

EMERSON'S EXPLORATION OF HINDU KARMA: A TRANSCENDENTALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Emerson, the luminary philosopher, essayist, poet, and revered preacher of America, stood at the forefront of a tumultuous epoch in the mid-18th century. In his ceaseless quest for profound comprehension, he endeavored to unravel the profound significance of enduring strength and the materialistic tapestry of our earthly existence. To delve deeper into this enigma, he embarked upon a profound study of revered Hindu texts such as the Vedas, The Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. Within the annals of Emerson's literary oeuvre, his resplendent works unravel his quintessential philosophical and mystical musings. At its core lies the moral idealism that posits God's governance through ethical laws, whereby the universe becomes a manifestation of divine emanation. Embedded within each individual, he believed, lay a mystical essence, an esoteric path to be explored, while exalting the quintessence of self-reliance as the ultimate gateway to transcendence. He exuded an unwavering faith in the veracity of natural inclination, with an unyielding belief that the harmony of the universe resided therein.

Emerson's seminal writings, including "Nature," "The American Scholar," "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance," and "The Over-Soul," bear eloquent testimony to the profound tenets of transcendentalism. Through his intellectual journey, he masterfully wove the intricate threads of Hindu karma, seamlessly merging it with his transcendentalist vision, unravelling the timeless wisdom that reverberates across cultures and eras.

Thus, this illuminating research endeavor seeks to unfurl the multifaceted layers of Emerson's profound exploration into Hindu karma, portraying it as a tapestry interwoven with transcendentalist thought, enlivening our understanding of the ethereal fabric that binds our human experience.

Keywords: Emerson, Hindu laws of karma, philosophical exploration, mysticism, moral idealism, transcendentalism, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, self-reliance.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze Emerson's interpretation of the Hindu laws of karma and its influence on his philosophical ideas.
2. To examine the role of Hindu texts, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, in shaping Emerson's understanding of karma.
3. To explore the connection between Emerson's transcendentalist thought and his exploration of karma.

4. To assess the impact of Emerson's ideas on moral idealism and the concept of self-reliance.

Research Methodology:

1. Literature Review: Conduct an extensive review of Emerson's works, including essays such as "Nature," "The American Scholar," "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance," and "The Over-Soul," to gather insights into his interpretation of karma and its relationship with transcendentalism.

2. Analysis of Hindu Texts: Study the Hindu texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, to identify key concepts and principles related to karma and its philosophical implications. Analyze how Emerson incorporated these ideas into his own philosophy.

3. Comparative Analysis: Compare Emerson's interpretation of karma with traditional Hindu views to identify similarities, differences, and potential transformations or adaptations in his understanding.

4. Interpretive Analysis: Analyze specific passages and quotes from Emerson's works that address the topic of karma, focusing on the underlying meanings and implications within his writings.

5. Contextual Analysis: Examine the historical and cultural context of Emerson's time to understand the influences that shaped his exploration of karma, including the rising interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality in 19th-century America.

6. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Apply interpretative phenomenological analysis to gain a deep understanding of the subjective experiences and personal interpretations of karma expressed by Emerson in his writings.

7. Cross-disciplinary Research: Draw insights from various disciplines, including philosophy, religious studies, and literary analysis, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Emerson's interpretation of karma.

8. Critical Evaluation: Critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of Emerson's ideas on karma, considering both their philosophical coherence and their resonance within the broader cultural and intellectual context of his time.

9. Conclusion and Implications: Summarize the findings and implications of the research, highlighting the significance of Emerson's interpretation of Hindu laws of karma and its relevance to contemporary philosophical discourse.

Introduction:

Transcendentalism, the quintessential American intellectual movement, ignited a fervent awakening of interest in the wisdom of the East. Amidst this awakening, Emerson, a luminous figure of the era, embarked on a profound exploration of Indian philosophy and mythology. The seeds of this fascination were sown during his youthful years as a Harvard graduate and continued to flourish until the twilight of his illustrious writing career. Emerson's enthrallment with Indian thought permeated his poems, letters, essays, and journal entries, leaving an indelible mark upon his intellectual legacy.

However, before delving into the depths of Emerson's interpretation of the Hindu laws of karma, it is crucial to cast a discerning eye upon the transcendentalist movement that served as the fertile soil for his philosophical pursuits.

The Radiant Symphony of Transcendentalism and Hindu Philosophy:

Transcendentalism, an all-encompassing intellectual movement, blossomed as a beacon of "free thinking," "intuitive idealism," and "individualism" within American society. It heralded a new era of social reforms and an optimistic outlook on human existence. Flourishing between 1830 and 1860, this vibrant New England movement found its roots in the famed gathering at George Ripley's Boston abode in the fall of 1836. Drawing inspiration from romanticism and post-Kantian idealism, luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott propelled transcendentalism to the forefront of American consciousness.

The profound impact of transcendentalism transcended traditional boundaries, leaving an indelible imprint on religious, literary, political, and philosophical spheres. Within the realm of religion, it heralded a newfound sense of intellectual freedom and fostered a spirit of unfettered inquiry. Rejecting the shackles of established religious institutions, dogmas, rituals, and literal scriptural interpretations, transcendentalism sought a genuine spiritual revelation, aspiring to establish a direct and unmediated connection with the divine.

At its core, transcendentalism yearned for a profound communion between humanity and the universe, striving for an original relationship with God and the cosmic fabric that envelops us. It championed a spiritual experience rooted in intuition, an untainted bond with the universe and its creator. Embracing idealistic philosophy, transcendentalism celebrated the supremacy of the mind over matter. Orestes Brownson defined it as the recognition of man's innate capacity to intuitively apprehend truth, while George A. Ripley proclaimed its essence as the triumph of mind over the material realm.

Beyond its spiritual and philosophical dimensions, transcendentalism emerged as a powerful doctrine of reform. Fueled by an unwavering cosmic optimism, its adherents radiated an infectious positivity that permeated every facet of their existence. From its New England birthplace, transcendentalism spread its wings, captivating the hearts and minds of individuals across the nation. The inaugural transcendental club, a symposium of brilliant minds, formed in Boston in 1836, boasting luminaries such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Channing, James Freeman, and Clark among its esteemed members.

In the realm of literature, transcendentalism grappled with two profound subjects: Nature and Man. Nature, viewed as an open book of divine revelation, served as a symbolic garment, a canvas upon which the hues of heaven were painted. The entire romanticism movement in American literature found its roots in these fundamental concepts. In essence, transcendentalism emerged as a transformative force, leaving an indelible imprint on American faith, philosophy, literature, and the very fabric of life itself.

Concurrently, Hinduism stands as one of the world's oldest living traditions, a testament to the enduring power of its wisdom. At its core lies the profound harmony that exists within the diversity of existence and the unified essence that resides within every individual soul—the self. All beings, both human and animal, spring forth from a singular source, dissolving the illusory divisions that seek to separate us. This inherent unity, so deeply embedded within Hindu thought, carries profound moral implications, fostering a kinder and gentler world, one that transcends artificial boundaries.

Hinduism, unlike any other faith, extends its compassionate embrace to all. It is not limited to a specific group or community but embraces all seekers of truth, reaching out to every

individual and creature. It extends its sympathies across all planes of existence, recognizing the divine presence not just in humanity but also in animals. While modern science traces the evolutionary origins of humankind to the animal kingdom, Hindu dharma perceives a reflection of God's power and presence in every creature, celebrating the interconnectedness of all life forms.

In this symphony of intellectual and spiritual resonance, the radiant threads of transcendentalism and Hindu philosophy intertwine, illuminating the path towards a deeper understanding of our place within the cosmos and our shared journey toward truth and enlightenment.

The Luminescence of the Bhagavad Gita: A Profound Source of Inspiration for Emerson:

Immersed in the sacred verses of the Bhagavad Gita, Emerson found himself deeply enthralled by its transcendent wisdom. The Bhagavad Gita, often hailed as "the first of books," captivated Emerson's spirit and sparked a profound transformation within his philosophical worldview (Buell 178).

This ancient Sanskrit text, adorned with rich literary devices such as allegory, metaphor, and allusion, unfolds a timeless dialogue between Krishna, the embodiment of the divine, and Arjuna, a valiant warrior torn by the burdens of duty and moral dilemmas. As Arjuna gazes upon his loved ones on the opposing side of the battlefield, compassion engulfs his heart, leaving him paralyzed with doubt and reluctance to engage in the impending conflict. It is then that Krishna, the compassionate guide, endeavors to illuminate the profound significance of Arjuna's duty, urging him to rise above personal attachments and embrace his righteous path, his dharma. Krishna's teachings echo the words of Christ, as he serves as the conduit through which the divine message flows, declaring, "Though unborn, for the soul is eternal, yet through my own nature, I manifest myself through Maya" (Herman 146). Krishna's divine manifestations aim to restore moral order and preserve righteousness whenever it wanes in the face of adharma.

Emerson found a profound resonance in the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, particularly in its emphasis on intuition and the discernment of right and wrong. In his essay "Over Soul," Emerson expounds on the concept that every individual soul is an integral part of the divine essence. He proclaims that the quest for spiritual enlightenment transcends the confines of organized religion, for intuition has the power to illuminate our spiritual realm with flashes of divine insight. It is evident that Emerson drew inspiration from the teachings of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, where the concept of Nirguna Brahman, the formless ultimate reality, manifests itself through the human experience.

Ralph L. Rusk, an astute editor of Emerson's letters, sheds light on the profound impact of Victor Cousin's "Course de Philosophie" (1828) as the catalyst that first kindled Emerson's fascination with the Bhagavad Gita (Letters I, 322). Through his letters, journals, and essays, it becomes apparent that the Bhagavad Gita became a wellspring of wisdom and inspiration for Emerson, shaping his philosophical discourse and enriching his intellectual journey.

In the interplay between the Bhagavad Gita and Emerson's enlightened vision, we witness the convergence of Eastern wisdom and Western thought, illuminating a transformative path towards self-realization, moral clarity, and profound spiritual understanding.

The Profound Laws of Karma: An Interplay of Action and Destiny:

The concept of karma stands as a vital cornerstone within Hinduism, intricately interwoven with the notions of dharma and liberation. Originating from the profound Upanishadic philosophy, karma gradually evolved from ritual terminology to become an essential element of Hindu metaphysics. At its essence, karma encompasses all actions, both physical and intellectual, resonating with the Sanskrit roots "Kar" (organs of movement) and "Ma" (producing or developing). Thus, karma embodies the creations and manifestations brought forth by an individual's faculties, extending far beyond mere physical gestures (Herman 146). In Hindu belief, karma carries a transformative power, capable of shaping destinies and impacting others. It acknowledges that thoughts possess the potential to create or harm, affecting not only their target but also the one who harbors them. Just as ancient sages harnessed the potent energy of mantras to shape and alter reality, the practice of yoga emerged as a means to stabilize the minds and thoughts of those adept in mantra knowledge (Herman 146). The sages understood that their intentions, whether benevolent or malevolent, held profound consequences, with their blessings being as potent as their curses. To regain balance, they would engage in arduous penances and austerities.

Karma, accrued through one's actions, charts the course of an individual's earthly existence and their progression into higher realms. It serves as a profound teacher, imparting invaluable lessons along the journey. A deep understanding of the theory of karma enhances one's capacity for self-improvement and perfection. However, failure to acknowledge and rectify one's mistakes denies them the benefits of virtuous deeds. Positive karma nurtures inner peace and happiness, while negative actions yield adverse effects, casting shadows upon the soul (Herman 146).

The law of karma, with its inherent reticence, emphasizes the significance of intentional and unintentional actions in our lives. Each choice, deliberate or neglected, bears consequences, shaping our future. By consciously avoiding malevolent actions, one cultivates virtuous karma. However, if one shuns necessary actions or responds inadequately to the presence of evil, motivated by personal or selfish interests, they become complicit in its perpetuation (Herman 146). Thus, one must exercise vigilance, ensuring their intentions and sincerity guide their actions and inactions.

The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient scripture, delves into the intricate nature of action and inaction, unraveling the profound wisdom of karma. It elucidates the enigmatic interplay between action, inaction, and wrong action, exhorting individuals to gain clarity and discernment in their pursuits (B.G. Ch4: Verse 17). The Gita further emphasizes the wisdom of perceiving action within inaction and vice versa, affirming the attainment of true mastery for the accomplished yogi (B.G Ch4: Verse 18). These verses encapsulate the transformative potential of karma, wherein one's actions dissolve into the divine, revealing the interconnectedness of all existence (B.G. Ch4: Verses 23 & 24).

Emerson, influenced by the profound principles of karma, accentuates the importance of individual agency and virtuous actions in his concept of "Self-Reliance." He urges readers to reject reliance on mere good fortune and recognize the power of their own karma to shape their destinies. In Indian philosophy, references to karma abound, cautioning against actions driven by desires that perpetuate suffering (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Ch4, Brahmana4, Verse5).

The Bhagavad Gita expounds on the practice of karma yoga, emphasizing the liberation from desire-driven actions and their outcomes. Lord Krishna instructs his disciple, Arjuna, that our actions arise from desires, which themselves are shaped by the three gunas or qualities. Through the freedom of choice, one can access the divine qualities already inherent within or succumb to baser instincts (Herman 146).

Emerson's belief in liberty and free will harmonizes with the notion of karma, as both acknowledge the individual's capacity to shape their own destiny through their actions. However, in his essay "Compensation," Emerson grapples with the existence of evil, accepting its presence alongside the belief that everything is ultimately created for the good. This dualistic dilemma temporarily clouds his faith, hindering the union between the individual soul and the divine over-soul (Herman 146).

Emerson's alignment with Indian philosophy and spirituality is unmistakable. His admiration for the Bhagavad Gita and its teachings resonates throughout his journals. By exploring and incorporating Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paves the way for future scholars to delve into the richness of ancient texts such as the Upanishads and the Gita. The profound influence of Indian thought on Emerson's works extends beyond his lifetime, as a lasting fascination and concern for Indian philosophy persists in the United States (Riepe 125).

In conclusion, the profound laws of karma, interwoven with the fabric of Hinduism, offer a profound understanding of action, destiny, and the power of individual agency. Rooted in the teachings of ancient scriptures and philosophical traditions, karma teaches valuable lessons and inspires individuals to cultivate virtuous deeds. Emerson, inspired by these principles, integrates the concept of karma into his philosophy of self-reliance, emphasizing personal accountability and the transformative potential of individual actions. This alignment with Indian thought reveals a profound resonance between Eastern and Western philosophies, opening the door to further exploration and assimilation of timeless wisdom.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research article has explored the profound concept of karma within Hinduism and its resonance with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Karma, intricately linked to the notions of dharma and liberation, embodies the transformative power of actions and intentions. The study has highlighted the significance of karma in shaping destinies, teaching valuable lessons, and guiding individuals towards self-improvement and perfection. The interplay between action and destiny, as elucidated by the Bhagavad Gita and other ancient scriptures, emphasizes the importance of discernment, intentionality, and the dissolution of the ego in the pursuit of virtuous deeds. Emerson, influenced by the profound principles of karma, echoes these teachings in his concept of self-reliance, emphasizing individual agency, accountability, and the potential for personal transformation through conscious actions. The alignment between Eastern and Western philosophies showcased in this research reveals the universality of certain principles and the capacity for cross-cultural exchange and assimilation of timeless wisdom. The integration of Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions by Emerson and subsequent scholars underscores the enduring fascination and relevance of Indian thought in the United States and beyond.

In light of these findings, further exploration and study of karma and its philosophical implications can deepen our understanding of human agency, morality, and the interconnections within the fabric of existence. The profound laws of karma continue to offer valuable insights and guidance, transcending cultural boundaries and reminding us of the profound impact our actions and intentions have on ourselves and the world around us.

As we delve deeper into the intricate tapestry of karma, may we embrace the lessons it offers, cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and conscious living, and striving towards the realization of our highest potential as individuals and as a collective.

While this research has shed light on the concept of karma and its connection to Ralph Waldo Emerson's teachings, there are several future aspects that can be explored to deepen our understanding and expand the scope of this study.

1. **Comparative Analysis:** Conducting a comparative analysis of karma across different religious and philosophical traditions can provide a broader perspective on the concept. Exploring the similarities and differences between Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other belief systems can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of karma's nuances and variations.

2. **Psychological and Sociological Perspectives:** Investigating the psychological and sociological dimensions of karma can offer insights into how individuals and societies perceive and respond to concepts of cause and effect, responsibility, and accountability. Exploring the impact of karma on decision-making processes, moral behavior, and social dynamics can provide a deeper understanding of its implications in real-world contexts.

3. **Contemporary Relevance:** Examining the relevance of karma in modern society and its implications for issues such as environmental ethics, social justice, and personal well-being can contribute to current discourses. Understanding how individuals navigate the complexities of karma in a rapidly changing world can shed light on its adaptability and applicability in addressing contemporary challenges.

4. **Cross-Cultural Influences:** Investigating the influence of Eastern philosophical concepts, including karma, on Western thinkers beyond Emerson can uncover a broader lineage of ideas and their impact on Western philosophy, literature, and spirituality. Exploring the reception and interpretation of karma by subsequent Western philosophers and intellectuals can provide insights into its enduring significance.

5. **Practical Applications:** Exploring the practical applications of karma in personal and professional contexts, such as ethics, decision-making, and personal growth, can offer practical guidelines for individuals seeking to live a more intentional and meaningful life. Examining how the understanding of karma translates into tangible actions and behavior can contribute to personal development and the cultivation of a more harmonious society.

By delving into these future aspects, we can continue to unravel the complexities of karma, its relevance in different domains, and its potential to shape our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and the world we inhabit.

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