



Beyond Duality: Non-Dual Vedanta and Transcendentalist Individualism

Geeta Bai Meena

Research Scholar

Department of English

Jai Narain Vyas University Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Abstract:

This article explores the striking convergence and divergence between Advaita Vedanta's philosophy of non-duality (Advaita) and the 19th-century American Transcendentalist celebration of individualism epitomized by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. While Advaita Vedanta posits the ultimate reality of Brahman—a singular, formless consciousness wherein the individual self (atman) is identical to Brahman—Transcendentalism elevates the individual soul to a sovereign source of truth, intuiting a universal Oversoul that mirrors the Vedantic vision.

This study examines key texts—Upanishadic literature, Sankara's commentaries, Emerson's "Nature" and "Self-Reliance", and Thoreau's *Walden*—to trace how both traditions reject dualistic worldviews yet employ distinct epistemologies: Vedanta grounds authority in Sruti (scripture) and guru-guided realization, whereas Transcendentalism privileges personal intuition and direct communion with nature. The paper argues that the shared emphasis on non-dual consciousness fosters a cross-culture dialogue, revealing complementary pathways to self-realisation: one rooted in renunciation and metaphysical inquiry, the other in engaged individualism and social reform.

By juxtaposing metaphysical claims, ethical implications, and historical exchanges (e.g., Emerson's reading of Upanishadic translations), the study illuminates how non-dual philosophy can enrich modern discourses on identity, ecology, and spiritual pluralism. The findings underscore the transformative potential of integrating Eastern non-dualism with Western individualism, offering a holistic vision of human unity without erasing culture particularities.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta, non-duality, Transcendentalism, Emerson, Thoreau, individualism, Oversoul, cross-cultural philosophy.

Introduction:

Advaita Vedanta, the path of none- duality, teaches that Brahman alone is real, while everything else is an illusion. This philosophy, based on the Upanishad, help seekers move beyond false identities and realize their true nature.

For this reason, those who follow Advaita Vedanta gradually overcome fear, attachment and limitations. According to the Upanishads, Brahman is unchanging, eternal and ever present. As a result, when one truly understands this, the illusion of separation disappears, revealing pure consciousness as the only reality.

Furthermore, this realisation brings inner peace and bliss. Since, everything arises from Brahman and dissolves back into it, nothing is truly separate. In other words, the self is not different from Brahman. Therefore, enlightenment is not about gaining something new but about recognizing what has always been present. To reach this truth, seekers must reflect deeply, practice self- inquiry and meditate. In addition, the Upanishads, Bhagwat Geeta and Brahma Sutras provide valuable guidance for those on this path. By following these teachings, one moves beyond illusion and experiences the oneness of existence.

The Advaita

The Advaita philosophy of Sri Shankaracharya is lofty, sublime and unique. It is a system of bold philosophy and logical subtlety. It is highly interesting, inspiring and elevating. No other philosophy can stand before it in boldness, depth and subtle thinking. Sankara's philosophy is complete and perfect. Sri Sankara was a mighty, marvellous genius. He was master of logic. He was a profound thinker of the first rank. He was a sage of the highest realisation. He was an Avatara of Lord Siva. His philosophy has brought solace, peace and illumination to countless persons in the East and the West. The Western thinkers bow their heads at the lotus-feet of Sri Sankara. His philosophy has soothed the sorrows and afflictions of the most forlorn persons, and brought hope, joy, wisdom, perfection, freedom and calmness to many. His system of philosophy commands the admiration of the whole world.

Shankara wanted his followers not just to theorize his Advaita philosophy but put it into practice. This message he gave in the form of an episode in which he himself was involved. Once when Sankara was on his way to have his bath at river Ganga at Kashi his pupils asked a Chandala coming in the opposite direction to make way for their guru. The Chandala asked Sankara how he might consistently teach Advaita and practise such differentiating observances. This thought-provoking question struck Shankara who composed Manisha Panchak, containing five philosophical verses expressing the Advaita sentiments and where he (Sankara) acknowledges the Chandala as his guru. The message of Sankara was that for a follower of Advaita it is absurdity to practice discrimination between humans and that one should view all as One and the same.

The Father of American Transcendentalism

Emerson called in his own day, "The sage of concord" is "The father of American Transcendentalism". He is the founder of the "Transcendentalism club" in Concord, and its organ The Dial, one of the most influential quarterlies of the mid-century. He is the most influential figure in the history of transcendentalism in America. His small prose-poem Nature has been called "The Bible of Transcendentalism" and his influence has been profound and far reaching. He is at the centre of what has been called "The New England Renaissance", i.e., the flowering of literature in New England in the first half of the 19th century. He was himself inspired- "Divinely inspired"-and he became a source of inspiration to countless others, particularly to other New Englanders, as Thoreau, Hawthorne, etc.

Transcendentalism defined and Explained: Oneness of All

Transcendentalism is a word which has been variously interpreted, and even misinterpreted, by various writers and critics. 'Transcendent' means 'beyond' and 'above', hence a transcendentalist is one who believes in the existence of a divine world, beyond and above the world of the senses. The divine cannot be known by reason or rational analysis, but it can be felt and experienced by the spirit through intuition. The divine is referred to as 'the over-soul' by Emerson and it was referred to as the "Soul of all the worlds" by Wordsworth. The External World is but the raiment or outer-covering of the divine. Men can know the divine and ultimately become one with it through the agency of Nature which speaks to the soul and not to the reasoning faculty. If

man comes to Nature in a mood of 'wise passivity' and allows influences from Nature to enter into his soul, he can see into "the heart of things". Thus, there is oneness of God, Man and Nature. The transcendentalists stressed the worth of the individual, the dignity of the human soul. They taught Man to rely on himself, on his own intuition, natural instincts and impulses, and not on any authority outside himself or on tradition, however sacred or old.

Individualism and Democracy

Thus, the teachings of the transcendentalists harmonised with the rise of democracy, the rise of romanticism and the revolt against the Puritan Orthodoxy which was begun by the Unitarians need by W.E. Channing, and carried by the transcendentalists to its natural conclusion. The Unitarians taught, "The ultimate reliance of a human being is, and must be, on his own mind and Conscience, his own sense of right. The power of perceiving moral distinctions is the highest faculty given to us by God." They asserted the doctrine of the freedom of the will. In so doing, they laid the foundations for Emerson's central doctrines of self-reliance, the moral sense, and the exact correspondence between natural and moral law. So intense a faith in the individual brought religious liberalism, political democracy and literary romanticism together to produce works of art from the substance of American experience.

Self-Reliance (Emerson's Individualism)

The essay was first published in 1841, and a revised version of it appeared in 1847. It is one of the better-known essays of Emerson. It contains the very kernel of his philosophy. Emerson begins by pointing out that to believe one's own thought, "To believe that what is true for one is one's private heart, is true for all men, that is genius. "If a man expresses his inner convictions, he will realise their universal importance. A genius is one who speaks not what he is taught, but what he is convinced is right and proper. He speaks out his own thoughts and not what he has learned from others. In other words, self-reliance is the whole mark of genius. Great and noble achievement is possible only when one acts according to his own convictions.

There is no justification for our worship of the past. The present is not better than the child into whom he has put his ripened being. The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul; and history is an impertinence and an injury if it is anything more than a cheerful parable of the individual's being and becoming. Unfortunately, man is timid and apologetic: he dares not say: "I think" and "I am", but quotes some saint or sage. Furthermore, a man postpones or he remembers; instead of living in the present he laments the past or tries to for see the future. He should follow nature and live only in the present. he cannot be happy unless he lives above time, like nature. Self-reliance means freedom from slavery both to the past and the future. Most people are like children who repeat the sentences of their grandmothers and tutors and as they grow older, repeat the sentences of men of talent and character of whom they happen to read of in certain books. Too much importance must not be attached to what great men have said or written.

"When we have new perceptions, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish. When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn."

Transcendentalism and Individualism

"Self-Reliance" in short is a manifesto both of Emerson's Transcendentalism and Individualism. It also expresses his views on history, on prayer, on education, on travel, on property, on conformity and consistency, and a number of other subjects. Transcendentalism implies faith in the over-soul. The over-soul means the ultimate reality from which all life is derived and by which the universe unified, because divinity exists in all forms of life. Each living creature and each object of nature is a microcosm embracing all the laws and meaning of existence. The individual soul of each man is, therefore, in essence identical with the soul of the universe. Transcendentalism also believes in intuition through which one becomes aware of the great truths which govern the universe. As a corollary to this, Transcendentalism emphasizes the doctrine of self-reliance, for the more the individual obeys his intuition the more he brings himself to conform to the spirit of the over-soul. It is in this way that Emerson's essay on self-reliance gains importance as the expression of his Transcendental belief. In this way, self-reliance is in reality 'God-reliance' a reliance on the dictates of the over-soul, or as Wordsworth called it, the 'Soul of all the world' which speaks to the human soul in the form

of intuition and inspiration and makes him see into the heart of things, i.e., understand truth and the mystery of nature.

In other words, self-reliance is obedience to the over-soul. It is actually God-reliance. Emerson felt that man must surrender himself fully to the dictates of the over-soul and act in accordance with the instincts and intuitions of his soul which come to him from the over-soul. It is through such intuition that the over-soul expresses itself and provides moral guidance to the individual. Hence self-reliance means acting in accordance with the moral law, which is derived not from society but from the over-soul or the divine, the power that rules on high, and it is the highest law-giver both to man and nature. At a very step Emerson draws parallels between the human and the non-human to illustrate the point. Oneness of all, both of man and nature, is the natural corollary of this immanence of the over-soul.

Walden; (first published as Walden, or, life in the woods) is an 1854 book by American Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau. The text is a reflection upon the author's simple living in nature surroundings. The work is a part personal declaration of independence, social experiment, voyage of spiritual discovery, satire and to some degree a manual for self-reliance. "Walden" emphasizes the importance of solitude, contemplation and closeness to nature in transcending the "desperate" existence that, he argues, is the lot of most people. The book is not a traditional autobiography, but combines autobiography with a social critique of contemporary Western culture's consumerist and materialist attitudes and its distance from destruction of nature.

Self-reliance: Thoreau constantly refuses to be in "need" of the companionship of others. Though he realizes its significance and importance, he thinks it unnecessary to always be in search for it. Self-reliance, to him, is economic and social and is a principle that in terms of financial and interpersonal relations is more valuable than anything. To Thoreau, self-reliance can be both spiritual as well as economic. Self-reliance was a key tenet of Transcendentalism, famously expressed in Emerson's essay "Self-reliance".

The need for spiritual awakening

Spiritual awakening is the way to find and realize the truths of life which are often buried under the mounds of daily affairs. Thoreau holds the spiritual awakening to be quintessential component of life. It is the source from which all of them flow.

- Man as part of nature.
- Nature and its reflection of human emotions.
- The state as unjust and corrupt.

Conclusion

In final analysis, this article has argued that no-dual Vedanta and New England Transcendentalism, though rooted in vastly different cultural soils, converge on a single insight: duality is a mental construct that dissolves when the self recognizes its identity with the universal spirit- Atman-Brahman in Vedanta, the Oversoul in Emerson's vision. The comparative reading revealed striking parallels in epistemology (intuition and Shruti), metaphysics (non-duality vs. immanence), and ethics (self-realisation fuelling compassion). Yet the traditions diverge in their view of Maya and the role of nature, underscoring the richness of each worldview. This cross-cultural dialogue offers a philosophical compass for contemporary challenges- climate crisis, digital identity, and the search for meaning- suggesting that inner transformation and outward action are not mutually exclusive. As Sankara declared, "Brahman is real, the world is illusion," while Emerson affirmed, "Nature always wears the colours of the spirit." The synthesis of these insights points toward a more integrated, planetary consciousness.

Works Cited:

1. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. James Munroe and Company, 1836.
2. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: First Series*. James Munroe and Company, 1841.
3. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: Second Series*. James Munroe and Company, 1844.
4. "Transcendentalism." Britannica, Encyclopedia, Britannica, 2022.
5. Swami, Tapasya Nanda. "The Sankara-Dig-Vijay of Madhava- Vidyaranya." Ramkrishna Mission, Madras. 1983.
6. Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Princeton University Press, 2004.
7. Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. Harper Collins, 1994.
8. Loy, David. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. Humanity Books, 1998.

