Bhavadaranayaka Upanishad* IV 4.6, states that: "This is what happens to the man who desires. To whatever his mind is attached, the self becomes that in the next life. Achieving that end, it returns again to the world" (Anwaruddin 5)

Emerson's essay "Compensation" is all about how each phenomenon, each occurrence, each circumstance has to be paid for, has to be compensated. It was intended to show men how the Universe operates through its endless rounds of 'cause and effect'

On August 31, 1837, Emerson was invited by the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge to deliver an oration. Here, Emerson talked about the much needed originality in ideas among American writers. Emerson opined that "The one thing in the world of value, is the active soul." (Richardson 88) Every man has this within himself, but in most of them, its path is obstructed and it remains unborn. It is a progressive entity. But there are institutions that cling onto the philosophy of a writer from the past and hence, start looking backwards instead of looking and moving forward. "The eyes of man are set in his forehead" (Richardson 88), says Emerson. This is the spiritual seat where all creativity, all originality emerge from.

Another of his lectures which created a furore was The Divinity School Address. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1838, Emerson, preached his gospel of Transcendentalism. This, at once created headlines, because it was something people had never heard of before.

The greatest thing about the Divinity School Address is the characteristic Emersonian delight in an individual. Emerson takes away all authority from the hands of the deity and puts all in the hands of men. He says: "If a man is at heart just, then in so far

he is God" (Richardson 110). This denied completely the concept of God. Emerson further said: "These facts have always suggested to men the sublime creed that the world is not a product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active,..."(Richardson 110)

The concept of God, as creator, and the world as the product of his creation were shattered completely by Emerson's statements. But then, he had come to shatter beliefs which took men away from themselves. He was a seer who wanted humanity to carve out their own destiny, find their peace within themselves. His firm faith in "intuition" led him to deny the authority of the 'Bible' as the word of God. He said that truth "cannot be received at second hand."(Richardson 112). One must try to find truth within oneself and not from any external sources, however sacred they are. Author Edward Wagenknecht offers a stirring summary of who Emerson was and what he believed:

He had perhaps the most seminal mind we have ever produced in this country. He believed that the development of the human soul was an ultimate end; that whatever stood in the way of the development and expression of that soul is vicious, however venerable or even sacred it may appear; and that unless life can be lived spontaneously and fully and gladly, there is no hope for the future of the world. It is not enough that God spoke to Moses; He must speak to me and to you. It is not enough that Shakespeare and Michelangelo created great art; you and I must create it also, and if we cannot do this ourselves, we must recognize its value in those of our contemporaries who can. It is not enough that we shall have pie in the sky by and by; life must be triumphant here and now. And what do you want with immortality, he asks you, if you are bored every time you are left alone for half an hour here? (Coppel 8)

Emerson has left behind a legacy of noble work and timeless wisdom. He was a visionary, a mystic and an agent of change. His main aim was to raise his countrymen and bring them face to face with their own selves. He was a *Yogi*, who, having realised God within himself, sought to see Him in his fellow humans. One of his biographers wrote: "He dealt a stunning blow to soulless Tradition. He exposed the folklore of a faltering civilization. He laid the foundation for a new and more excellent society than history has recorded. He pointed man to the Supreme Spirit in his own soul."

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