

UU and World Religions: The Transcendentalists

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Some of the greatest names associated with Unitarian Universalism were alive and writing in the mid-1800s. People like Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Ellery Channing were at the forefront of a new kind of thought about religion and spirituality in those years, and I want to talk about them a bit today.

History can perhaps seem dusty and irrelevant, a rehash of old stories and points of view that have little relevance to us in the present. Certainly our brother and sister Transcendentalists would have some sympathy for this view, since they were about finding a new, individual way through intuition and personal experience instead of relying on the repetition of past truths. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us “do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail.”

Of course, Emerson also said, “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.” So, perhaps I shouldn’t hold him up as an exemplar!

We’re going to take a ride in the time machine today, and revisit a bit of our denominational history by spending time with this theological movement and, specifically, its connections to the world of philosophy and theology beyond our borders. Those who called themselves Transcendentalists, while uniquely American, were also influenced and guided by wisdom and teachings from Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the emerging European philosophical traditions of their time. Our goal is not only to revisit what Transcendentalism meant to the Unitarianism of its day, but to see what we can learn about our own time by revisiting the past.

Transcendentalism arose in a people who were reacting and responding to their historical time, full of curiosity and fervor, spurred by a desire to make sense of the life they saw unfolding around them. They questioned everything about the status quo of their lives, including the purpose and practice of religion, politics, and even the meaning of life itself.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian minister in his early career, although his emerging philosophies eventually led him to resign his ministry and become a writer. Referring to the focus of religion in his day on rational biblical criticism, formality, and historical tradition, Emerson declared it “corpse cold” for his generation, urging a shift to a more spiritual practice of religion based on a personal, immediate, and emotional experience of spiritual life. The Transcendentalists hungered for a more intense, inspirational, and in-dwelling connection to the divine.

The men and women whose thoughts fueled the rise of Transcendentalism were among the first generation born after the struggle of the Revolutionary War, the first to identify themselves as wholly American. In response to the emergence of the Age of Reason, which emphasized the role of rationalism and empiricism, this new generation longed to find what to them would be a deeper and more meaningful means of expression for the changes in consciousness they experienced as a radically new world order. In Emerson’s 1836 manifesto, “Nature,” he wrote, “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”

Desiring to find a uniquely American expression of the spirit of the times, the Transcendentalists shifted their focus from Europe and looked to the Far East for inspiration. At this time in history, those of European descent were “discovering,” if you will, the cultures and people of the wider world, particularly Asia. Europeans, and Americans, were fascinated with the larger world, which fueled a desire to know and experience the culture, craft, and literature of the people of these far off lands.

In 1844, the first translation of a portion of the teachings of the Buddha was printed in **The Dial**, a Transcendentalist journal edited at various times by Elizabeth Peabody, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller. If you read some of their early commentary on the precepts of Eastern religions, you might find that the Transcendentalists were a bit confused not only about what Buddhism and Hinduism were actually about, but also how they were different from one another.

But, despite their confusion, they were quite clear on the elements of Buddhism that they felt reflected their own thoughts about the pursuit of a spiritual life.

Emerson wrote of his concept of the Oversoul, the divine spark within each person that is connected with all the rest of creation – all humankind, all nature. In his thinking, a person did not discover the true nature of their soul, their selfhood, through logical reasoning, but rather through the use of creative insight and the interpretation of one’s own inner voice, one’s intuition. Let’s read together what he said: turn to reading #531 in the gray hymnal, please. (Emerson: The Oversoul)

Emerson’s idea of the divine spark within each person is similar to the Buddhist concept of the “seeds” within each person that represent our potentialities for love, anger, compassion, greed, and so forth. How one lives one’s life determines which of these internal seeds has the opportunity to take hold and grow. Each of us then, in Buddhist teaching, is potentially a reflection of the entire world, and each of us is a part of the larger whole. The Transcendentalists, too, saw the potential for the whole in each of the parts, and the parts which made up the whole.

In the Eightfold Path, Buddhism encourages a questioning process of life, something that the Transcendentalists took to heart. In his essay “Nature,” Emerson wrote: “Question everything, look deeply, and then act from that insight.” They were idealistic and optimistic because they believed that the answers to what they were seeking could be found, that one could come to know the true self within. This knowing would one to be able to live in alignment with the best possible purpose. Buddhists’ speak of right view, right intention, and right action, which have deep similarities to the concepts formulated by the Transcendentalists.

The connection between the environmental responsibility of Buddhism and the emphasis on a relationship with nature from the Transcendentalists is a further link. Buddhists, rooted in Asian cultural values, emphasize the importance of social well-being, which includes a concern for the environment as a reflection of the state of the spirit. The Dalai Lama has spoken of the importance of “caring for our home” as a practical spiritual practice. He’s talked about the value of nature, not only for beauty and serenity, but also in its symbolism for the state of our inner being. When we are spiritually well and living in harmony, our environment reflects that, because we take care of it as we take care of ourselves. He urges us to work with compassion, along with responsibility and care.

Emerson said that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.” The transcendent in nature is a consistent theme for the Transcendentalists, witnessed

specifically by the writings of Henry David Thoreau. In describing his time at Walden Pond, he wrote that he'd gone to live in the forest in order to live deliberately, using the process of getting to know nature as a way of getting to know himself.

His process of reflection, of being within a natural setting, resembles the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation. Thoreau sets aside abundant time in his day to simply be in nature, in contemplation, to observe the world around him in attentive detail, and reflect intuitively on how what he observes and experiences lends insight into self knowing.

Here's how he describes his process: "Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise til noon, rapt in reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in my west window or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than the work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Buddhists mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works."

Not only were the Transcendentalists engaged in exploring the meaning and experience of a new philosophy of living, they were also eager to express their new ideas in terms of reform in many social institutions. They were among those who spoke out for change in the rights of women, in the elimination of slavery, educational reform, and respect for the natural world. Two utopian communities, Brook Farm and Fruitlands, were established at this time by followers of the Transcendental movement, in a desire to create a more simple, wholesome lifestyle.

Historian Gerda Lerner has written this about the study of history:

"What we do about history matters. The often repeated saying that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them has a lot of truth in it. But what are 'the lessons of history'? The very attempt at definition furnishes ground for new conflicts. History is not a recipe book; past events are never replicated in the present in quite the same way. Historical events are infinitely variable and their interpretations are a constantly shifting process. There are no certainties to be found in the past.

We can learn from history how past generations thought and acted, how they responded to the demands of their time and how they solved their problems. We can learn by analogy, not by example, for our circumstances will always be different than theirs were. The main thing history can teach us is that human actions have consequences and that certain choices, once made, cannot be undone. They foreclose the possibility of making other choices and thus they determine future events."

The time of the Transcendentalists, and their influence on the Unitarianism that emerged, does have insight for us in our contemporary experience. Our philosophical and denominational ancestors contributed not only to our American sense of individualism and self-reliance, but also to our idealism. George Hochfield, who edited a collection of selected writings of the Transcendentalists, says this about the heritage they left us: "The divinity of nature, the glory of human aspiration and freedom, the power of intuition as opposed to reason, the creative energy of the poetic imagination – these are some of the themes imported into America by [the Transcendentalists.]"

The generation arising at the mid-1800s yearned for a greater sense of spirituality and personal connection to the experience of life. There was a great spiritual hunger that spawned not only the Transcendentalists, but a movement of evangelical Christianity, as well. The mid-1800s was a time of a great revival of religious fervor, and the roots of the evangelical and fundamentalist Christian movements can also be traced to this time in our history. This group, too, wanted to find a more experiential, passionate, and beyond-rational relationship with God.

This play, perhaps even tension, between the life of the mind and life of the spirit continues today, in the larger world, but also within Unitarian Universalism. I think we see the cycles of the past within our own contemporary experience in our congregations.

Within our own denomination we have those who value the rational, who interpret life through the reason of the mind, and yearn to focus on the empirical, the scientific, the truth and inspiration found within the scientific method. These are often the people in our congregations who describe themselves as agnostic, atheist, or humanist. They have formed our communities to be places of questioning and healthy doubt, where reason is the filter used to sort religious wheat from chaff, so to speak, to distill the truth of the rational, reasonable, and provable.

We also embrace those who yearn for a life experienced through the intuition, for whom a direct experience of the spirit alive within is a necessary part of their inspiration. These are the people in our congregations who perhaps describe themselves as “spiritual,” but not religious. They are seeking a direct, personal experience of and connection to the divine, whether that is defined as God, or the sacred nature of all creation, or divine spark within. These are the people who have brought spiritual practice and a language of reverence to our congregations, some of them drawn from Buddhism, and some from not only from Christian traditions, but from other religious traditions, as well.

The engagement of both head and heart is part of a meaningful life, both avenues of learning and experience offer opportunities for insight and understanding. Our challenge is to find the balance, akin to the Buddhist middle way, perhaps, that honors and encourages both ways of being; that provides a religious home to both the mind and the spirit.

It’s not an easy task. From our Transcendentalist ancestors, however, we have retained our inclination to fully engage in the tension, to question our own and others experience, and to find a path through our own understanding, insight, and reason. It is a treasured part of our heritage, and a fundamental theological position of Unitarian Universalism as we practice it today.

Our Transcendentalist heritage includes the great ideas of seeking truth within one’s self, instead of through the doctrines espoused by others. We are on a quest for truth and meaning, a truth and meaning of who we are within the whole of life. Let us continue to explore our history to understand our present, not to cling to the old ways, but to find insight and courage for our explorations.

May it be so.