

# The Asian Soul of Transcendentalism

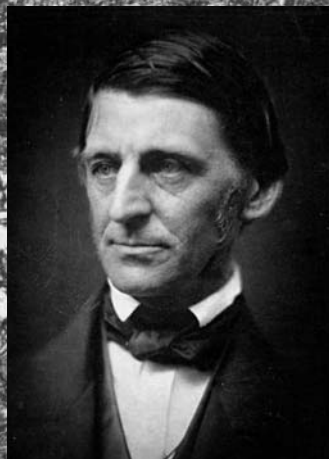
By Todd Lewis and Kent Bicknell

The treatment of Transcendentalism by twentieth-century teachers of literature and American history has followed a long tradition of focusing primarily on the European and American cultural influences on its major figures, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson and Louisa May Alcott. Their work is seen as fitting into various Western currents such as German Romanticism, Unitarian theology, neo-Platonism, and American utopian thought. In this framework, their writings were of great significance, constituting the headwaters of Western environmentalism, Northern abolitionism, voting rights for women, advocacy of public education and curricular reform, inter-faith mysticism, and diet and health movements, among others.

To perceive the Transcendentalists as largely formed by and working in the Western intellectual tradition, however, is seriously flawed because it ignores a central strand in this cultural fabric: the influences from Asia. Despite the work of a few earlier scholars demonstrating the importance of Asian and Islamic traditions for the major Transcendentalists (e.g., Christy 1932), the Western-centered historical narrative still remains the focus in teaching about *Walden*, Emerson, and the writings of the Alcotts. It is time to reshape this too narrow and incorrect viewpoint and to understand that it was the Transcendentalists, among all Americans, who first gleaned the entire world of human religious belief and practice. As they relentlessly pursued “the universals” in human life, they assiduously borrowed and eagerly read the first translations of dozens of Asian and Islamic texts, acquiring their own copies whenever possible.

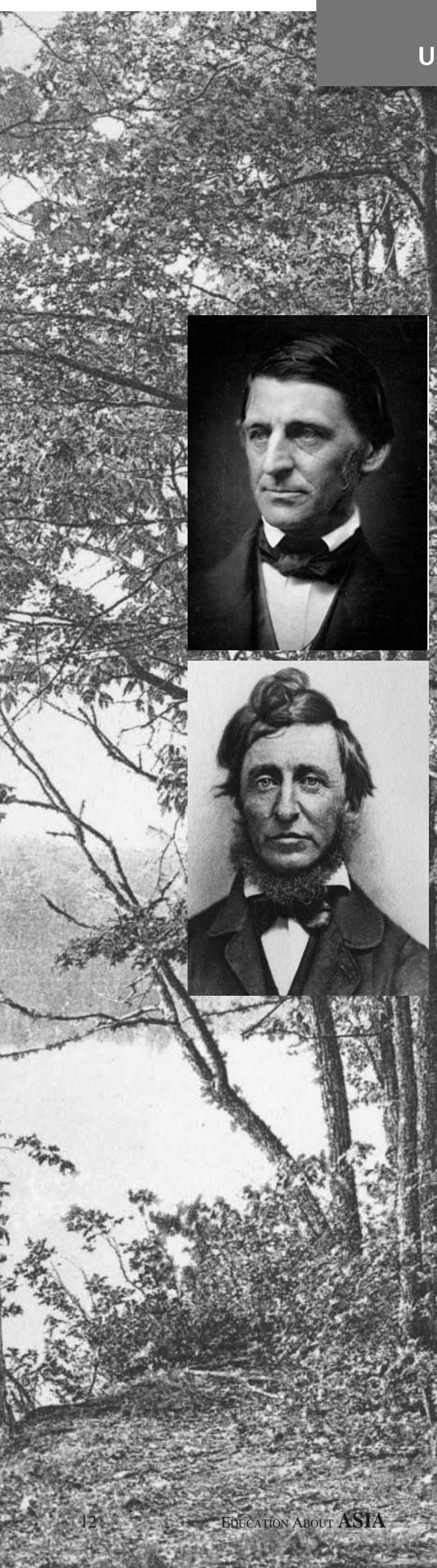
Recently, scholars such as Alan Hodder have expanded upon insights gleaned by earlier authors in demonstrating that Transcendentalism’s leaders, Emerson and Thoreau, were seriously engaged in the reading of Asian religious texts as the first translations found their way into European languages, especially English.<sup>1</sup> As they creatively sought timeless transcultural spiritual truths, they were nourished by these first translations of the major works of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam that were published in Europe.

Our view is that the Transcendentalists’ enthusiasm and inspiration was founded on their realization that they were among the very first intellectuals to see the full global vision of human religious understanding. They realized that this spiritual knowledge from India, China, and Persia would open up a rich garden of new understandings, with the potential to alter human lives and civilization’s destiny. Educator,



Photos from top to bottom right:  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson. Source: <http://tiny.cc/dsf42>.  
 Henry David Thoreau. Source: <http://tiny.cc/47gtl>.  
 Margaret Fuller. Source: <http://tiny.cc/mg9fl>.  
 Bronson Alcott. Source: <http://tiny.cc/u23ez>.  
 Louisa May Alcott. Source: <http://tiny.cc/kcz7p>.

Left: View of Walden Pond from the location of Thoreau’s cabin.  
 Source: The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods Library, photo gallery of illustrations by Herbert W. Gleason at <http://tiny.cc/ww80v>.





Bronson Alcott's utopian community, Fruitlands. Source: <http://www.alcottfilm.com/louisa-may-alcott/photo-gallery/>.

writer, and father of novelist Louisa May Alcott, Bronson Alcott envisioned a “Bible of Mankind” that would capture the spiritual wisdom gathered from “Homer, Zoroaster, Vishnu, Gotama, Confucius, Mencius, Mahomet, mystics of the Middle Ages, and of times later.”<sup>2</sup> Going beyond European and American ideas, the Transcendentalists absorbed fresh insights, reveled in the new realms of religious imagination, and sought ways of assimilating their global discoveries into a new world view that was in harmony with what they were seeing, perceiving, feeling, and experiencing.

Although the core “Transcendentalists” were amused by the name given to them by the public, they all believed that a Divine Essence enlivened everything and that this essence was available to every human being without the need of an intermediary. As Harvard professor and Emerson biographer Lawrence Buell observed about the Transcendentalists,

*If you have to point to one and only one thing it would be the idea that Emerson expresses most powerfully, of the God or the Divine Principle within the individual self.... ‘Every person has a spark of the divine.’ Emerson wrote in his journal, ‘I have been on the lecture circuit for a decade and I really have only one doctrine to preach: the infinitude of the private man.’<sup>3</sup>*

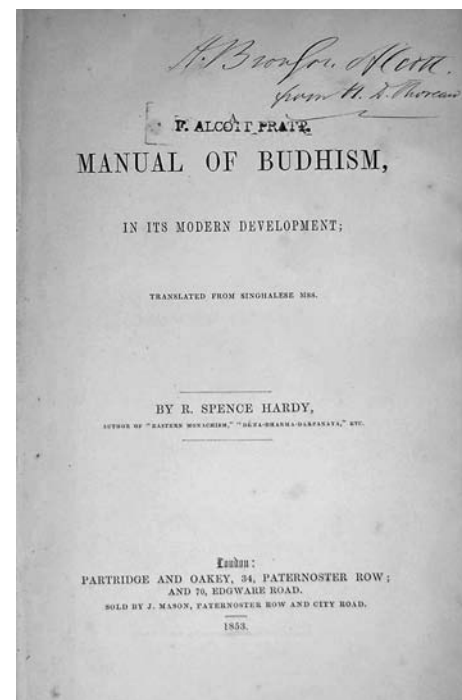
The most accessible way to experience the Divine Essence was through Nature, untrammelled by human hands, as this allowed for direct perception without first negotiating the sometimes narrow path of logical reasoning. As Emerson wrote in *Nature* (1836), the short text that was an open invitation to moving beyond the culture they inherited, “Why should we not also enjoy an original relationship with the universe? Have our own poetry? Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past? There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”<sup>4</sup> The excitement these new discoveries engendered explains the vitality of the Transcendentalist movement.

Even in its nineteenth-century heyday, Transcendentalism never included more than a dozen major exponents, but it fostered enormously significant cultural initiatives, including two of America’s utopian communities (Brook Farm and Fruitlands), an early women’s rights manifesto (Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*), influential moral discourses on the abolition of slavery, the nation’s earliest influential voice of environmentalism (Thoreau’s *Walden*), and a new style of travel writing (Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes*, Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, along with his travel narratives in Massachusetts, Maine, and Cape Cod). It is difficult to overstate the significance of Transcendentalism’s richest and most original literature or how its leaders and their writings inspired new lineages of thought and a wealth of subsequent creative expression in each one of these fields.

What is now clear from studies of their journals and letters is how the Concord circle of Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott) were all influenced in a very deep and thoroughgoing way by the philosophies conveyed in Asian religious texts. Emerson eagerly sought out the newest publications from his Paris and London booksellers for their “revelations” drawn from “The East,” and Thoreau revealed his excited consideration of their ideas in his journals and letters. While Thoreau had borrowed Asian texts from his good friend Emerson and the Harvard Library, in 1855 he received his own “nest of Indian books”—forty-four volumes in all—from a visiting Englishman who had made his acquaintance and understood his predilections. Thoreau, who could hardly believe his luck, built a special bookcase for these treasures that were, as he wrote to a friend, “in English, French, Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit.” Calling them “a godsend,” he eagerly shared the volumes with Emerson and Alcott.

Granted, authors of the books were often Europeans making first attempts to understand Asian traditions, and many of the works are full of terms, analogies, and conclusions that later scholars of these faiths would correct or reject. Nonetheless, in most cases, these works convey the essentials coherently enough for their learned American readers. For the Transcendentalists, this was no mere dabbling in the “exotic,” as one school of earlier scholars had viewed their engagement in Asian texts. In the words of Arthur Christy, author of *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* and one of the first American academics to recognize

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Henry Thoreau's copy of R. Spence Hardy's *A Manual of Buddhism* (1853), bequeathed to Amos Bronson Alcott and delivered to him by Ralph Waldo Emerson two weeks after Thoreau's death. Inscribed in Alcott's hand: A. Bronson Alcott./from H. D. Thoreau. (Photo: Permission of Christian Pearsall)

the depth of this connection, the Transcendentalists turned to the scriptures of Asia because “they could not live with an absentee God.”

The following chart lists the Asian books known to have been in the hands of Emerson and his circle and the date acquired:

<b>Samples of Asian Books of the Transcendentalists</b>			
Text*	Edition	Date Acquired	Religion
Bhagavad Gita	1785	1845	Hindu
A 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition	1855	1855	
Vishnu Purana	1840	1845	Hindu
Upanishads	1832	1850	Hindu
	1853	1855	
Veda Samhita-s			Hindu
Laws of Manu	1825	1836	Hindu
Samkhya Karika	1837	1851	Hindu/Philosophy
Daodejing			Daoism
Confucian Analects	1828	1843	Confucianism
	1826	1858	
Hitopadesha of Vishna Sharma	1787	1842	Hindu Fables
Harivamsa	1834	1849	Hindu
Shakuntala of Kalidasa	1790	1855 (second copy for Emerson in 1856)	Famous Indian drama
	1856		
Ishopanishad—Yajur Veda	1816	1820	Short chapter from the Upanishads
Megah Duta or Cloud Messenger	1814	1837	Classical Sanskrit poem

\*Note: Spellings of these titles are in their modern renderings.

## *Brahma*

*If the red slayer think he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.*

*Far or forgot to me is near,  
Shadow and sunlight are the same,  
The vanished gods to me appear,  
And one to me are shame and fame.*

*They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.*

*The strong gods pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1856 [1857]*

The ideas the Transcendentalists found in this growing library of works from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Sufism directly entered into their understanding of the world, shaped their vocations as writers, and informed their mission to disseminate the new intellectual and spiritual vistas these sages and saints were revealing. Although by now the scholarly evidence is well established that the Transcendentalists’ engagement with Asian belief systems profoundly influenced their work, this important insight has not, for the most part, appeared in textbooks and popular treatment of this topic. It is our conviction that teachers who cover this movement and the writings of its major figures should highlight this Asian religions-Transcendentalism connection. This can be, in fact, a pivotal case study for classroom teaching about the globalization of cultural ideas. It can also be a case study of how the Euro-American ethnocentrism of scholars and teachers can limit understanding of even the greatest literary figures.

Part of the problem of seeing the Asian sources of Transcendentalism is that its chief figures did not spotlight them or readily use terms from these traditions in their most famous works. As much as they worked to deliver messages that awakened souls, the Transcendentalists also wanted what they wrote to be accessible and to sell. The result is that sources often lie buried. Similarly, one can easily move beyond the passing references to Hinduism in reading *Walden* to ponder the dense and rich evocations of the natural world that flow through this masterfully written text. Compare that to Thoreau’s first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which—while laced with the wisdom of Confucius, the Buddha, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Hafiz, Dowlat Shah, and others—was a commercial failure. When Thoreau’s Aunt Maria told him that all those references sounded like “blasphemy,” and the influential critic James Russell Lowell complained, “We were bid to a river party, not to be preached at,” Thoreau took it to heart.

While Emerson paid homage to these sources in poems like “Brahma” and essays such as “The Oversoul” and “Persian Poetry,” generally he did not emphasize the importance of these texts in his major published works. These authors were keen to reach as broad an audience as possible, not alienate their readers. There is little doubt that the writers (and their publishers) did not want what were then, in the

*Thoreau had a copy of the Bhagavad Gita on his bedside table in his cabin . . . the pond for him was “his Ganges River” where he retreated in the spirit of the ancient ascetic sages of India.*



Walden Pond. Source: The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods Library, photo gallery of illustrations by Herbert W. Gleason at <http://tiny.cc/1w2cv>.

general public, seen as esoteric, even bizarre ideas, to undermine the popularity of the works. Teachers and professors who have relied solely on the best-selling, canonical texts to form their understanding of the Transcendentalists are missing the rich source of Asian texts that so deeply informed the Concord group in particular and did much to shape their developing worldviews.

The key to understanding and scaling the role of the Asian influences is found primarily in the journals they kept and the letters they wrote. The reading of *Walden* cannot miniaturize the inspiration of Asian religion once we know that Thoreau had a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* on his bedside table in his cabin or once we read in his journal that the pond for him was “his Ganges River” where he retreated in the spirit of the ancient ascetic sages of India. Thoreau explicitly framed his entire “experiment” at Walden Pond, an extended metaphor for sounding the depths of the soul, as the ascetic practice of a Hindu *yogin*.

Thoreau’s lifelong journal makes it clear that core Asian ideas powerfully transformed his intellectual and spiritual identity. In a journal entry of July 16, 1851, for example, Thoreau reflected on adolescent experiences of transcendent ecstasy that left him “daily intoxicated” with

*an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion [that he had] nought to do with . . . I speak as a witness on the stand, and tell what I have perceived. The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I led a life aloof from the society of men.*

No one could explain these states to him, and it was not until he discovered sacred writings such as the *Upanishads* and the *Vishnu Purana* that the meaning of his experiences were put into a cogent spiritual context.

Thoreau’s connection—to Hindu texts especially—bubble more to the surface in the travel accounts where he is more direct in acknowledging what was foremost in his mind at key moments. For example, Thoreau wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*:

*The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvat-Geeta [sic] . . . The Oriental philosophy approaches, easily, loftier themes than the modern aspires to . . . [assigning] their due rank respectively to Action and Contemplation, or rather does full justice to the latter. Western philosophers have not conceived of the significance of Contemplation in their sense . . .*<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to describe people who have practiced the art of separating their mind from sensory perception and the depth of a new kind of knowledge that awaits such practices.

If Thoreau’s writings and disposition incline toward the praxis of mysticism, Emerson dwells more in the realm of philosophy. As a young man, Emerson was encouraged by his spinster aunt, Mary Moody, to read Asian source texts. Fresh out of Harvard, he became a minister, only to discover that he found no sa-

The sacred symbol ‘OM’ uttered as a holy exclamation. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Om.svg>.

## Transcendentalism's Global Foundations Online Classroom Resources

**Transcendental Roots: Thoreau and Taoism** by David T. Y. Chèn

URL: <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/roots/hdt-tao.html>  
In this site, Chèn presents compelling evidence that Thoreau had access to the teachings of Taoism, an idea not generally accepted by those studying Thoreau's sources. The site is part of the rich offering of original writings and reflections on the Transcendentalists, *The Web of American Transcendentalism* ([www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/index.html](http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/index.html)), hosted by the University of Virginia.

**Walden to Graceland: 200 Years of the Asian Spiritual Tradition in Western Thought** by Kent Bicknell

URL: <http://www.santbani.org/kent/Thoreau/>  
This excerpt highlights spiritual experiences Thoreau received as an adolescent and how his later reading of Asian religious texts provided him a context to comprehend these (in his words) "long periods of daily intoxication." The site is hosted by Sant Bani School, dedicated to educating children along spiritual and Transcendentalist principles.

**East Meets West: Oriental Seeds in Occidental Soil** by Swami B. G. Narasingha, Jack Hebner, and Steven Rosen

URL: <http://gosai.com/writings/east-meets-west>  
This site includes a synopsis of the connections between a number of nineteenth-century American luminaries and the religious texts of India. Hosted by the Sri Narasingha Chaitanya Ashram (near Mysore, India), this article includes, for example, parallels between Emerson's poem "Brahma" and *The Bhagavad Gita* and notable references by Thoreau to various spiritual texts. Cautionary note: The author's claim that Bronson Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau were "enthusiastic" vegetarians is inaccurate. Alcott certainly was; Thoreau leaned that way (see "Higher Laws in Walden for his thoughts that humans will evolve to an all-plant diet), and Emerson was not.

**Chinese Philosophy in America: How it Influenced H. D. Thoreau**

by Linda Brown Holt URL: <http://www.religiousscholar.com/the-chinese-roots-of-hd-thoreau/>. In an essay on her website, "Religious Scholar: Exploring Common Themes in World Religions and the Role of Nature in the Spiritual Quest," the author offers a gentle look at how Chinese philosophical/spiritual writings informed Thoreau's outlook. Building on the work of David T. Y. Chèn (above), she offers a vista that is broader yet more personal.

**American Veda: Documenting the Colorful History and Extraordinary Influence of India's Spiritual Legacy on Western Culture**

URL: <http://www.americanveda.com/>  
This site expands on the 2010 book by Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*.

Goldberg, a journalist and long-time practitioner of meditation, backs up his skillful style with a wealth of research and interviews that build on his own experience. The book and this site offer the most expansive look to date at the depth and breadth of the impact of Indian spirituality on America.

credness in a ceremony like communion and therefore refused to offer it. He resigned from the Unitarian church, and, after his young wife died of tuberculosis, he found himself completely adrift. He sailed to Europe to meet some of the bright lights of the day, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle. While looking at a large exhibition of plants and animals in Paris—arranged in such a way as to highlight incremental growth as well as connectivity—Emerson was struck by the fact that all life is part of a web and that change is the constant state in which life finds itself. This existential insight enlivened his mind, and he never looked back: it was in Asian texts that Emerson found particularly rich images of life's fundamental inner-connectivity. He continually read a wide range of texts in search of what he called "lusters"—pearls of wisdom that would inform his ever-expanding worldview. As his first biographer, James Elliot Cabot, noted while describing Emerson's reading preferences, "The Oriental (particularly the Hindoo) religious books, the *Bhagavat Gita*, the *Puranas*, and *Upanishads* were among his favorites." These books, according to Emerson,

*are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must—when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is.*<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Thoreau relied on these texts to validate his own ecstatic experiences, Emerson plucked jewels from wherever he found them to underscore his philosophical belief in "the infinitude of the private man," for as he wrote, "I believe in Eternity. I can find Greece, Asia, Italy, Spain, and the Islands—the genius and creative principle of each and of all eras in my own mind."<sup>7</sup>

### Transcendentalism and the Global Dialectic

The influence of the Transcendentalists was profound and continues to be so. By the late nineteenth century, many in New England were interested enough in "Eastern thought" that journeys to India were not uncommon. Reverend Phillip Brooks, the highly popular minister of Concord's Trinity Church, wrote his sister-in-law from India that a pilgrimage to the tree where the Buddha found enlightenment was now a "duty of a minister who preaches to Bostonians."<sup>8</sup> When asked about her religious beliefs in 1884, well-known novelist Louisa May Alcott wrote:

*The simple Buddha religion is very attractive to me, and I believe in it. God is enough for me and all the prophets are only stepping stones to him . . . I seem to remember former states before this . . .*<sup>9</sup>

Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, was intimately involved in the publication of the book that brought the Buddha's life more into American consciousness than any text before: Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* sold over half a million copies in Europe and America. The work of the Concord Summer School of Philosophy, with its lectures on Asian texts, amongst many other topics, was carried further in the late 1800s and early 1900s by intrepid Bostonians like Sara Chapman Bull. It



Swami Vivekananda.  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/5qgsv>.

was Swami Vivekananda's connections with women, such as Chapman and others in Boston, that opened the doors wide for him at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893, and the time he spent in Boston, Maine, and New York gave birth to the first Vedanta Centers in the US.

The ripple effect of interest in Asian texts continued decades after the decline of Transcendentalism. Henry Salt, the extraordinary British socialist, was so taken by the writings of Thoreau that he wrote perhaps the best early biography of him. Salt was active in animal rights and dietary reform—and it was Salt’s pamphlet on vegetarianism that gave a young student of law in London, Mohandas K. Gandhi, the strength not to succumb to the voices around him that were insisting that he change his diet. Later in life, Gandhi wrote to Salt about diet and the influence of Thoreau:

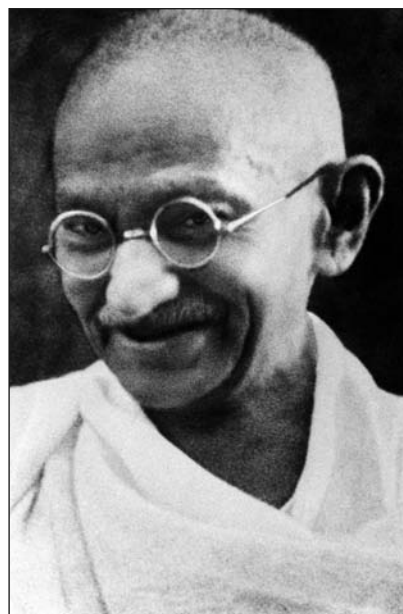
Camp Hardoi,  
October 12th, 1929

Henry S. Salt, Esq.,  
21 Cleveland Road,  
Brighton (England)

Dear friend,

I was agreeably surprised to receive your letter. Yes, indeed your book which was the first English book I came across on vegetarianism was of immense help to me in steady-  
ing my faith in vegetarianism. My first introduction to Thoreau's writings was I think in 1907 or late, when I was in the thick of <sup>the</sup> passive resistance struggle. A friend sent me Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience. It left a deep impression upon me. I translated a portion of that essay for the readers of Indian Opinion in South Africa which I was then editing and I made copious extracts from that essay for <sup>the</sup> that paper. That essay seemed to be so convincing and truthful that I felt the need of knowing more of Thoreau and I came across your life of him, his "Walden" and other short essays all of which I read with great pleasure and equal profit.

Yours sincerely,  
*M.K. Gandhi*



Mohandas K. Gandhi.  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/otuoem>.

In the 1960s, the praxis of the Civil Rights Movement, as developed by Martin Luther King, Jr., derived much inspiration from the teachings of Gandhi—and in turn from the writings of Thoreau, particularly the essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” or, as it is now known, “Civil Disobedience.” The stature of both Thoreau and Emerson continues to grow, and several recent studies have examined the educational philosophies of Alcott (and Thoreau), shedding light on their holistic approach in the classroom. At play in the field of all of the above were the teachings of the classic Asian religious texts.

### Conclusion

Transcendentalism represents an important moment in a new American consolidation of global religious awareness. Seeing such strong connections that were so pervasive in one of America’s most original intellectual movements—and with *Walden* long-installed as part of the Western canon—now is the time to understand and teach this intellectual movement as a watershed moment, one in which influential American thinkers began to conceptualize a world where Asia and the West met, and the full spectrum of humanity’s spiritual understandings were creatively synthesized. Their pioneering curiosity for exploring other peoples’ literatures, philosophies, and spirituality is no less important or relevant for our own time. ■

## NOTES

1. Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
2. Bronson Alcott, *Journals II*, (August 8, 1867), 388.
3. Laura Knoy, "The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings," New Hampshire Public Radio, Friday, April 7, 2006, interview with Lawrence Buell, <http://www.nhpr.org/node/10499>.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Introduction to *Nature* (1836).
5. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1849), 110. This work is available online, digitized by Google, at <http://tinyurl.com/67u7kuq>.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the *Phi Beta Kappa* Address in "The American Scholar," 1837. Note that this is the same talk that Sophia Peabody Hawthorne had just finished reading when she wrote to her brother George on October 1, 1837.
7. *The Essays of Emerson, Volume The First* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1899), 9.
8. Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1982), 141.
9. Louisa May Alcott, Letter to Maggie Lukens, February 5, 1884.

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