

Ralph Waldo Emerson:  
From Buddhism to Transcendentalism, the Beginning of an American Literary Tradition

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## INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a key figure in the American literary tradition. He was an extraordinary and revolutionary thinker who helped found a new philosophical, social and literary movement in the United States during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The movement was created as a way to protest against the general state of society at the time. Transcendentalism grew to be more than just a rebellious act against conformity, however; it became a way of life. Early in his life, Emerson identified as a Calvinist and then later a Unitarian, even becoming a Unitarian minister. However, after the death of his first wife, he renounced his Unitarian beliefs and gave up the observance of any specific kind of religion, instead adopting many different philosophies and epistemologies. Although Emerson was a great thinker, many of his ideas were influenced by other intellectual figures and philosophies, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, the theories of Immanuel Kant, and many more. One of the most significant influences on Emerson's transcendental ideals was Buddhism. Although there is evidence of Emerson studying Indian Buddhism, many of his philosophies seem to parallel with the school of Zen Buddhism.

## FUNDAMENTALS OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism originated in India, but it is now practiced throughout the world. There are many different schools of Buddhism that originate from various countries. Although some of these schools emphasize various aspects of Buddhist philosophy, the underlying fundamentals are still the same. The goal of Buddhism is to obtain spiritual enlightenment, meaning an awakening, including a final enlightenment, which can be achieved by the Eightfold path. This awareness can help people reach a better understanding of the world around them, not just a sensual understanding, but a more intuitive one. To understand the practice of Buddhism, one must have knowledge of the basic principles of the teachings of the Buddha. The fundamental

pillars of Buddhism include: taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; samsara; karma; nirvana; and the four noble truths.

### *The Three Refuges*

To demonstrate their dedication and devotion to the practice, many of the laymen followers of Buddhism had to take refuge in three things. Mitchell explains: “Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha was a formal act of submission to a person or god. One promised with this action to be a faithful follower of a being who could offer protection and benefits” (21). This is essential to the practice because one must instill all of their trust in these three things before they can attain enlightenment. To submit to the Buddha meant committing oneself to the Sangha, a celibate community within a monastery. As members of these communities, people were to follow the Dharma, the teachings of Buddha.

### *Samsara*

The concept of samsara, a world or cycle of suffering, can be divided into three different parts: impermanence, dukkha (suffering), and the concept of self. These three parts play a crucial role in helping one understand how samsara works and what one must do to break out of it. Impermanence is the notion that everything in life changes: nothing is permanent, except Nirvana, the ultimate level of intuitive knowing. The first step to ending dukkha (suffering) is to acknowledge the impermanence of all things. Dukkha can be broken down to three qualities: the constant flux in physical life, changing mental states, and the impermanence of satisfaction and happiness. To successfully eliminate suffering, one must let go of any attachments to the self, thus adopting the idea of no-self. Buddha believed that “all phenomena lack any underlying and permanent substance; they all have the characteristic of “no-self” (Mitchell 37). Mitchell observes in his book, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, that the concept of no-self

means the absence of a permanent self or soul in humans. Without the self, one can release any attachments to impermanent things and thus end his or her suffering. By letting go of these attachments, impermanence vanishes because it can no longer exist without the premise of permanence. Opposites have no meaning when one no longer exists. This connects impermanence, dukkha, and no-self back to samsara, the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. We are born; during our life we experience suffering because we cling to impermanent things, and we become the no-self when we die. The acceptance and acknowledgement of these concepts will lead us to be reborn and samsara begins again until one can reach Nirvana.

### *Karma*

The idea of karma is that a person's good or bad actions and motivations determine his or her rebirth. This means that however one is reborn is dependent upon his or her past actions; there is no notion of a god or gods assigning punishments or giving rewards. According to Buddha, good actions, or "wholesome" acts, are considered to be something that induces positivity in both the doer and those who are affected by the doer's actions. Wholesome acts should be motivated by generosity, geniality, and certainty. In contrast, unwholesome acts include greed, hate, and delusion. In order for karma to take effect, the actor must intentionally act, for good or ill, based on those good or bad motivations.

### *Four Noble Truths*

Upon his awakening, the Buddha believed he had come to understand the cause of suffering. He later called these understandings the four noble truths. These truths include human suffering, the cause, a possible solution, and the eight fold path.

The four noble truths are:

1. Life is Dukkha, which means that suffering is unavoidable in life.

2. Dukkha, or suffering, is the result of craving or thirst for “sensual pleasures, becoming, and non-becoming,” which is shaped by ignorance (Mitchell 50).
3. Cessation of Dukkha, or Nirvana, is the result of true enlightenment, which is the key to eliminating suffering. However, to achieve this, one must acknowledge and understand the causes (craving and ignorance) of dukkha.
4. The Eightfold path or the eight steps necessary to remove oneself from suffering. The eight steps are arranged into three categories: Wisdom (right understanding and right thought), morality (right speech, right action, and right livelihood), and concentration (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). (Mitchell 49-61)

### *Nirvana*

Nirvana is the state individuals attain when they successfully end their suffering by detaching themselves from it. Nirvana is the only thing that does not change under any circumstance, because it just is. It cannot be influenced by anything, because when a person is in this state there are no attachments to anything. This is also why Nirvana cannot be produced, because one must discover it by his or herself through his or her own experiences. Although each person attains the “absolute Truth” by their own means, their individual truth is still true for everyone. This is so because everything and everyone is connected within the over soul.

### PRINCIPLES OF ZEN BUDDHISM

The Japanese school of Zen is not about practicing Buddhism through an intellectual discipline, but instead it focuses on the study of one’s own mind and his or her own nature. In his book, *Zen: A Way of Life*, Christmas Humphreys explains that, before one goes about learning the art of Zen, he or she must search within him or herself for these qualities:

[he or she] must want it [Zen or enlightenment], must possess humility, must have faith, must have a mind of his own and some control of it, must be profoundly and actively aware of the limitations of the intellect and conscious of the faculty which supersedes it..., must have a mind sufficiently well balanced..., and finally, must have an innate feeling for Zen which is as difficult to describe as it is unmistakable in practice (5-6).

After one possesses all seven of these qualities, he or she is now ready to begin their path into enlightenment, or the Japanese form of it, called satori, through zazen, sitting meditation. In other schools of Buddhism, enlightenment (same Zen concept of satori) is the destination, but for Zen Buddhism it is only the beginning. The goal is to achieve satori (enlightenment), but it is also to repeat the process until one truly understands and sees oneself and his or her true nature. To successfully achieve Zen, one must practice the notion of “no-mind,” which means letting go of any attachments to things. The concept of “no-mind” indicates that one can free their mind of thought, which allows it to open and absorb everything around it. In contrast, the Buddhist notion of no self explains that there can never be a permanent “me,” so there is no real self, just illusions. As Humphreys explains, “There is no thing; only the Suchness, which needs no pacifying for it *was* before peace and war were born” (85). This Suchness is a representation of all things; it is not a concrete entity, but rather a kind of ideal form. There is no beginning or end; it just is.

According to Zen, no thing means no mind; thus there is no thinking. Humphreys writes, “Zen functions in non-duality. The process of thought, of reasoning, takes place in the field of duality. It follows that no thinking will achieve Zen” (Humphreys 93). The goal of the practice is to achieve enlightenment by erasing the notion of duality. This means that in order to achieve a

higher level of understanding, one must be able to put aside his or her mind and just be at peace. The Suchness addressed in Zen Buddhism is a representation of the unity or oneness of all things. Many would argue that duality is needed in order to make sense of the world, but the Zen Buddhists believe that paradox is the answer instead because it can provide answers that dualities cannot account for. These paradoxes can explain some of the experiences that cannot be placed into certain categories or be explained by one thing or the other. Paradoxes break the cycle of consistency, which is the very thing Emerson and other transcendentalist dislike.

## FUNDAMENTALS OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalism developed as a way to protest and rebel against the way society was progressing during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ralph Waldo Emerson and many of the other transcendental writers were upset with how society had been taken over by evolving technology. As a result of this shift towards technological progress, transcendentalist believed that society was beginning to lose its humanity. The movement was not only a response to the social conditions at the time, but also to religious institutions, specifically Calvinism and Unitarianism. Transcendentalism was a new way of thinking that contradicted many of the traditional ideals of Calvinism. Rather than focusing on the Calvinist concepts of unconditional election (the elect are chosen not based on merit, virtue, and faith, but on God's mercy alone) and total depravity (the idea that all humans are born sinful), transcendentalist believe in the goodness of humanity. Many transcendentalists believed that humanity had become corrupted by technological progress. Due to this dislike for technological progress, the transcendentalist favored idealism over materialism. The idealist believed that the world and its reality are formed by the individual's mind, whereas a materialist considered the world and reality to be shaped by things

consisting of matter or energy. This distinction is significant to the transcendental movement, because many of its ideologies are based on the concept of idealism.

This was not a religious movement, but a spiritual one. There were some aspects of what Emerson calls “religious sentiment” within it, but it is in no way a form or institution of religion. Emerson defined “religious sentiment” as an experience one has that results in a spiritual or emotional connection similar to one associated with certain religions. The divinity experienced, however, was not derived from a deity, but from within the individual and throughout nature. This inward experience of divinity led to the belief that all men were naturally good, and, if left to themselves, would behave accordingly. However, people’s intentions to act well in nature were stifled by the restrictions placed on them by both the advancing technology of the day and the dogma and doctrines of traditional religions. Since divinity can be found within the individual and nature, there was no need for the concept of salvation. What an individual sought instead was an awakening.

A significant principle in Transcendentalism is what Emerson calls “self-reliance.” The idea is to be confident in oneself and stand up for his or her thoughts, even when others try to bring him or her down. To be a successful human, as Emerson famously writes in his essay “Self-Reliance,” one “must be a nonconformist” (122). Emerson believed that the best way to reform society was for a person to search within and reform him or herself; social reform, he believed, would follow. By doing so, each person would contribute to society equally, thus creating a democracy. Democracy was the answer, for each individual, man or woman could equally gain knowledge about him or herself as well as his or her surroundings. Self-reliance becomes the key to the formation of an enlightened democracy, because each man and woman would be able to stand on their own. This individualism could lead to one having a better



understanding of not just him or herself, but of the world around them. Emerson encourages each individual to live with an open mind, open heart, and open arms. The openness creates a new way of understanding life relationships between human and human, and human and nature. If one is a conformist, he or she cannot truly embrace him or herself, because his or her own voice and or thoughts blend in with and are contaminated by the majority. The lack of a voice, for Emerson, becomes a lack of an identity. Without individualism, one cannot truly know the self; thus, they cannot fully understand the connection that humans share with one another and with nature. Also, a democracy is not about leading or following others. It is about being confident and working alongside of one another. Democracy is about understanding and communicating with one another. This is the source of the social reform Emerson and other transcendentalist were calling for.

#### BUDDHIST INFLUENCES (SIMILARITIES and DIFFERENCES)

Emerson expressed his ideas throughout his prose, poetry and personal journals. The various forms of literature were used as a way to track the progress and changes in his philosophy throughout the years. Each one of his essays reflects some aspect of his transcendentalist ideals, but these four are the most crucial when discussing the Buddhist influences: “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” “Circles,” and “Fate.” These four essays reveal significant parallels between Emersonian ideas and Buddhist ideals. “Self-Reliance” is one of the more significant essays because it explains the best way to access Emerson’s rendering of enlightenment

#### “Self-Reliance”

Through a transcendentalist lens, consistency is synonymous with conformity. The transcendentalist notion of consistency is similar to the Buddhist lens of opposites and the path to

satori. For Emerson duality or contradictions become troublesome within society, because once an individual says something, he or she is expected to hold true to those words forever. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson shares a piece of wisdom with his readers: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds ... With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (125). Consistency is a little elf in little minds because the individual becomes consumed with it, and refuses to listen to other opinions or broaden his or her perspectives. The inability to be open-minded creates a limitation on a person’s worldview; thus, his or her radius of knowledge will be small, because he or she only has limited knowledge of those few things. The concept of “inconsistency” is similar to the Zen Buddhist ideal about “paradoxes.” Duality forces one to choose either this or that, but the truth of things often does not allow for such clear distinctions or boundaries. Being human, one is going to make a mistake inevitably. This is how individuals can learn and grow as human beings and expand their radius of knowledge. Dualities in this view become trivial things that can hinder one from progressing forward in their journey to obtaining a higher understanding of the truth. The only way for a person to achieve this goal, according to Emerson, is to rely on him or herself.

The path to achieving satori (enlightenment) lies within the individual. One must have trust and will within him or herself. Emerson was a huge advocate for the independent man. He believed that it is only “the individual” who creates change, because little change occurs when people are merely carbon copies of one another. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” he writes “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (121). This line is a concise restatement of the Buddhist idea that satori can only be reached by the individual alone once he or she allowed themselves to be open to it. The individual must “trust thyself” because he or she is the only one who can lead him or herself to enlightenment, based on their own experiences. Once the

individual successfully transcends him or herself spiritually, he or she may see the truth. The vibrations of iron strings represent the truth that does not only resonate with the individual, but within everyone or every heart. In his article, “Emerson’s Transcendentalist Individualism as a Social Philosophy,” Joseph Blau observes that Emerson’s self realization or truth is an iron string that vibrates every heart. He writes,

What he had found in the healing process of finding himself was the conviction that any person who honestly examines his own mind and his own heart and carries the examination out to its utmost limits will arrive at conclusions that are not particular, self-centered, and limited, but are universal and applicable to all of humankind. He conceived the method of self-reliance as an individual, immediate raid on ultimate, universal truth. (82)

The definition of the term “self-reliant” can often be misinterpreted because the first word “self,” can be misleading. As Emerson defines it, self-reliance is not about limiting others’ behaviors to coincide to those of one’s self, but rather a way to examine and apply the self to society. What Emerson means by self reliance is to observe good character and contribute it to society, rather than practicing selfish intentions. This is parallel to the Buddhism notion of enlightenment, because the path to enlightenment is a one man or woman journey, and yet the truth is, as Blau has suggested, universal for all of man-kind, because everything is interconnected.

In Buddhism, there is a distinction between good and bad actions, and this distinction influences one’s cycle of samsara. A good deed must be a deliberate act that consists of good intentions and good motivations. Emerson embraced a similar ideology. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” he writes: “There is man *and* his virtues. Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in the expiation of daily non-

appearance on parade” (123). A man, for Emerson, is not defined only by the contents of his character (the innate behavior a man observes when left alone in nature), but also by his actions. Emerson criticizes those who perform selfish deeds. These men carry out “good action” by donating to charity, but if the intentions behind that action are not good, it cannot be considered a “wholesome” act. The motivation behind the charity of the men Emerson criticizes is not the goodness in their hearts, but rather their wish to create a certain image that will embellish their character. Emerson can see through their “good action” and realize the selfish motivations. He writes: “Their virtues are penance” (“Self-Reliance”123). Their acts of charity serve as an attempt to make up for their sins, to wash their hands of any guilt. Although their charity benefits both parties and seems, on the outside, to be an act of generosity, Emerson realizes that their intentions and motivations do not match up to the goodness of the deed itself.

The notion of goodness for Emerson is not just about being morally good, but about being a decent human being moment to moment. Good moral intentions can be accomplished by any man, but to be a true human being, such intention must be within his character. This concept of goodness is similar to the concept of goodness in Buddhism, because it is not merely about having good intentions and motivations, as well as good actions, but is also about basic human virtue. It is about the innate pureness of human nature which cannot be corrupted or destroyed. The innate goodness within people does not distinguish things into categories of good or bad, but instead sees things for how they are as a whole. These concepts of good and bad are constructed by society. The Buddhist philosophy of karma demonstrates the idea of basic goodness, because the results of one’s actions are not rewarded or punished. There are no positive or negative consequences to one’s actions. Karma is based on the basic goodness of people, not their perceived actions. People would often associate rewards, a positive attribute or benefit, with

good actions because only good outcomes can reward good actions. On the other hand, punishments or penalties are deemed negative because they represent a loss which is a consequence of a bad action. This is true because there is no true notion of externally determined: “good” or “bad.” Whatever the effect is, one has brought upon him or herself.

“Over-soul”

If individual truth is also a universal truth, then separation of the truth from the self cannot exist; the truth and the self become one, because the boundaries of self do not exist. Emerson’s defines the Over-soul in the following passage: “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” (“Over- Soul”164). The over-soul eliminates the ego- defined notion of self, because, according to Emerson, all men are a part of the whole. Everything and everyone is interconnected and there is no distinction because each individual truth contributes to a whole and universal truth. All truths come together to create a harmony or unity, because each person has a part, which helps complete the whole, creating the eternal one.

The concept of the over-soul also parallels the idea of Suchness in Zen Buddhism. No one thing exists independently, because it is interconnected with everything else in the world. Although an individual aspect can be examined independently, it cannot exist independently. The over-soul is the thing within which all other things exist. It does not begin or end; neither was it born, nor will it die. Just like Suchness, it just is.

“Circles”

In Buddhist thought, reincarnation erases all that is known of the past, leaving one with nothing but the present. This is so because only enlightened individuals have the ability to see

the past. The cycle of reincarnation or samsara continues until one has attained enlightenment. During each cycle of reincarnation, one expands his or her circumference, range of perception and increases their pool of knowledge. This increased range allows old eyes to have new perspectives. In the moment of “rebirth,” Emerson describes below, he is appreciating the state of blankness where man becomes a blank slate and is in a state of pure enlightenment,

The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning. I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain. (“Circles” 181)

The idea of enlightenment here is not about gaining, but about emptiness. Like the Buddhist notion of enlightenment, emptiness is bliss because there is nothing from the past weighing the individual down. Being stuck in the cycle of samsara or a continuous cycle of suffering brought about by clinging or ignorance, is not good because it hinders one from continuing their path to attaining enlightenment. Similarly, Emerson believes that if one continues to cling onto the past or old knowledge, he or she will fail to expand their perceptions; thus, they will be stuck in their limited vision or pool of knowledge. Although new knowledge is acquired through new experiences, for Emerson it does not mean that all the previous knowledge is erased or forgotten. Rather, from this past experience, his heart and mind are transcended so that he may gain a greater understanding of himself and nature. In her article, “In the “Light Out of the East”: Emerson on Self, Subjectivity, and Creativity,” Susan Dunston identifies impermanence as a key factor for Emerson’s sense of personal growth. She writes “...impermanence is a necessary condition of growth” (31). Grasping the concept of impermanence is essential to one’s growth

because coming to terms with it is the process by which one attains emptiness. The emptiness derives from impermanence because if nothing is permanent, there is nothing to hold onto from the past or the present. This, then, allows one to relive and relearn past experiences as well as new ones. By recognizing that nothing is permanent, man becomes reliant on himself, because he will continue in this cycle of learning and emptiness until he has fully achieved understanding, or as a Zen Buddhist would say, attain enlightenment. Growth comes with each cycle of learning and emptiness because something new can be understood through this process.

Emerson *adapts* the Buddhist idea of reincarnation in his essay "Circles." For Emerson, samsara is not a complete cycle of birth, life and death. Instead it is a smaller cycle within life itself. This definition of samsara becomes a representation of reincarnation of man in the moment rather than at the end of a lifetime. This smaller scale of samsara focuses on achieving ways to seeing life from multiple perspectives, which can help one understand life in a much deeper way, by allowing a person to look at his or her actions both in the past and the present, as well as the consequences of those actions. Emerson defines life as a continuous spiral circle or a series of concentric circles. He writes in his essay, "Circles," "The life of a man is a self evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles and that without end" (175). Each circle represents a cycle of samsara within a demarcated period in one's life. As an individual reaches the edges of each circle, he or she bursts through the perimeter, marking the end of one cycle of samsara and the beginning of another. At the beginning of a new "life," each individual begins at the center and begins spiraling outwards as he or she goes through new experiences, and once he or she has learned all that there is to know in that moment, his or her spiral comes to a close. When the individual has reached the maximum knowledge that can be gained in that one moment, the spiral circle edges

closer to perimeters that enclose this “life.” During a pivotal moment in that “life,” the individual will connect the dots, and burst through the limiting perimeters and break through the barriers. Breaking through the barriers here is similar to breaking a cycle of samsara. Instead of remaining stuck within the enclosed circle, the individual has the ability to expand and increase their perspective and knowledge pool. This process leads progressively towards attaining true and unlimited knowledge, or enlightenment.

“Fate”

In this essay, Emerson is trying to make sense of the notion of fate and how to overcome its limitations. He comes to terms with fate by reconciling the seemingly opposites of power and limitation, creating a unity. This unity becomes a paradox because it creates a plane in which both of these opposites can exist simultaneously. The unity demonstrates that one phenomenon cannot exist without the other; thus, they are necessary to one another. Emerson writes, “Everything is pusher or pushed; and matter and mind are in a perpetual tilt and balance” (276). However, oppositions, not dualities are a necessity, because within them, Emerson finds the resolution of paradox; these oppositions must exist in order for the mind to struggle, to come to terms with, understand and appreciate the connections in life, and from this one can find a balance or unity among the two. Unlike dualities, which represent a binary or a pair, opposites are seemingly contradictory aspects of experience that can, ultimately, according to Emerson, be reconciled, in the end resulting in unity or balance. One cannot exist without the other. Everything is interconnected within the over-soul.

The notions of “Blessed Unity” and “Beautiful Necessity,” from Emerson’s essay “Fate,” suggest many similarities with the Buddhist concept of enlightenment. Emerson believed that the paradoxes of “Blessed Unity” and “Beautiful Necessity,” provide an alternative way of resolving



oppositions. The paradox becomes an alternative solution for opposites because it erases the idea that something must be one thing or the other, when in reality a balance of both is necessary in one's life. "Blessed unity" represents the over-soul because the harmony that is required connects everything together. This relates to the concept of no-self within samsara because it (samsara) is a vicious cycle that is continuously in motion because the self cannot let go of its ego. "Beautiful necessity" describes the struggles in life which help us appreciate and see beauty in what we have. "Beautiful necessity" is similar to the notion of impermanence and suffering one experiences in life. By acknowledging impermanence and dukkha, the individual understands the struggles of life and comes to appreciate the life he or she is given.

#### TURNING AWAY FROM BUDDHISM

There are many parallels between Emerson's philosophy and Buddhism. Many of the essential ideals in Emerson's philosophy share common ground with Buddhist ideals. Emerson's notion of the over-soul is similar to the Buddhist concept of no-self or oneness, because both emphasize the lack of boundaries that are used to define individuals. Emerson similarly shares a common sense of karma, that is, good deeds may only be defined as good if they are done with good intentions and motivations. Despite the many similarities, however, there are some important differences between these two ways of thinking. Transcendentalism was a social movement protesting the general state of society, and Buddhism was and is a religion.

One of the crucial distinctions between Transcendentalism and Buddhism is the definition of the self each expresses. Dunston observes, "The doing is what matters to Emerson, not the having done. Buddhist accounts of the self focus on structure and process instead of contents or products" (31). Emerson is a man of action. His focus is more on the context of the doing itself rather than the process, the meaning (context) behind the action rather than the actual

doing itself (process). He is more spontaneous; thus, the result of his actions would be more organic, which is what Emerson values. He values living in the moment, the doing rather than the having done. A practicing Buddhist would have to be more mindful of the structures and processes of the self because such practice requires a lot of discipline. The path to attaining enlightenment is very extensive and elaborate.

In contrast, Emerson has a more relaxed approach. His embracing of these basic Buddhist ideologies captures the essence of the philosophy without the need for strict discipline. The goal for Transcendentalism is to attain a more organic sense of enlightenment. As mentioned before, enlightenment is not about gaining, but about losing. To attain enlightenment means understanding emptiness in a slightly different way. This new perspective comes from the experience of knowing that everything is interconnected, which means that nothing can exist without the existence of something else. Perhaps Emerson's enlightenment has resulted from his concept of self-reliance. By becoming self-reliant, one can exist independently, because there is less of a need to depend on society. Blau notes that Emerson understood that human beings require social contact, but he goes on to state the significance of the private self,

... [Emerson] considered that without rooting in society any person is lost. People are nothing except in relation to other people, and yet, in his sense, the essential human being is the private self. What seems paradoxical in the apposition of these two ideas is resolved, in Emerson's thought, by the belief that the private self does not exist for itself, but for the contribution that it can make to the human race.

(85)

Emerson consistently places an emphasis on the importance of the private self. The private self embodies the Transcendentalist ideal that the reform of the individual would be

mirrored in society, which would result in a social reform. The notion that the private self only exists because of contributions it can make to society is ironic, considering the whole point of being self-reliant is to remain a nonconformist, but in Emerson's view, society gains from the individual rather than the other way around. People depend on one another for survival, but it is the private self who contributes to the existence of society. It is the individuals or self(s) who make the existence of society possible, because society is a composite of people, individual persons. Each person adds something individual or unique to the group, which is what makes society as diverse as it is. The private self is a reflection of a person's true self, because within his or her deepest thoughts, there are no social pressures to conform to a group. This is what Emerson meant when he wrote that men should live as their private selves within society, because when each man acts according to their own thoughts and ideas, they are then self-reliant. The achievement of self-reliance within the population will result in a reform in society because people will no longer feel the need to conform to the majority, simply for the sake of conformity.

A limitation has been set on this kind of relationship, however, because of the lack of true independence. In his essay "Fate," Emerson seems to acknowledge the limitations set on man by the universe, but Emerson's idea of limitation does not match up to the kind of limitation defined in Zen Buddhism. The notion of limitation in Zen Buddhism refers to the limitation of knowledge. However, in "Fate," Emerson writes, "The revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom" (269). Here Emerson is implying that knowledge is power. By displaying a revelation of thought, man is able to break out of servitude to the forces of Fate and into freedom. This contradicts the Zen Buddhist ideals in two ways. The first has already been mentioned above, i.e. the Buddhist concern about the limitations of knowledge. Being aware of the limitations of knowledge allows one to see the faults in depending too much upon knowledge

because the Zen notion of no-mind states that one cannot fully absorb everything around them if their mind is distracted by thoughts. The second contradiction is the notion of no-mind.

Emerson's philosophy contradicts the Buddhist concept of no-mind because for him, it is the mind that leads one to attaining enlightenment. In contrast, Buddhists believe that having no-mind is necessary for satori because it eliminates duality.

## CONCLUSION

Both Zen Buddhism and Transcendentalism share the fact that they are anti-institutional. Zen Buddhism did not recognize itself as a philosophy, but rather as a way of life. Transcendentalism, on the other hand, was a counter-cultural movement created in protest against the prevailing norms of society during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is ironic these ideologies became the very thing they were against. Emerson believed that one should follow the words of his own mind, rather than the words from the past, as read in literary and historical works. He advocated for self-reliance, yet his essay came to function for some like the books he criticizes in many of his other essays, because he is writing to men *telling* them to go out and pursue their individualism. Despite the irony, Buddhism still made a huge impact on Ralph Waldo Emerson, who made a large impact on not just American literature, but history. Many parallels can be drawn between the ideologies of Buddhism and Emerson's own ideas, but these served as mere inspirations rather than exact models. From this inspiration, Emerson was able to contribute to a counter-culture during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the social and political issues have changed drastically throughout the past century, some of these traditional American transcendentalist ideals can still be applied today.

Each generation looks to the one before for guidance. Although the contexts have changed over time, some philosophies are cemented into the foundations of American culture

and are passed down from one generation to the next. One of these foundations included the ideologies of transcendentalism. The form and issues may look different on the surface, but the foundations are unmistakable.

## TRANSCENDENTALISM TODAY

Transcendentalism began as a counter cultural movement or a new way of thinking. Although it was short lived, the movement still had a great impact on American literature and history. The short lived movement was created as a way to protest against the corruption and loss of individuality due to technology. Sadly, though, everything Emerson had anticipated has become reality. As technology continues to advance, the younger generations are drifting further and further away from the core values of human dignity. As society is searching for a stronger wireless connection, there is a disconnection between human beings. People are losing the ability to feel compassion for one another, because they cannot connect without the help of some sort of technical device. Without human contact, humanity will be lost in translation among all of this technology. This will result in the loss of basic communication skills, such as having a normal conversation on the phone or even in person.

Another issue over time shared with Emerson is the rise in consumerism, especially in the United States. Being a capitalist country, it thrives on industrialism and consumerism. If the focus of one's life is materialism, he or she can never be satisfied, because there will never be enough. He or she will be stuck in the cycle of samsara because of their inability to let go of the materialism that acts as an anchor, weighing them down. The cycle continues because once he or she purchases the latest technology, a few months later a newer model is out on the market. This is what Emerson was worried about happening with society during his own time, but fast forward to over 100 years later, and the problem is still prevalent. The rise in materialism creates a

money-hungry society that will always want more. Evidence shows the dramatic shift in the motives behind pursuits of higher education. More students build their future life around a college major that will provide a hefty pay check, rather than pursuing a subject they are passionate about. College has become more of an investment for a huge payout than an investment for the sake of learning. Also, colleges have now become more like corporations than educational facilities. It seems that people have misinterpreted Emerson's definition of self-reliance. The definition of self-reliance within the general population seems to be the notion of individualism and freedom, which means having the freedom to do whatever one wants. These notions of individualism and freedom seem to be based on selfish motives. Rather than working as a team, many people embrace the free-for-all mind set, meaning everyone is on their own and in a competition against one another. This ideology has become a stereotype for the country: one can come here and build him or herself from ground up with hard work and dedication, but this is not what Emerson envisioned for his notion of self-reliance. He believed that self-reliance would ultimately lead to a common good, rather than a selfish, capitalistic society.

There are many negative attributes about society today, due to the advancements in technology, but it would not be fair to ignore the minority of those who do make an effort to carry out some Emersonian ideology. One of the major examples of transcendentalism today is the Green movement and the efforts to preserve the earth. The Green movement is an effort to reduce the waste and carbon footprints left behind by society in order to preserve the earth. This demonstrates a devotion and love for nature and the environment. Emerson would scold society for the deforestation and mistreatment of nature we engage in because we are hungry for its resources, but would rejoice at the efforts made by people to preserve and save nature and the environment.

Transcendentalism is about finding the goodness in humanity. Volunteering is a way for people to express their kindness by donating their time. It is not just about helping those who are poor, but everyone who is in need. Humans are programmed to sympathize and care for one another. Emotions are the foundation of relationships. The innate goodness in humans allows them to open up and share their stories with one another. By developing these connections, men and women are demonstrating their ability to do good by donating their time and efforts because of altruistic motives. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson wrote that charity is penance that people pay to erase themselves of their sins. He believed that true charity would be to donate one's time and effort rather than one's money. There are no shortcuts to doing good work. Good can only be done when there are no ulterior motives.

Transcendentalism has gotten a makeover in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but society is so focused on working that it often gets ignored. The common saying 'work hard, play hard' is definitely relevant for today's society. However, there is more to life than work and play. Sometimes, one just needs to sit and relax, truly relax. Perhaps it is a day out in nature or sitting in silent solitude. Sometimes, it is the little things that have the largest impacts in people's lives because having less materialistic things means having more spiritual and fulfilling experiences.

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