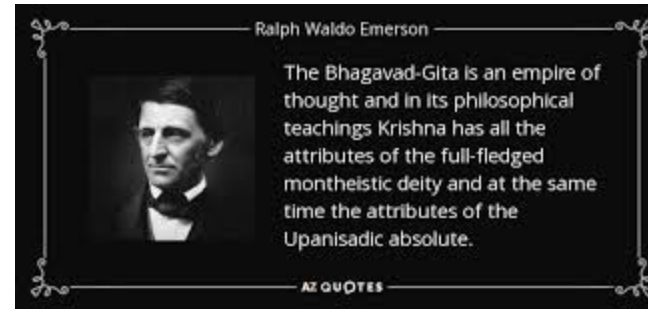
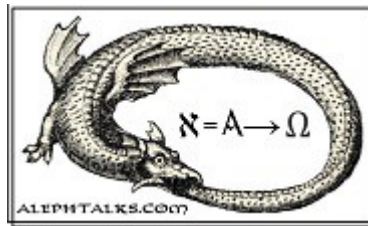
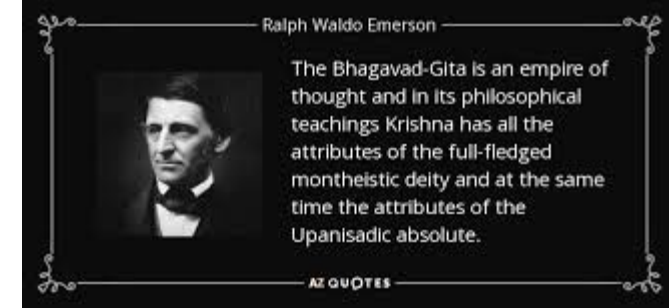


Is Mysticism Where Science, Art and Religion Meet?



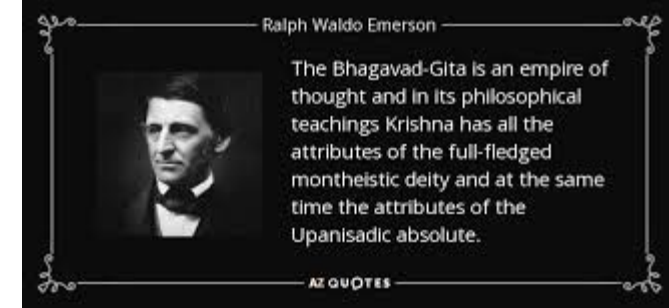
Subject Three Ralph Waldo Emerson Transcendentalism and the Bhagavad-Gita

Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography



- Ralph Waldo Emerson born on May 25, 1803; father dies 1811, graduates Harvard Class of 1821
- 1830: Becomes the sole pastor of church
- 1831: Ellen his wife dies on Feb. 8
- 1832: Emerson resigns his pastorate because of disagreements with over the administration of the Lord's Supper; on Christmas Day, he sails from Boston to Europe
- 1833: Arrives in Malta on Feb. 2 and travels throughout Italy, France (arriving in Paris on June 20), England (arriving in London on July 21), where he visited Coleridge and Wordsworth, and then to Scotland, where he met Thomas Carlyle, beginning a friendship that would include his becoming Carlyle's agent for books published in the U.S.; returns to New York on Oct. 9 and joins his mother in Newton Upper Falls

Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography Continued



1834: Moves to Concord

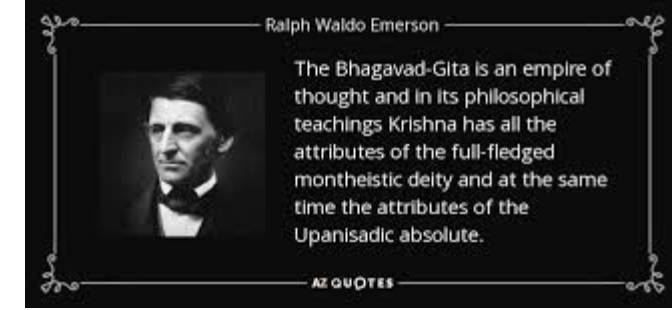
1835: Marries Lydia Jackson and begins his career as a lecturer

1836: Helps to form what will be called “The Transcendental Club” and publishes his first book *Nature*

1837: Delivers address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard (“The American Scholar”), which calls for an American literary independence

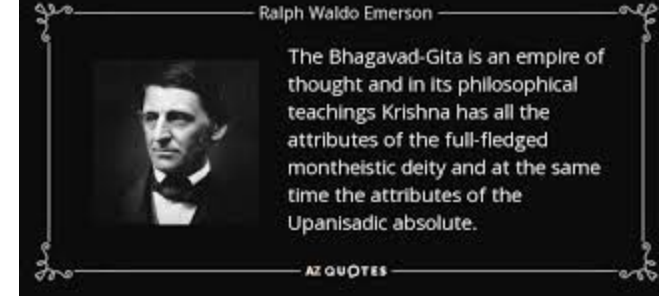
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Divinity School Address Background



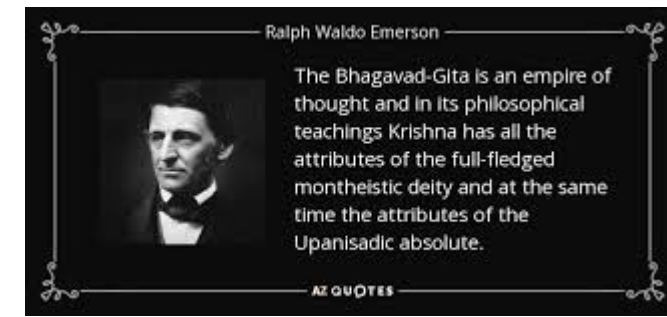
- <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hds/1st-100/hds/19th-century-emerson>
- A quotation from: **Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*. Vol 5. Edited by Merton M. Sealts. Cambridge : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 471. [Print Only]:**
- 1 April [1838]. Cool or cold windy clear day. The Divinity School youths wished to talk with me concerning theism. I went rather heavy-hearted for I always find that my views chill or shock people at the first opening. But the conversation went well & I came away cheered. I told them that the preacher should be a poet smit with the love of the harmonies of moral nature: and yet look at the Unitarian Association & see if its aspect is poetic. They all smiled No. A minister nowadays is plainest prose, the prose of prose. He is a Warming-pan, a Night-chair at sick beds & rheumatic souls; and the fire of the minstrel's eye & the vivacity of his word is exchanged for intense grum-bling enunciation of the Cambridge sort, & for scripture phraseology.

Emerson Divinity School Address



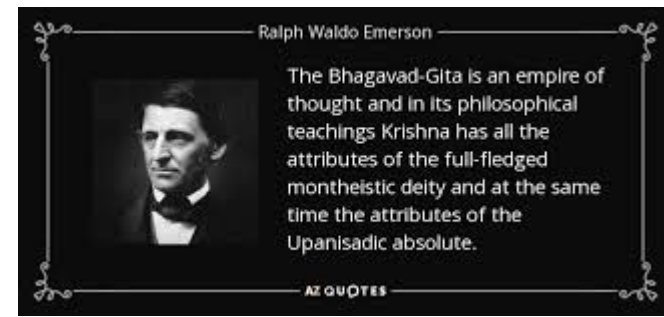
- A quotation from **History of Harvard Divinity School, 1827-1913** [Print Only]:
- July 15, 1838: This evening Rev. R. W. Emerson preached a sermon to the Senior Class. The Chapel was very much crowded, and the discourse listened to with profound attention
- After the address was delivered on July 15, the students were undecided what action to take. On July 16, B. F. Barrett, W. D. Wilson, H. G. O. Blake, F. A. Whitney, and R. C. Waterston signed a letter to Emerson asking for his manuscript and stating that they differed in opinion as to whether it should be published, or printed merely for discretionary circulation, but would follow his advice on this point. On July 19 Simmons, Blake, and Wilson, the original committee, wrote him that some of the class did not assent to his views but that all thanked him. On July 20 Wilson acknowledged a letter from Emerson and stated that it had been decided merely to print, not publish, three hundred copies of the address.

Emerson Divinity School Address



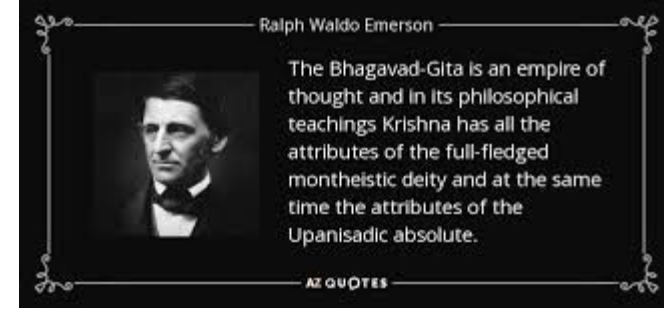
- https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_address_delivered_before_the_senior_class_in_Divinity_College,_Cambridge
- Emerson draws upon
 - the physical reality of the present moment in opening
 - the lushness of nature in high summer and acknowledges the perfect loveliness of the physical world. Man under the summer stars is like a young child, and the world is his toy
- But Emerson quickly turns away from the material and takes up universal laws, which dwarf the significance of nature's beauty and prompt questions about the world and its order. He reiterates ideas developed at length in *Nature*, thus laying the groundwork for what he will say about the state of religion at the current time.

Emerson Divinity School Address



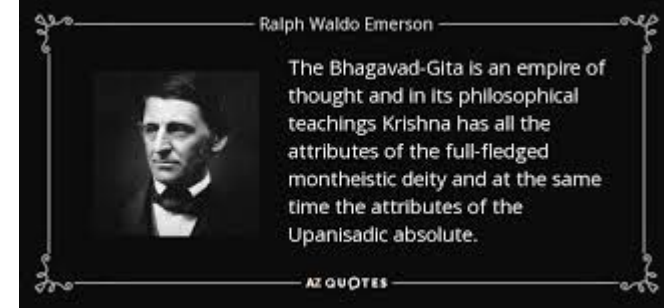
- A beauty more "secret, sweet, and overpowering" than that of nature is apparent when man opens himself to "the sentiment of virtue."
- Man then sees the divine and universal that encompass his existence, and knows that his place in the larger picture assures him a limitless capacity for goodness.
- When man strives to apprehend the absolutes of right, truth, and virtue, he is in harmony with God's creation of the universe for that very purpose, and he pleases God.
- The "sentiment of virtue" is identified as "reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws," which are revealed through experience of the world and through life.
- Universal laws cannot be fully envisioned or articulated, but are evident in our character and actions. The "sentiment of virtue" is at the heart of religion.

Emerson Divinity School Address



- Emerson holds up intuition as the means of perceiving the laws of the soul, which are timeless and absolute, not subject to current values and circumstances.
- Goodness and evil are instantly rewarded or punished in the enlargement or diminishment of the man who practices them — external reward and punishment are beside the point.
- Man *is* God to the degree that he is inwardly virtuous. In subordinating himself to the expression of the divine virtue that speaks through him, he knows himself and realizes his capabilities.
- As he does so, he acts in accordance with the workings of the universe, and his efforts to understand and exercise virtue are reinforced.
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Emerson Divinity School Address

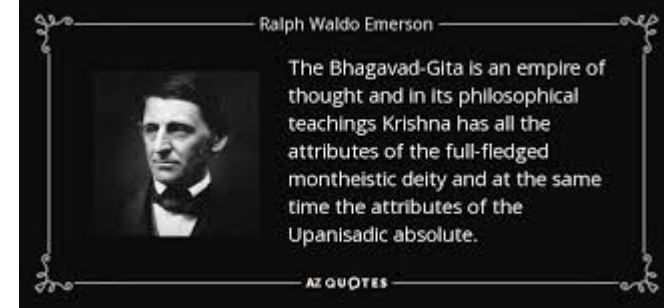


The human soul, in its ability to elevate itself, has the power to determine whether it will go to heaven or hell — that is, there is nothing predetermined about the ultimate fate of the soul. All of this is true because of the unity of man and nature in the divine mind

Because the divine is intrinsically perfect, goodness is real, while evil — the absence of goodness — is not an absolute quality in and of itself.

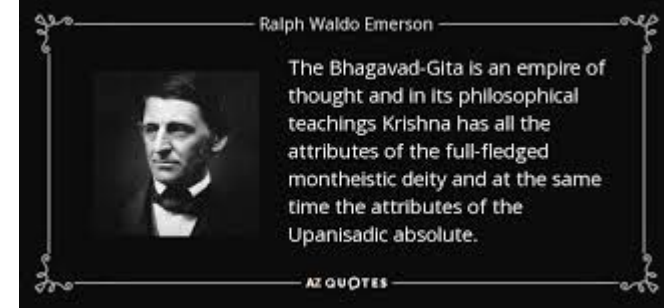
Goodness is identified with life; evil, with death. In straying from goodness, a man progressively loses his connection with the divine, is diminished, and — from a universal point of view, if not physically — ceases to exist.

Emerson Divinity School Address



- The religious sentiment brings joy and makes sense of the world for us, empowers and deifies us. Through the religious sentiment, a man understands that goodness is within him, that he and every other man enjoys a direct relationship with God through intuitive Reason, and that virtue cannot be attained by emulating other men.
- All of society's forms of worship — Oriental as well as western — were founded on an original direct understanding of God by man.
- The importance of intuition to the individual in achieving the religious sentiment, stating that it cannot be received "at second hand," and stresses that the process takes place through inspiration or revelation rather than learning.

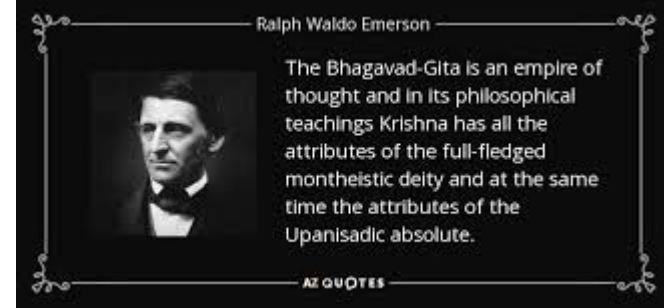
Emerson Divinity School Address



If religion is not based on this intuitive individual connection with the divine, the church is meaningless, man's importance is reduced, and the inner drive to achieve the true religious sentiment is perverted into rejection of a direct relationship with God.

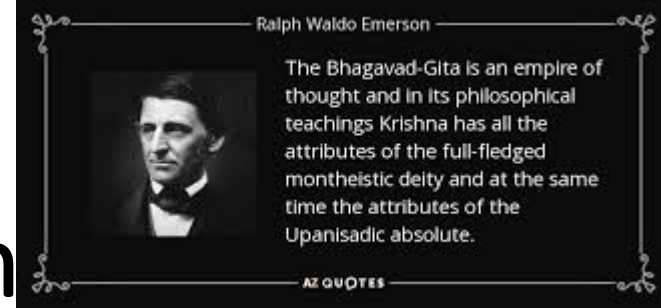
Miracles, prophecy, poetry, the ideal life, the holy life then are present through religion only historically, in its ancient intuitive origin, but not as it currently exists. **Emerson points to the established Christian church as an illustration of this decline of religion from what it was and should be.**

Emerson Divinity School Address



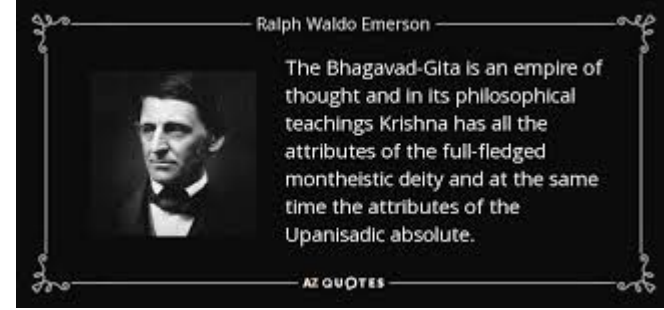
- Jesus belonged to the true race of prophets.
- He saw and lived the inherent relationship between God and man, perceived the human soul as the outlet of the universal soul, and consequently accorded man his proper greatness.
- In his life, he demonstrated the agency of God through men.
- But the example of Jesus has been misused by the church, which quickly came to deny his humanity and to focus upon "the idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric" instead.
- The church has offered false miracles in place of the miracles of human life that Jesus himself recognized, and it has replaced inner perception of truth and goodness with externally imposed commandments.

Emerson Divinity School Address: Two errors in Christianity administration



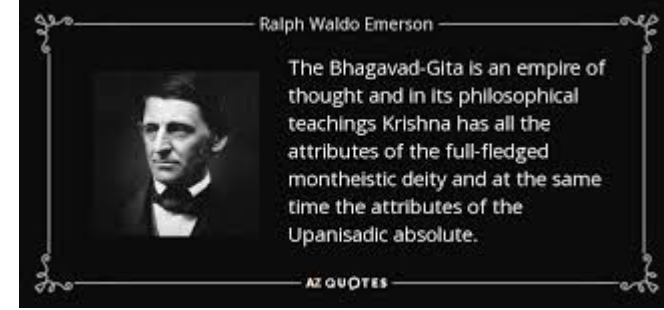
- Rather than promoting the doctrine of the soul as it applies to all, Christianity raises Jesus up above other men. The soul "knows no persons," but indiscriminately invites each man "to expand to the full circle of the universe." Jesus has been made into a kind of eastern monarch, his name associated with official, formal titles that obscure his original position as "friend of man."
- If we accept this view of Jesus and subordinate our own importance to his, we do not recognize our ability also to enter into the divine. The approach that takes God out of man weakens man; that which reveals God within strengthens man. If God is not within, then there is no reason for man's existence, and he will "decease forever." Jesus and the prophets — the "divine bards" — only serve to remind us that our intuitions of the divine do not emanate from us, but from God
- Ordinary men tend to exaggerate the importance of a "great and rich soul" like Jesus, and not to see that they themselves can elevate by "coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves." The current "vulgar tone of preaching" denigrates Jesus as much as it does the rest of mankind. It isolates Jesus and discounts the warmth and vigor that characterized his life and words.

Emerson Divinity School Address



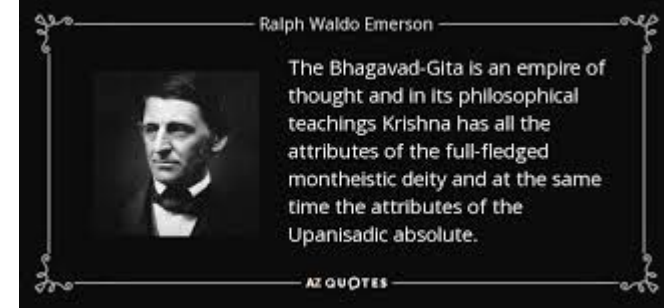
- Secondly, the failure of traditional Christianity to acknowledge as its source "Moral Nature, that Law of laws, whose revelations introduce greatness, — yea, God himself, into the open soul."
- Consequently, men think that revelation happened long ago, once and for all, "as if God were dead," instead of being always possible for every individual. This belief makes it difficult for the minister to preach with meaning and to offer inspiration.
- Because he is obliged to preach a religion that has been formalized and codified, he cannot preach the primacy of the soul. Because "the seer is a sayer," the minister's words do not satisfy his own inner (although sometimes unrecognized) need to impart vision of the "beauty of the soul" to others; nor do they satisfy the innate craving of the members of his congregation to realize their own personal connection to God.

Emerson Divinity School Address



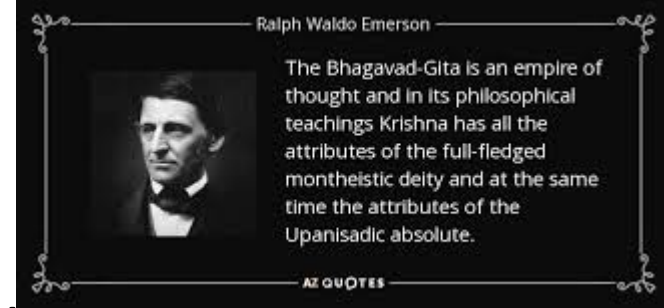
- The death of faith and the lifelessness of the church is deplorable
- The audience of new preachers embarking upon pastoral careers to restore truth, the soul, and intuitive revelation to the church.
- The barrenness of inherited religion must be acknowledged, and ministers must accept their true and exalted function. The preacher's particular office is to express the applicability of the moral sentiment to the duties of life, to help his parishioners relate the ideal to experience
- How infrequently the preacher helps man to see "that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God," and points out that we ourselves, sitting in church on Sunday, come to a better understanding of God than the preacher offers.
- Religious formalism leaves us empty. The preacher who does not convey his own humanity and the truth that he has gleaned from life says nothing that we need to hear.

Emerson Divinity School Address



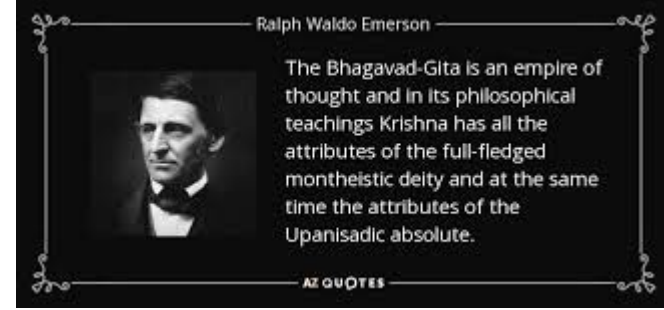
- People so want to enlarge their sense of the moral sentiment that they still go to church. The "good hearer" takes what he can from bad sermons by finding in them echoes of more inspiring words he has heard and thoughts he has had at other times.
- People put up with preaching that does not acknowledge the soul, because the stale doctrines preached were all once intuitively inspired and preserve some of the vigor imparted by their origins.
- The minister is on some level aware of the lack of truth and life in what he preaches, and he suspects that he falls short of fulfilling his duty. He cannot even invite men to the Lord's Supper in good conscience, because he is unable to bring warmth to this rite, the "hollow, dry, creaking formality" of which is "too plain."

Emerson Divinity School Address



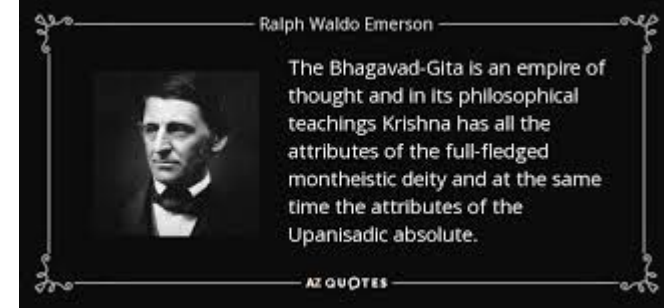
- There are ministers who bring life to public worship. The exceptions, he says, are found not so much in the examples of a few extraordinary preachers as in the rare sincere moments of all.
- By and large, preaching is hindered by tradition, by lack of a sense of the essentials of true religion — the soul, and the absolutes toward which the soul strives.
- By ignoring man's moral nature, historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, takes the joy out of religion, and invalidates the very reason for the ministry's existence.
- The results are devastating — "the soul of the community is sick and faithless," man despises himself, and fails to achieve the goodness of which he is capable. People are leaving the church in droves. The loss of worship is the worst of all possible calamities

Emerson Divinity School Address



- What can be done to redeem the church: the fledgling ministers in his audience need to recognize and preach the importance of the soul, thereby restoring man to his place of importance, and to combat the notion that religion is static and must be accepted as received
- Do not fear the presentation of Jesus as a man, and show what God is, not what God was to other men. True Christianity — a faith like Christ's in the boundless capabilities of man — has been lost through our tendency to trust in established schemes of religion rather than in the power of the individual soul.
- Only the soul can restore to man a sense of the divine within himself: "to go alone; to refuse the good models, . . . and dare to love God without mediator or veil," and in so doing to inspire their congregations to break from conformity. provided are key, **the Sabbath and the institution of preaching**. Both will become meaningful again if life and conscience are restored to religion.

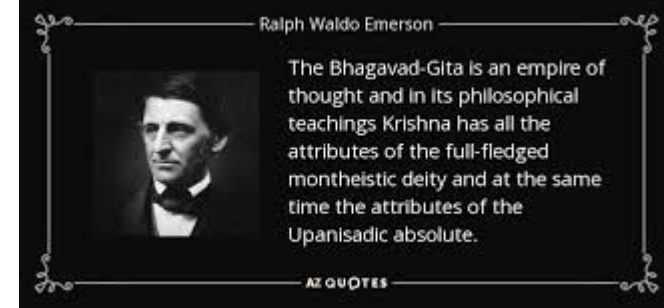
Emerson Divinity School Address



If ministers "acquaint men at first hand with Deity," their flocks will respond with love and gratitude. Society does not encourage development of the "absolute ability and worth" of every person, but after we form a direct connection with God, "the all-knowing Spirit," we will not care about society's values, which preoccupy us only as much as we allow them to.

We must be independent of the opinions of others and draw upon the resources within ourselves, regardless of consequences. Do not establish new rites and forms, but rather breath life back into those already in existence. If we are fully alive with soul, the forms of worship that we employ will become "plastic and new." Two traditions that Christianity has

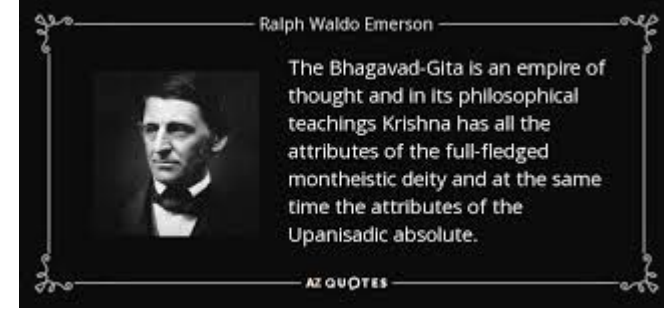
Emerson Divinity School Address



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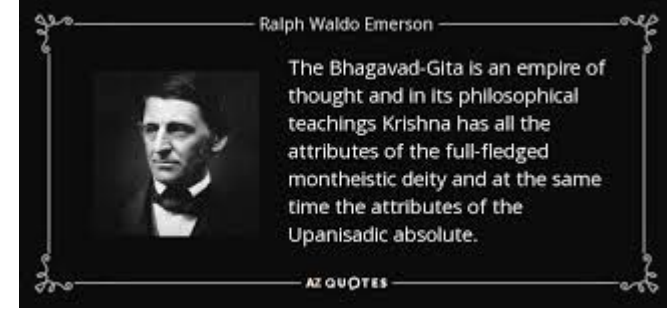
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Emerson Divinity School Address Conclusion



- looking to the time when the spirit that inspired the prophets of old will move men in the present, and
- bringing forth "the new Teacher" who can see the universe and its laws in totality, the world as "mirror of the soul,"
- showing the correspondence of natural laws with spiritual laws and the ultimate oneness of all absolutes.

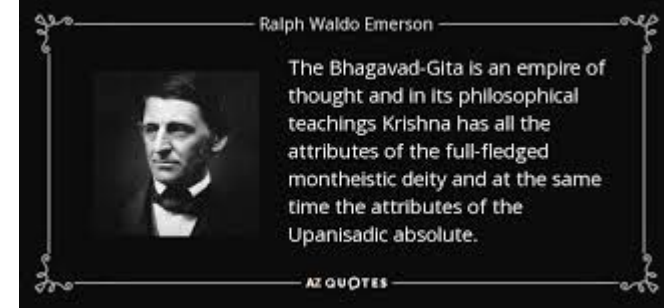
Emerson Divinity School Address



Man as Outlet to the Divine

- Emerson bases all that he says upon the intimate relationship between man and God earlier put forth in *Nature*.
- At the beginning of the address, he introduces the unity of God, man, and nature that he elsewhere terms the Oversoul, and he refers to this unity throughout. He stresses that a true sense of religion, indeed the very soundness of the individual and of society, are impossible to achieve unless a man realizes his direct access to God and recognizes that religion and virtue are within, not imposed or understood from without.

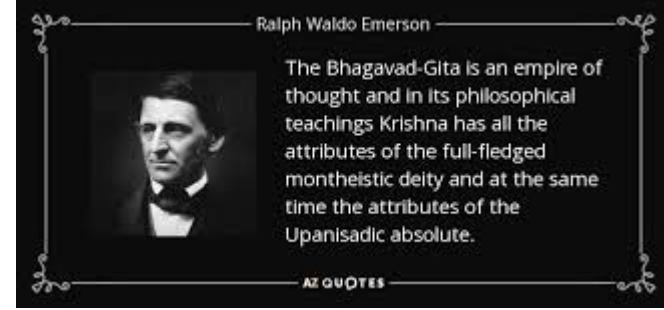
Emerson Divinity School Address



Man has no need for "mediator or veil" between himself and God. This immediate connection gives man his innate and unlimited capacity for development toward God's perfection. Man expresses his oneness with God through virtue in character and action.

Emerson is very clear about man's inherent potential for good, and about how the state into which the church has fallen has obscured our perception of human perfectibility: "[Man] learns that his being is without bound; that, to the good, to the perfect, he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness. That which he venerates is still his own, though he has not realized it yet." Emerson is responding to what he sees as a widespread crisis of faith caused by man's disconnection from the source of his powers.

Emerson Divinity School Address

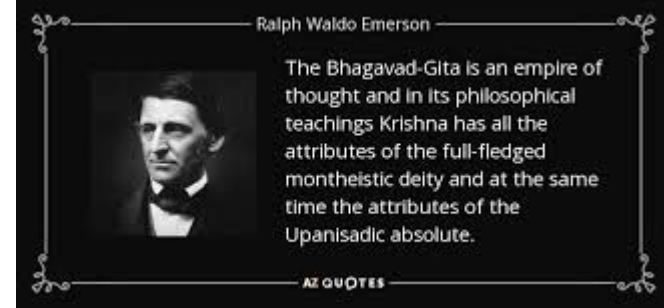


The view of evil expressed by Emerson

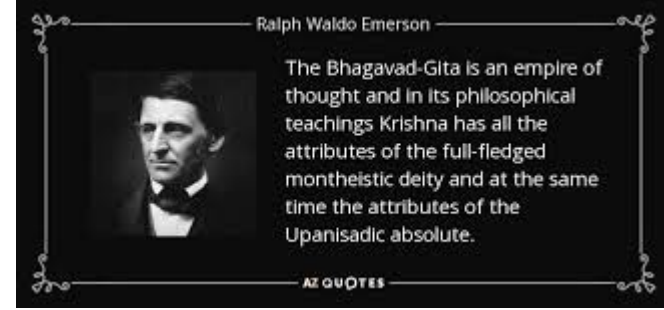
- God is perfection, and that, through his connection to God, man is perfectible. Goodness, and the reward of goodness, are within man, who therefore does not require external structures to ensure his virtue.
- All of the world exudes a kind of sympathetic support of man's goodness, because it is in harmony with the laws of the universe.
- Likewise, when a man deviates from the virtue to which God and the universal laws predispose him, he is instantly aware of disharmony within himself and with the universe, and evil is consequently its own punishment.
- Emerson states that, unlike good, which is a positive, absolute quality, evil does not have independent existence. It is "merely privative, not absolute" — nothing more than the absence of goodness. This sense of the relationship between good and evil departs radically from that offered by traditional religion. It presents a consummately affirmative outlook on human nature and possibility.

Emerson Divinity School Address

- A direct connection with God is available to and exemplified in each and every person. This belief guides his discussion of the nature and importance of Jesus, whom he regards as a man, and as the highest demonstration of the expression of the divine spirit through the life and actions of a man.
- Jesus serves as a model and a source of inspiration for other men, but he did not achieve anything beyond the capabilities of humankind in general. The church has held Jesus up as different from and superior to other men, and has focused excessively on "the person of Jesus" — that is, on the particular qualities that distinguish Jesus from other men — rather than on his inherent similarity to the rest of mankind.
- Emerson insists upon the complete equality of every man in regard to the knowledge of God: "The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love."
- Emerson sees the deification of Jesus as a disservice to man in general and to Jesus as well. Men cannot forge an understanding of the God within by emulating others, even such a powerful exemplar as Jesus. And Jesus loses humanity, warmth, and his true excellence when approached as "a demigod, as the Orientals or the Greeks would describe Osiris or Apollo." Jesus himself — "the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a man" — understood better than anyone the divine nature of mankind.



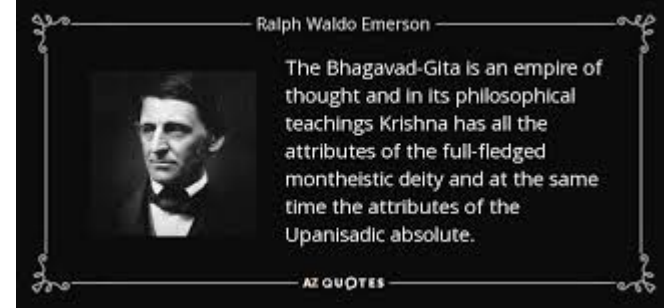
Emerson Divinity School Address



Inherited versus Intuited Religion

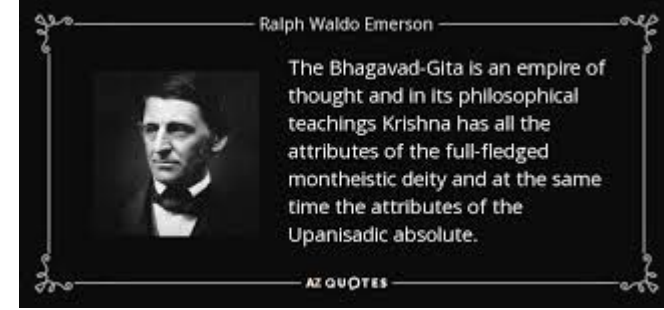
- Emerson contrasts inherited religion — the religion handed down to man by the past — with the connection that each man may form with God directly.
- Inherited or "second hand" religion is presented as lifeless, empty of vitality and meaning, and stifling to the highest capabilities of man.
- Personal religion — man's intuitive grasp of his relationship with God — is full of warmth, vitality, and significance, and is experienced in the here and now. The individual's religious understanding — his "insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul" — constitutes a grasp of universal absolutes that transcend time, space, and temporal circumstance. Intuitive insight into divine laws is also timeless, possible at any given moment, independent of specific cultural values and conditions.

Emerson Divinity School Address



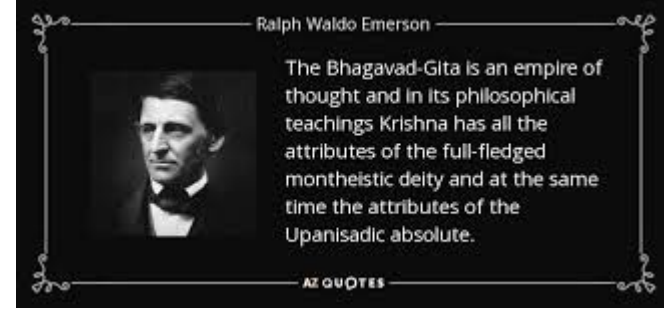
- Emerson associates the church and its inherited traditions with "stationariness," with "the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed."
- In its institutionalization, the church has developed a fixed body of beliefs, dogmas, scriptures, and rites, which it offers as religion. This "petrification" has made us forget that these traditions originated in the distant past through intuition working on the religious and creative faculties of man.
- Whatever power and meaning they retain are vestiges of their archaic inspiration through intuitive Reason. At the end of the address, Emerson looks forward to the time when "that supreme Beauty, which ravished the souls of those Eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also."
- Spirit is eternal, but its revelation to man occurs over and over again, in each new generation and within each man. The religious sentiment about which Emerson writes flows continuously into man from God, is fluid and dynamic, and cannot be contained or transmitted in fixed form any more than the goodness of man can be compressed into particular examples of humanity.

Emerson Divinity School Address



- Emerson carefully does not recommend that the individual apply his own intuitive apprehension of God to overthrowing the existing traditions of the church and to replacing them with new ones. He states, "I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms."
- In religion as in other areas, Emerson is suspicious of external reform. He trusts in the reform of the individual as a means of reforming the institution of the church: "Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new."
- The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul." Rite and ritual are thus incidental and secondary. When the individual allows the spark of intuition to bring his own religious sense to life, the forms through which he expresses it will be enlivened as well. The prevalent failure of faith will be remedied only through each man's understanding of his own personal connection with God.

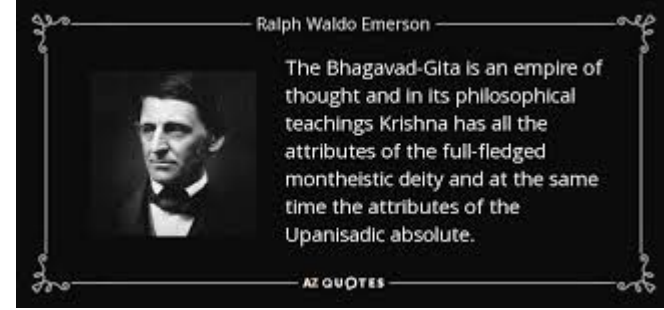
Emerson Divinity School Address



The Function of the Preacher

- Emerson aims to inspire his audience of new preachers to meet the currently unsatisfied spiritual needs of their future congregations.
- The codification of religion into fixed forms and beliefs has made their fulfillment of this responsibility difficult. Emerson declares, ". . . the Moral Nature, that Law of laws whose revelations introduce greatness, — yea, God himself, into the open soul, is not explored as the fountain of the established teaching in society."
- Men and their religious leaders no longer understand that revelation is always possible and also essential to their spirituality. They regard it as an isolated phenomenon that occurred in the past. It is the preacher's function to restore soul to his parishioners by encouraging intuitive spirituality and promoting an immediate relationship with God.
- Emerson emphasizes that only the minister who has experienced intuitive perception of God can preach it: The spirit only can teach. Not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give, who has; he only can create, who is. The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach.

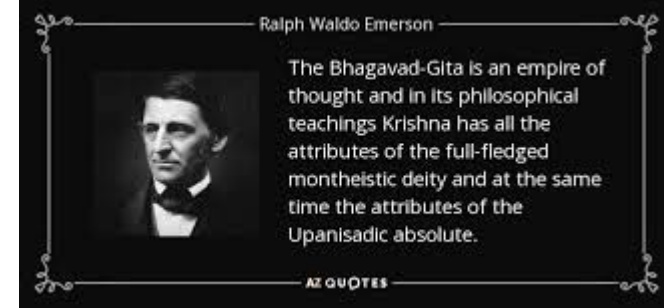
Emerson Divinity School Address



- Emerson laments the fact that the minister is frequently not such a man. In its failure to address all-encompassing soul as the first, central, necessary element of religion, the church has made worship joyless.
- If the minister likewise does not address the importance of spirit as the direct link between man and God, he not only neglects his true obligations, but is inwardly aware of his failure, and his congregation is profoundly dissatisfied.
- "Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist," Emerson proclaims, "then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate." Conversely, when the minister is himself "a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost," he is able to reject conformity and to "acquaint men at first hand with Deity."

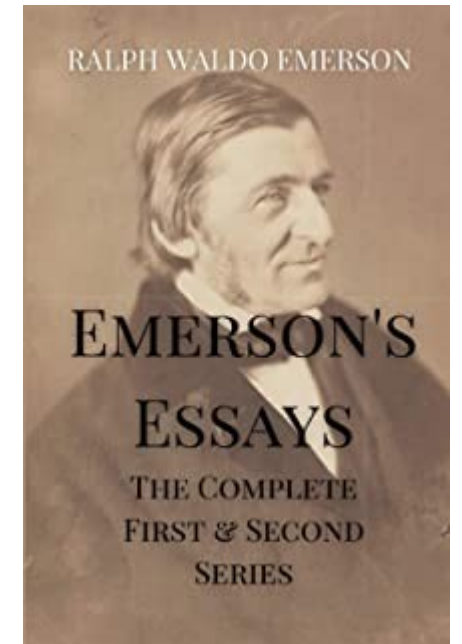
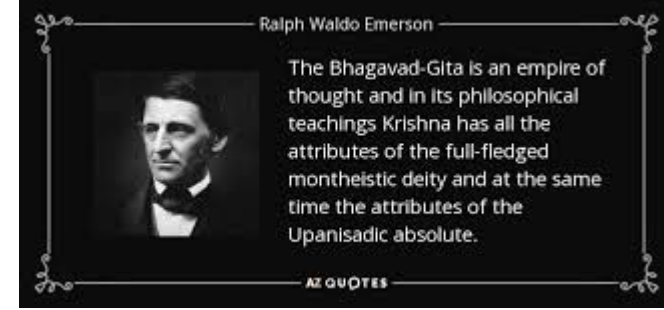
Emerson Divinity School Address

- If a good preacher possesses divinely inspired spirit and values it above form, he must also have the ability to convey his own humanity to his flock.
- Emerson provides the specific example of a preacher so uninspired and uninspiring that he almost made his hearers (Emerson among them) wish to avoid church. (Emerson no doubt here indirectly refers to the Reverend Barzillai Frost, assistant minister and later minister of the First Parish in Concord.) In contrast with the raging snowstorm outside the church, this preacher lacked reality. He did not communicate that he, too, like the members of his congregation, was a man, that he had lived and experienced what they had lived and experienced. His sermon gave not a hint that "he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history."
- Emerson uses this example to underscore the key function of the preacher — bringing his parishioners to the realization of spirit. He asserts, "The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought." In so doing, the preacher offers his parishioners living proof that individual spirituality can coexist with and even thrive amidst the realities of experience. The minister's spirit and humanity together will infuse the dry rites of the church with relevance and meaning.

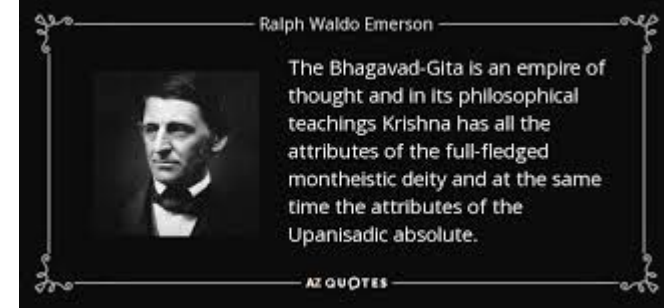


Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Bhagavad-Gita

- The Meeting of East and West
- Who Inherits the Mantles of These Crossing Stars
- The Turning of Emerson
- The Song of God in America
- Who is Krishna?
- The Tradition of Conscience – Needed more now than ever before.

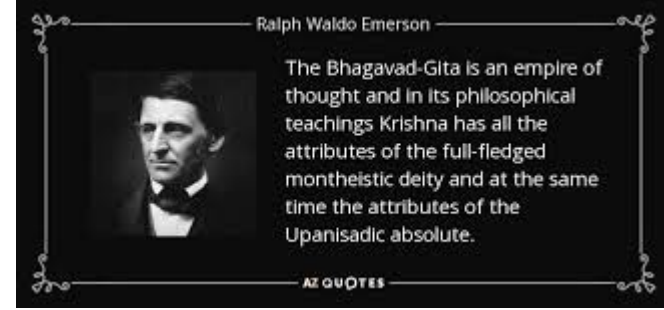


The Bhagavad-Gita



- The Bhagavad Gita forms a section of the sixth book of the Mahabharata, an important Sanskrit epic in the Hindu tradition that recounts a lengthy struggle and brief war between two sides of the Bharata family—the Pandavas and the Kauravas—over their kingdom of Hastinapura. The Gita recounts a dialogue in the moments leading up to the war between the Pandava warrior Arjuna and his charioteer and trusted advisor, Krishna, who turns out to be a worldly incarnation of Vishnu, a god who serves as the Supreme Being in many forms of Hinduism. However, Arjuna and Krishna’s dialogue is actually recounted through a frame story: Sanjaya, an advisor to Dhritarashtra (the Kauravas’ father and the blind king of Hastinapura), reports this dialogue to the king after the Pandavas have already won the war.

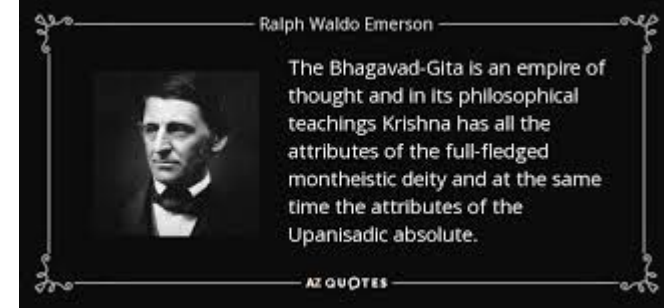
Emerson and the Gita



Emerson poetically expresses it in “Self Reliance,”

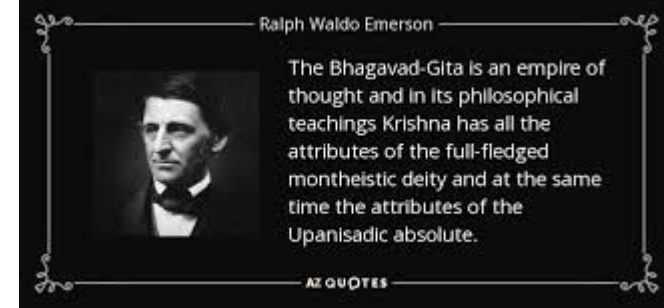
- “When a man lives with God, his voice will be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.”¹
- Emerson proclaimed no anxiety of influence: the roses under his window, he declares in “Self Reliance,” make no reference to former roses or to better one.
- Emerson’s famous “transparent eyeball” passage in his inaugural essay “Nature” is taken almost verbatim from Coleridge’s description of entering a gothic cathedral, for Emerson, however, there was no a question of plagiarism or appropriation. Rather, he was assimilating what was germane in this moment, and he did likewise with the *Gita*. Emerson’s “originality” could, perhaps, accept overt textual influence without feeling contradiction or disturbance. His critic, Perry, on the other hand, complained that Emerson was rooted in a past that he tore down.

Emerson and the Gita



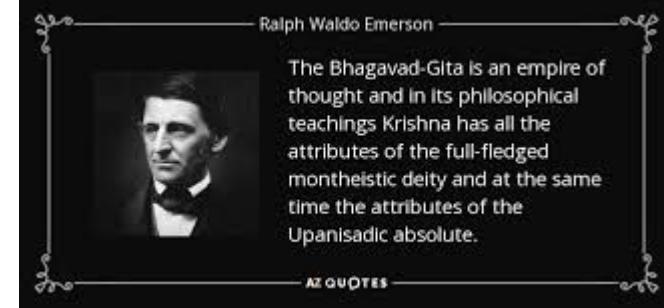
Emerson was certainly not rooted in the *Gita*, what to speak of its cultural past. In his now infamous line upon his first reading of the text, he called it “the much renowned book of Buddhism.” The *Gita*, however, only became a “book” by itself being appropriated out of the epic. The Mahabharata tradition that bequeathed the *Gita* to the world is vast and all containing (so it says), and literacy may be but a brief print-interlude between mega-layers of oral culture. Moreover, the *Gita* is more than this, for a text is as much a meeting of differences as it is a unified entity, and one thing that is clear in the *Gita* as we now know it, is that it is a compendium of various perspectives – samkhya, yoga, bhakti, monist and dualist philosophies.

Emerson and the Gita



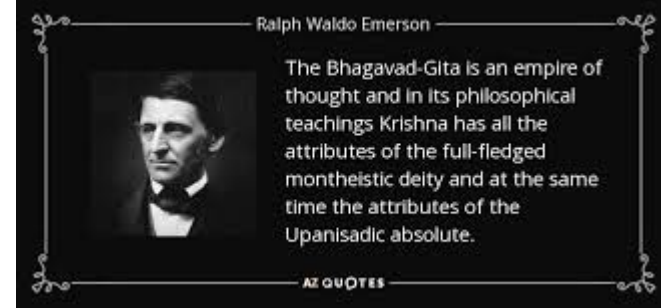
- At least ten percent of its' vocabulary is of Buddhist derivation, and some call it "The Ecumenical Council of India," an attempt to reconcile everything and everyone. One can argue that in fact it would be nearly impossible to read the *Bhagavadgita* in its entirety, for would entail a reading of the entire Epic. And why should one be expected to? It is a hassle, it is problematic, and the ending does not fit.
- Arjuna may understand it all in the *Gita*, but by the end of the Epic he loses all of his power. Krishna knows it all in the *Gita*, but he is unable to avert a major holocaust, nor stem the greed of warring tribes.
- Only one man out of the mythical six hundred and forty million who fought at Kurukshetra is privy to what is actually happening on the battlefield (from a transcendentalist point of view, anyway). And that would have suited Emerson just fine, which may be one reason he liked the *Gita*. It could support his ideal of the solitary individual (minus Krishna of course), Arjuna, the one insightful mind among the ignorant, violent desire-driven mass of humanity heading for destruction in the fangs and maw of Vishnu.

Emerson and the Gita



- Emerson took what he wanted to (or perhaps better yet, what he needed to) from the *Gita*, just as we all do. Things can become thorny, however, since allegiances to interpretive communities abound; from the theological, to the Indological, to the economic (perhaps Marx is always there on the background here in terms of the relationship of interpretive authority to private property and social organization). Both Emerson and the *Gita* are still with us, however, they still inhabit the cultural landscape (as well as the memory) of America and the discourse of various interpretive communities.
- Emerson, appearing as the icon of the individual, the harbinger of the “religion of the One,” saw America as the new holy land, one in which the individual could integrate the wisdom of many old worlds into the new.
- The *Bhagavadgita*, emerging out of the list of “oriental translations,” pumped up by Emerson, Thoreau and their ilk, became an emblem of a certain kind of wisdom as it eventually flowed into the somewhat popular esoteric fiction of Theosophy along with variant ideas about reincarnation. The same *Bhagavadgita* became an icon in an America that wanted a Hindu Bible and was appropriated by fundamentalist groups like Iskcon, while other translations of the *Gita* are taught in universities that still serve as arbiters of intellectual history.

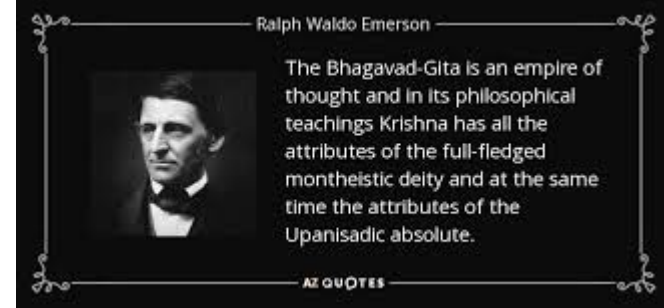
Emerson and the Gita



Who Inherits The Mantles of these Crossing Stars?

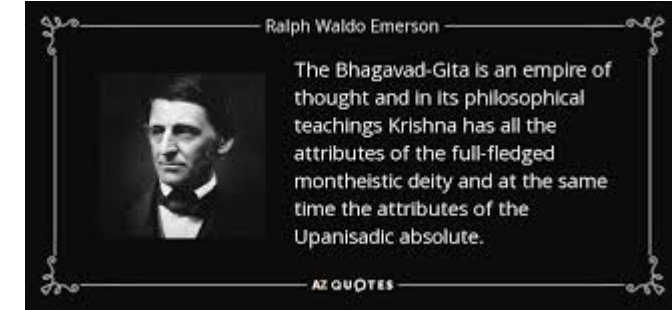
- What then may be at issue in Emerson's reception of the *Gita*? Perhaps one can say
- "tradition" in the struggle for definitions in a multicultural world. It was not that the "Sage of Concord" and his colleagues discovered the east; they made their east in order to remake the West, and a bouncing pizza effect, which was truly unprecedented, would lead them to remake one another. The "yoga" that transitioned to American for example (as De Michele had documented) was already influenced by Western esotericism, which in its turn was influenced by New England transcendentalists.
- Versluis remarks that "Asia grew on Emerson slowly," there are no references to Asia in his published works until 1841. Perhaps as Versluis contends, Emerson had to work his way past many prejudices to arrive at what one scholar called "a neo Vedanta that was an amalgam of German idealism and mystical Christian and Hindu concepts."5 More than likely, he was "simmering" as the junior Whitman later described himself.
- Emerson received the *Gita* through a lineage of political conquest and cultural acquiescence. The British thought it would make good politics to translate some brahminical texts, the brahmins acquiesced to the *Gita* since technically it was *smṛti*, not *śruti*, which was not to be shared with outsiders.

Emerson and the Gita



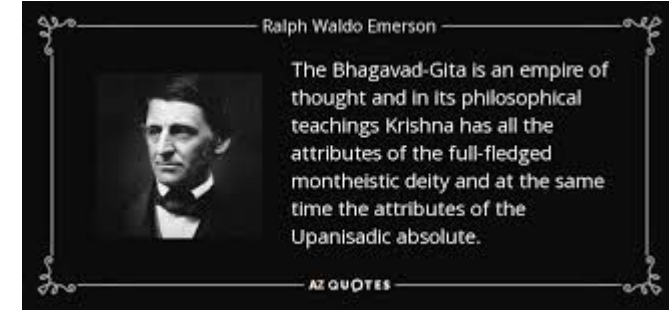
- Emerson had previously read what the Unitarians had to say about Ram Mohan Roy in the early 1820's and others. So even though Emerson published "The Oversoul" in 1841, before receiving the text of the *Bhagavadgita*, he certainly had secondary knowledge of some of its contents.
- In 1845 Emerson acquired his own copy of Wilkens' 1785 translation of the *Gita*, which he initially called in the now infamous aforementioned letter to Elizabeth Hoaror, dated July 17 1845, one of the moist renowned books of Buddhism.⁷ This was an honest mistake
- Emerson had nothing but praise for the *Gita* declaring: "It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered over and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.
- Note, how even in his first recorded response to the *Gita*, Emerson's focus is existential, on the "questions which exercise us," which to me separates him from the romantic, orientalist notion of the "wisdom of a pristine past." The *Gita* also made its way to Emerson through Thoreau, who eventually bequeathed to him his entire library of Asian texts.

Emerson and the Gita



- Emerson did not seek to promote the *Gita* among his fellow citizens, as he did with Whitman's work, probably because he thought that his fellow Americans would not be up to understanding it in its "native form." However, the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* served an Emersonian purpose: along with confirming his expanded, transcendental vision, they would serve as a hedge against the universalizing and absolutizing of Christianity.
- It was not that Emerson needed the *Gita* to develop his theories of the self or the oversoul. His self reliance and self trust could easily be traced back through Classical and European sources up to Goethe's self-cultivation and the Essays of Montaigne or even those of Ben Franklin. And theories of metempsychosis abounded in the Neo-platonic literature that Emerson was familiar with. I would imagine, however, that Arjuna was an inspiration to Emerson, who himself was a sort of Arjuna; not as in a story from thousands of years ago, or as a servant of a scriptural God, but as an advocate and model for the possibility of every individual to arise and hear the voice of Spirit:
- "If therefore a man claims to know and speak of God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old moldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not.

Emerson and the Gita

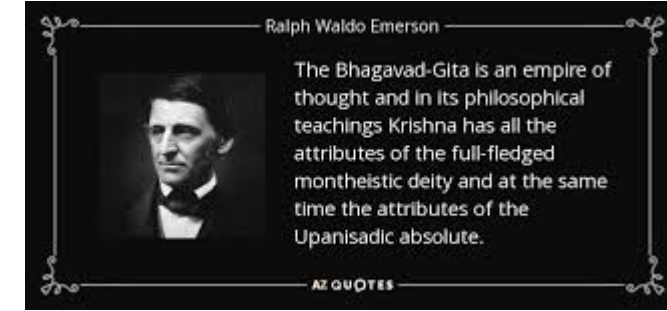


“Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away—means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now and absorbs past and future into the present hour.”

Let us not mistake rhetoric for reality, however. Emerson struggled with his sense of, and debt to, a past that he valued enough to remake in the present. Emerson does a service, one could argue, by reconstituting the past through the sum of influences upon him, not in a straight line from Greece to Europe to the shores of the New World but by winding his way back through Persia, India, and China.

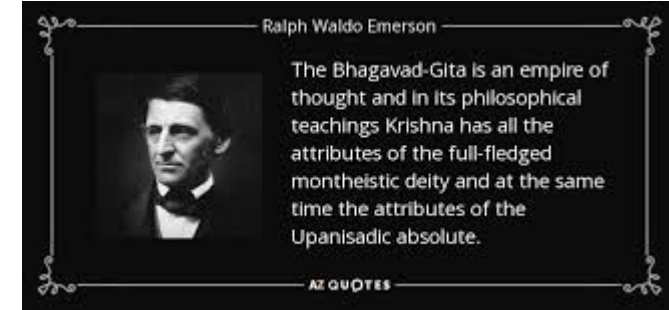
In a way, the “appropriation of the East” gave Emerson leverage, room to move, to create his own tradition as millions would after him.

Emerson and the Gita



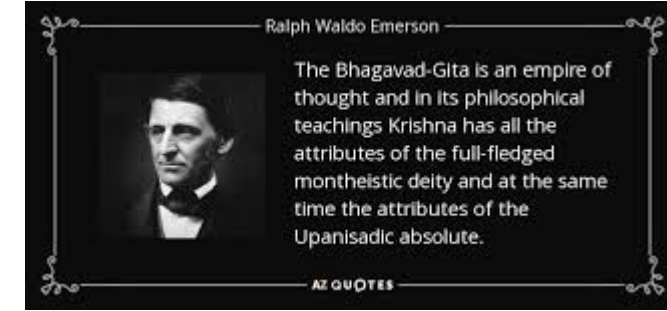
- Versluis argues that the Unitarian rejection of the church and its heretical embrace of progress led to the transcendentalists ultimately jettisoning Christianity entirely and affirming an “absolute religion universal religion
- But Emerson was more complex than New Age re-makers of the wheel. In the autumn of his life, as an overseer at Harvard University, he voted for compulsory chapel attendance, and his transcendentalist project of the “religion of humanity” did not prohibit him from being an abolitionist advocate willing to lose the union if the union maintained slavery.
- There are a series of stock answers that appear when considering Emerson’s relationship with his various predecessors. One may say that he had the ability to consider the spiritual writings of all ages without sacrificing the pure and immediate revelation of truth. One may say that Emerson came into contact with the very same universal truths as the ancients and could speak in a similar tone while still leading men to the “law of their own hearts.” More plausible, perhaps, is the idea that the Emerson texts were produced under a different set of assumptions (and perhaps a shared set) around influence and originality than are presently held.

Emerson and the Gita



- While the *Gita* itself does not condone slavery, the Epic takes it for granted.
- The *Gita* does promote a social system based on *varnas* that are evidenced by birth, something Emerson would have found abhorrent. Hence, Emerson's relationship with the "Wisdom of the East" had little to do with the romantic embrace of an older and wiser culture.
- There was an intuitive recognition of affinity between thought processes and perspectives. And this affinity allowed Emerson to "translate" the *Gita* from one context to another, a project that may be more delicate and difficult than the literal translation of a text.
- While an awareness of the aura of influence serves to cure one of the illusion of the solitary, individual author, the extended focus on the agonistic aspects of influence is a remnant of a Nietzschean, Adlerian world view that is unable to see beyond the purview of conquest and loss (which interestingly enough is exactly what Krishna tells Arjuna to do).
- Rather than worrying about "influence" or engaging in spineless academic comparisons, one might simply say of Emerson and the *Gita* that "They met," they met like two crossing stars each with their own trajectory, each with their own *karma*, in the ongoing flow of history.

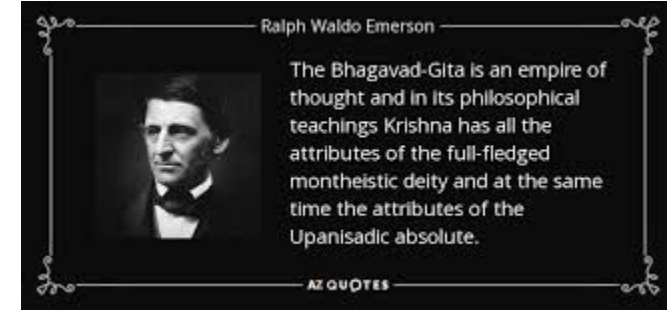
Emerson and the Gita



The Turning of Emerson

- In his Divinity School Address of 1838, Emerson dared his audience to love God without a mediator and to completely reject formal religion. This address, along with the opening salvos of “Nature,” is the Emerson that has endured, while the later more skeptical Emerson has faded further into the background. Emerson, “left the church, left the academy, and became Emerson.”
- How did he break away from his friends and kinsmen, as Arjuna was urged to do, and fight the battle he had to fight? He left the pulpit, but he did not burn his bridges with Unitarians.
- Emerson’s struggle for freedom is akin to Arjuna’s. They must both forge a path through the power dynamics and nuances of their particular communities. The teachings of Krishna, in the *Gita*, are clearly mediated through various communities, Buddhist, Samkhya, Yoga, Brahmanical, etc., and the seemingly contradictory statements attributed to Krishna can be seen as efforts to placate or incorporate variant communal perspectives
- What may often appear as an unmediated transcendental vision may be something else as well.

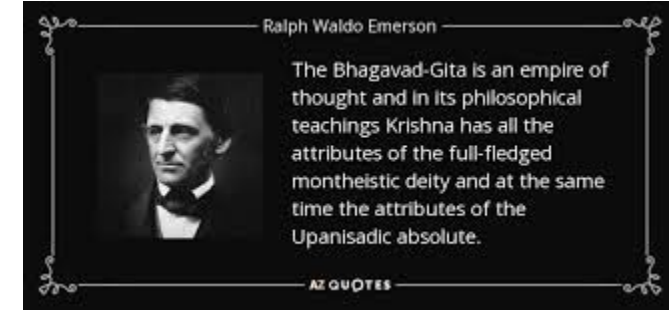
Emerson and the Gita



This is clear in the celebrated “transparent eyeball” passage in “Nature.” While arguing for an original relationship with the universe and a philosophy of insight as opposed to tradition, Emerson walks into the woods and declares:

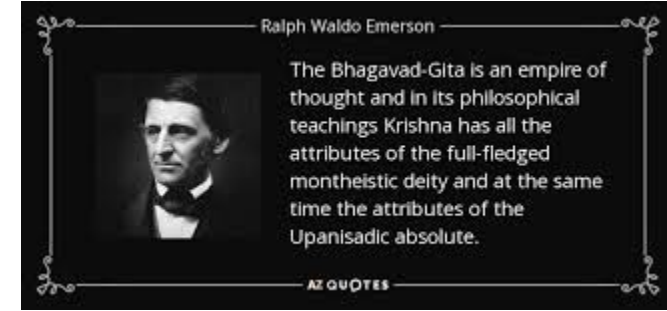
Standing on the bare ground, -my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing: I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me. I am a part or a particle of God.

Emerson and the Gita



- Emerson probably penned this *Gita*-like passage before ever reading the theophany in the eleventh book of the *Gita*, like a finally enlightened Arjuna, Emerson goes on to declare:
 - The name of the nearest friend sounds foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -master or servant, in then a trifle and a disturbance. I am a lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.
- His “cathedral” is the woods and his God is fashioned from his own amalgam-like insight. The over-soul doctrine, adopted through a conglomeration of German Romantic, Neo-Platonic, and Hindu sources will follow with Emerson forging a new language to fit his intuitions. It is not possible to fruitfully speculate to what degree the *Gita* helped open a way for that language, but the resonance of sensibility is unmistakable.
- *Brahma* is all too often and easily glossed over when discussed as an example of the “influence of Asia” on Emerson.

Emerson and the Gita



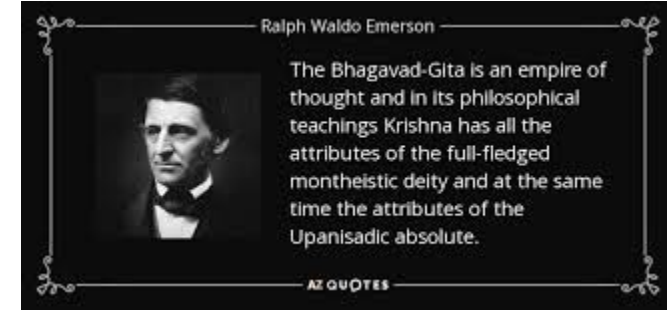
One might then ask, “How so.”

Emerson, like many intellectual Vedantins, resonated with *karma* and *jnana* yogas as “works” and “illumination,” but not, or much less, with *bhakti*.

His monistic disposition would lead him to focus on oneness over difference in his general consideration of the path of yoga, which for Emerson was the path of universal virtue.

Bringing the *Gita* into such a mix, however, immediately opens the field, makes this consideration more than a Western humanities or philosophical problem and casts it within larger global context. It legitimizes not only world religions, but a world that can no longer be narrowly limited to a few texts deemed appropriate by those who have refused to look outside the confines of their self-created container.

Emerson and the Gita

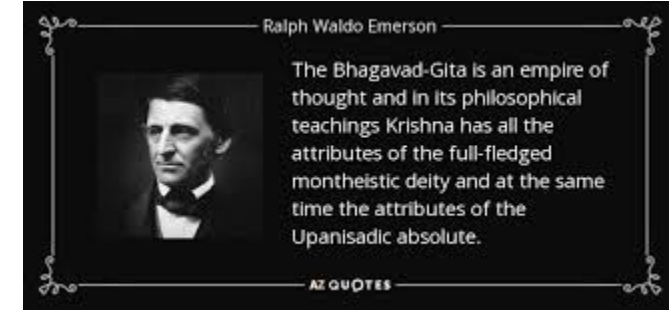


What is remarkable here is how far Emerson has come since his “renowned book of Buddhism” days. Not only does this little poem paraphrase the author of the *Kathopanishad* and the *Bhagavadgita* in cadence as well as in sensibility, taking on the first person voice

It communicates subtle aspects of the *Gita's* polemic, touches the sublimity of the seventh, tenth, and eleventh chapters, and interweaves monistic and dualistic strands of poetic discourse. The final line “Find me, and turn thy back on heaven,” takes a stab at the Christian heaven, but more overtly, it is evidence of Emerson’s resonance with the panoramic largesse of the *Gita's* divine landscape, and how opening to this landscape may allow one more room to move and breathe on the ground upon which one stands.

Emerson and the Gita

The Song of God in America

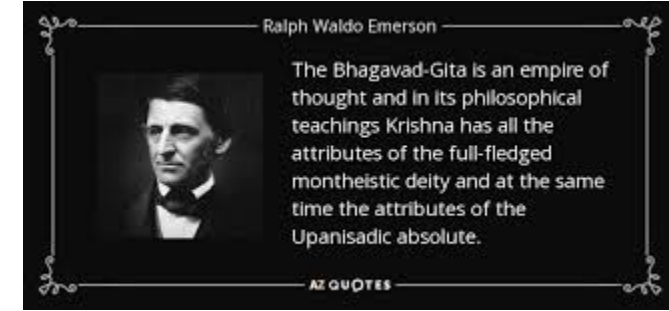


Suppose we take the *Gita* as the “the Song of God” (which need not obfuscate its being a small portion in the eighteenth chapter of the Great Epic

If Krishna is the strength of the strong, the taste of water, the fragrance of the earth, and the one behind the many, and if he descends in appropriate forms in age after age to restore the dharma, his incarnation into Concord, New England might look quite different than on the battlefield of Kuru.

- One might even suggest that the transformation of the work out of the Epic narrative it has been embedded in is part of its incarnational prowess. Somewhat like the apple, tulip, potato, and cannabis, the *Gita* may have embedded itself into the Epic like a seed in the earth in winter. And when the time is ripe, it takes a manageable and portably readable form that allows it to become a standard bearer of “Eastern wisdom.”
- Ironically, the *Gita* can be, and has been, taken to task, like Emerson, for an eclectic and unsystematic view of life, and yet it might very well be this humanistic aspect of the *Gita*; the fact that it is both a philosophical tract, a poem, and an exhortation to action, that has allowed it to be claimed by such diverse communities. The *Gita*’s emphasis on liberative action and its framing of knowledge within the context of action were also crucial, I would argue, in its embrace by the

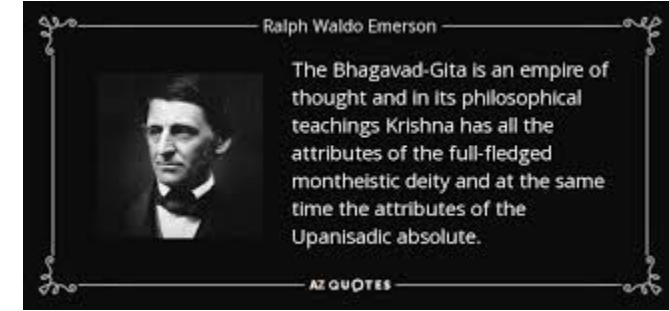
Emerson and the Gita



Absorbing the general atmosphere of the *Gita* was and is no small task

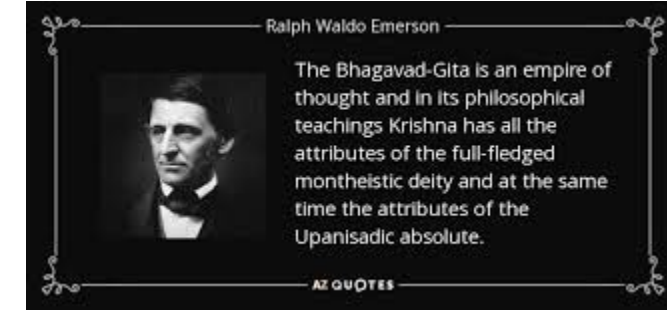
- Emerson was able to absorb the atmosphere of the *Gita* because he already lived in such an atmosphere
- Emerson's Neoplatonic readings and forays into German idealism prepared him for the *Gita*, but his ability to absorb its' atmosphere had as much to do with his inherent disposition and his willingness to follow it as it did to any literary tradition (or, in other words, his *samskaras*)
- Emerson's reception of the text is not merely a "romantic one," the focus and import of Emerson's reading of and meeting with the *Gita* is not just on his subjective apprehension of the text, nor about idealized notions of its grandeur, but like Thoreau, he is around his grappling with the existential issue of how shall I live my life

Emerson and the Gita



- Emerson absorbed the parts of the atmosphere that suited him.
 - Who really wants to take the caste system, even when whitewashed as *varnashrama* and divinely justified?
 - Who wants class ridden and sexist ridden paths of virtue (both institutionalized in the *Gita*, which does grudgingly allow for women and commoners to attain to divine status) condoned by absolute scripture? Emerson, who had his own issues to deal with in terms women's rights and liberties, nevertheless breathed the spacious atmosphere of the *Gita* and let go of its more stuffy aspects.

Emerson and the Gita



The issue of divorcing the text from its culture is often brought to the fore here. But who does memory belong to (*smrti*)? And on what basis does a text belong to a community?

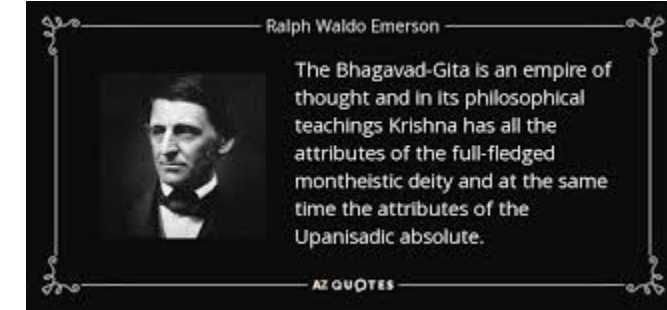
Would the righteous Ramachandra be acting dharmically if he followed scriptural exhortations about having lead poured into the ears of lower class persons who have heard the Vedas?

Who texts belong to are often based on power (the brahmins), but these relations are temporal (publishing rights). Texts might grow out of a certain historical moment, but like one's children, they take on a life of their own, go their own way, and forge their own destinies.

Ultimately, issues of authority, be they literary or scriptural, are intimately bound up in community.

We need more focus on what is actually important: not ownership or influence or minutiae (although these all have their place), but the very pressing issue of how shall we live. Arjuna had to decide whether or not to participate in a civil war; Emerson likewise had to decide between war and slavery and made a resounding decision. The fact that this decision echoes that of the *Gita* may or may not be happenstance, but it is an important resonance, because we too have decisions to make in face of wars hoisted upon us..

Emerson and the Gita



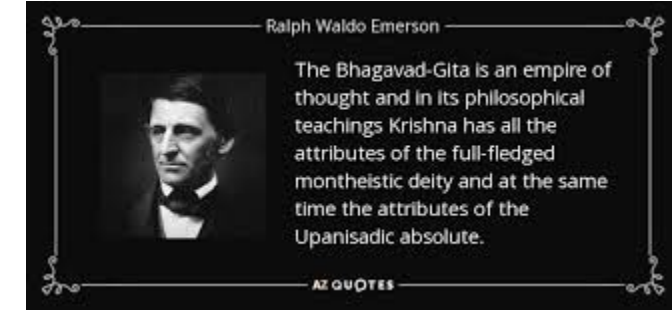
- The Song of God fits Emerson’s call to evolve ones personal dharma. The genius of the personal dharma in many ways prefigures Sartre and the existentialists, essence or not you havoc make your own existence be your own Krishna and not allow the authority of Krishna to be usurped by Churches or *sampradyas*, as the case may be.
- A significant question in this regard may be, “Will the cult of the self overturn society and plummet all into chaos?” This was a charge often hurled against the “heretical” Emerson, and it brings us to what may be the crux of the issue in contemporary interpretations of the *Gita*, “Who is Krishna?”

Emerson and the Gita

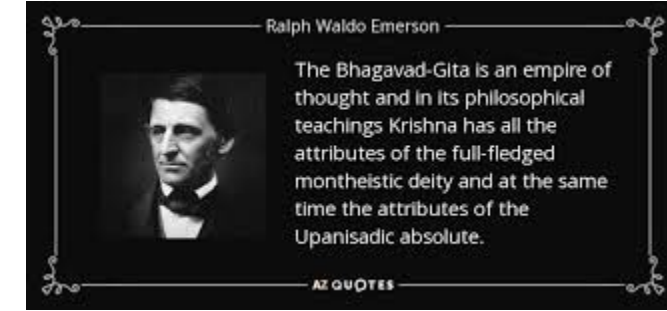
Who is Krishna

Arjuna sees Krishna as a friendly prince before he sees him as the supreme personal God. Throughout the Epic different people see Krishna quite differently, and if one is sensitive to issues of redaction: Is Krishna the one divinity in a specific human form, an aboriginal tribal hero exalted in later eras by Vaishnava editors, an avatar of Vishnu, or a historically significant warrior/prince?

Can one ever consider the Krishna of the *Bhagavadgita* apart from Arjuna? They are seen, after all, as the *nara-narayana*, human and divine perpetually linked together. Along with its convenient size, ecumenical outlook, and monumental scenarios, one often overlooked aspect of the *Gita's* promulgation in both contemporary India and America may be the transition into what could be labeled the "Age of Arjuna," containing the democratic ethos that extols the single man.



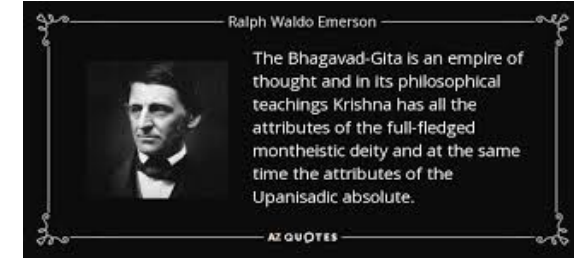
Emerson and the Gita



Among the six hundred and forty million soldiers said to participate in the battle of Kurukshetra, only one has the conscience and the courage to balk at the coming fratricidal slaughter. True, Arjuna's eldest brother, Karna, is offered an opportunity to stop the battle, and like Arjuna he might have some inkling of who Krishna is, but his own circumstances demand the war, as do Bhishma's, whose following of the letter of the law arguably caused the war in the first place.

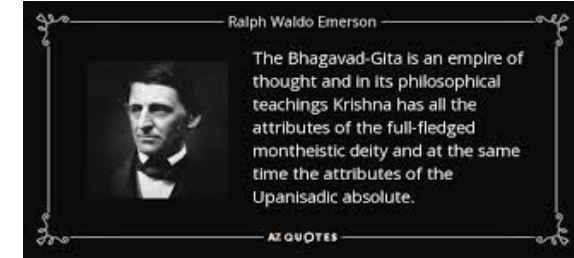
The focus on the individual as the moral arbiter of action and center of attention may be part of the "protestantization" of the *Gita*. Like Emerson, Aurobindo eschews the temporal *Gita* for a universal one. The fourfold *varnashrama* system, for example, is seen as "a rightly ordered expression of the nature of the individual being through whom, work is done.²¹ The outer Krishna becomes the inner voice.

Emerson and the Gita



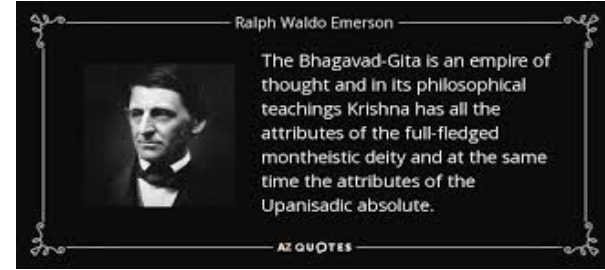
- T.S. Eliot, another significant Western reader of the Gita, mentions Krishna by name in *Little Gidding*, saying, "I think this is what Krishna meant." Eliot's move, casting the voice of Krishna in a poetic meditation on time and eternity that is largely informed by his Christian perspective, represents a different contemporary strategy.
- It casts the *Gita's* voice, Krishna's voice, as part of a universal wisdom that is congruent with the message of the Western savior. Arjuna wins the day. The focus of the world moves toward the individual and to the problem of aligning the individual with a higher will, with an absolute knowledge, in face of the loss of absolute systems of knowledge, of trust, and authority. Interpretive authority moves from the Brahmin priests, who in a sense abdicate their power by surrendering to the solitary man, the new Arjuna, before getting swept up again by nationalist tides, beginning with Aurobindo, who in a sense puts these two sensibilities together, and on to Hindutva and the rest.
- The "ultimate" verse of the Gita, its final *upadesha*, *sarva dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja*, "abandoning all varieties of dharma surrender to me alone," is clear and transparent in its giving final authority to the supreme being. Shankara, however, read this somewhat differently, and so did Emerson, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and even Kerouac, who went on a search as a Dharma Bum, for a missing father he would never find. One might ask, "How does Krishna reveal himself in a new different time and a different place?"

Emerson and the Gita



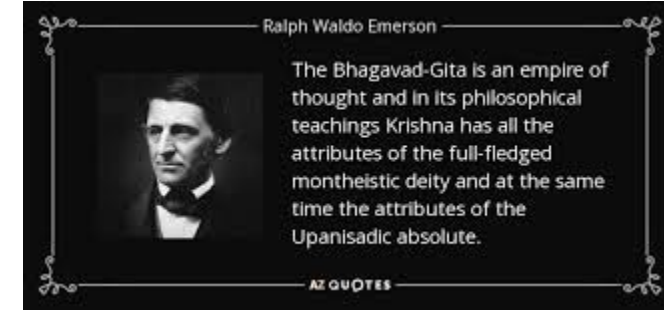
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Emerson and the Gita



- The centrality of Krishna is not ubiquitous in Indian, even in classical Indian readings of the Gita, particularly the Vedantic reading that arguably carried the day and that is more aligned with contemporary universal notions of a perennial philosophy. Because of the Shankaras, (and the later Shivanandas and Maharishis), Emerson and those who followed him; theosophists and neo-Hindus, can let the person Krishna slide, much to the frustration and chagrin of both Krishna fundamentalists and Hindu fundamentalists.
- This overturns the paternal authority of dharma, a self that is a law unto itself and that seems to have much more in common with the *Gita's* sixteenth chapter's description of the asuric (demonic) nature than with any spiritual paradigm.
- However, it also gives rise to the Oversoul, a meta- historical self that confronts the assumed authority of linear history which is ultimately but the most plausible consensus narrative of those who hold cultural power.
- The move from time bound subject to the Oversoul slices through and exposes the narrative of time and progress for what it is; a narrative as opposed to an episteme, and this is significant. The fulcrum moving toward Arjuna is so strong however, that it becomes less and less conceivable, as it was to Emerson, that Krishna can be more than a particularized version of the Oversoul, one whose voice cannot contradict the voice of conscience which is his true voicing.

Emerson and the Gita

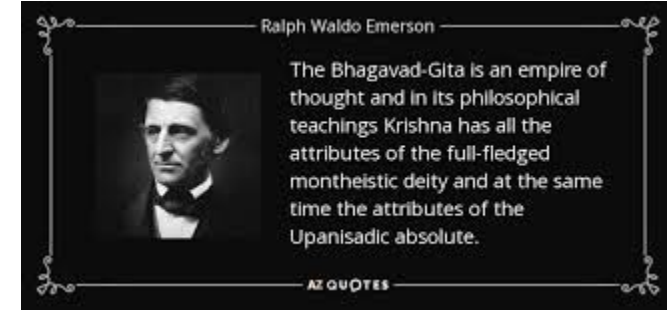


The Tradition of Conscience

- Emerson did to some degree step out of the ethnocentric perspectives of his era and used the *Gita* to validate and spark his imagination. The *Gita* became one way out from under the thumb of the father, the church, the Boston Brahmins, but the last thing Emerson needed was a new father, a new church, and new Brahmins, hence his refusal to join the utopian Brooke Farm community.
- The *Gita* contributed toward Emerson's meta-historical ideal, as did Plato, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Mme De Steal, and his contemporaries Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Whitman, Alcott, and others. Ultimately, Emerson's taking what suits him from the *Gita* is not much different than Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, or the Maharishi for that matter, showcasing the *Gita* to suit their theological agendas. The Bloomian argument that only the strong readings survive is suspect, simply because what is considered strong in one community might not be in another or in another period. Along with the "age of Arjuna," the key figure in this drama is Krishna of course. And how ironic that Krishna is an embarrassment to contemporary sensibility which is why the Bhaktivedanta fundamentalist reading of "The BhagavadGita as it is" remains highly marginalized. Krishna was an embarrassment to Emerson and his ilk, who preferred the vagaries of an open aired divinity to another personal God who would crack the whip. Any yet, Krishna remains as the puzzling narrator of the Gita, as well as its protagonist. Whether envisioned as an incarnation of Vishnu or valorized as the seed of love in everyone's heart (theosophy) or placed on a pantheon along with Christ, Buddha, and Sri Yukteswar (Self Realization Fellowship), it is not easy to write out the main character of the play.

9/30/2020

Emerson and the Gita



Would Krishna, like Jesus, have left the visible world so conclusively if he knew what his followers would make of him?

Emerson opens a banquet of the past spreads the table widens the aperture of a common human inheritance.

Could anyone have imagined that the Gita would ultimately be integrated into the American experience through yoga soy chai lattes?

With Emerson, one might fall off of a cliff – Nietzsche did, carrying his copy of Emerson with him

With Krishna it is easy to become a subservient server of authority. Both paths have their pitfalls and both have their attainments. The dharma is lived. This is Yoga. And in Emerson's case yoga can only be the exercise of freedom, and Krishna can only appear as one's conscience