EMERSONIAN "SELF-RELIANCE": A RE-READING OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM FROM THE PURVIEW OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: As a core cultural value, individualism has been ubiquitous in America since the nation's genesis; and American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson has often been credited as the apostle of American individualism. Although there has been no dearth of studies of American individualism and Emersonian "self-reliance," an analysis of the latter from a Buddhist purview has been overlooked in academic scholarship. This paper attempts to fill this lacuna by examining the cross-cultural and inter-faith foundations of Emerson's dictum of "self-reliance" by drawing upon the Buddhist doctrines of self-knowledge, self-confidence, prajñā, bodhichitta, Buddhahood from Theravadian, Tibetan, and Zen traditions. It elaborates how Emerson divests American individualism from the threat of becoming a rugged, baser rendition of social atomization and apathetic self-absorption by formulating a credo of the individualism, which is essentially epistemological, spiritual, soteriological, and communitarian in spirit and character.

Introduction

Individualism is a seminal ideal in American culture and consciousness. It is distinctively and quintessentially an "American" ideology, as C. Eric Mount Jr. designates it as "a kind of secular religion" (1981, 362) for the American people. The cult of individual autonomy and identity is commonplace in American culture and discourse. Right from the nation's genesis, the notions of selfhood and individual freedom have heightened the implications of the uniqueness of American culture, life, and democracy by letting people decide, do whatever they wish, and be whomever they want to be. However, what is individualism? Simply defined, individualism is a moral, social, and political philosophy that emphasizes the primacy of the individual over society. This theory emerged in nineteenth-century France, from where it was imported to the New World in the 1820s. It went through a series of appropriations, modifications, and reconfigurations, of which Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) contribution has occupied a central place in scholarship. Emersonianism is synonymously associated with individualism. This paper probes how Emerson inaugurated an American individualism, powerful and agentic enough to resuscitate the nineteenth-century falling American spirit, worn down by decades of socio-cultural and economic upheavals; but also spiritual, humanistic, and communitarian enough to revoke the ruthlessly self-serving and self-centered modes of thinking and

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living, informed by baser egotistic sentiments. It had seeped into the psyche and was being blindly emulated in American culture and society—a tendency that socialists and French counter-revolutionary thinkers attacked.

There have been several discussions of Emersonian individualism; however, most of them are from a secular aspect;[1] barring Kurt Liedecker's reading, which has been conducted from a Hindu perspective, portrays individualism as the self's implication with the whole, with the "over-soul" (Liedecker, 1951, 42). None of the existing analyses has considered the influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy on Emerson's formulation and conception of the credo of "self-reliance." It is well-established academic parlance that Emerson had consciously "Easted" himself and re-oriented his philosophy and ideology by drawing upon Asian wisdom from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Persian poetry. In lieu of the previous statement, the absence of a reading of Emerson deploying a Buddhist frame of reference becomes imperative, especially given the fact that Emerson was an outspoken champion and adherent of the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*[2] -- the only Buddhist doctrine which enjoys a continuous, conspicuous presence in his published writings, often under the guise of the "law of hospitality."

This paper first traces the Western tradition of individualism, its origin in Europe, and its influx in America, witnessing its modification and re-appropriation. After that, it investigates Emerson's bestowal of particularly epistemological, humanistic, and spiritualistic dimensions upon it in the special light of the Buddha's teachings and principles. The author shall be using Buddhist readings from the Theravadian, Tibetan and Zen traditions as the analysis tools. This paper has attempted to show how Emerson's "Self-Reliance" marks a significant departure from the Western ideological tradition and American definition of individualism. It is striking a balance between self and others, individual and society, egoism and selflessness, and creating a harmonious amalgam of eastern values and western ideals—the Western ideological tradition of individualism in America.

Although the term *individualism* was introduced into the American lexicon in the 1830s and 40s, it has held a distinctive place in the national imagination from the country's inception. America has always steeped itself in a self-congratulatory light through the myth of American exceptionalism. It was heralding itself as a nation unique, one of a kind, a glorious exemplar of freedom, autonomy stemming from its overthrow of British imperial chains. It began with Winthrop's emphatic visionary proclamation of America as "a shining city upon a hill" in his sermon, delivered on March 21, 1630, at Holyrood Church in Southampton, even before embarking on the

[1] C. Eric Mount Jr, Joseph L. Blau, David Lyttle, and Cyrus R. K. Patell have demonstrated it as a fundamentally social philosophy, betraying an amalgam of equality and personal liberty. In this transcendental philosophy, individualism entails universalism. However, they all have rendered accounts from a secular, non-religious perspective.

[2] As we shall see in the paper later, *karma* was the basis for Buddhism's essentially atheistic and individualistic character.

Arabella *en route* to America in the colonial era. It was to the post-revolutionary America built on the foundation of civil liberties and rights, "Life, liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness"—America has always prided itself on its essentially individualistic, libertarian spirit. The narrative of the might of individual effort, personal exertion, and self-belief, as evident from their creation of a civilization out of a wilderness, perpetuated by the Frontier myth, furthered the idea of American supremacy and the power of the individual American man. The proclivities of anti-authoritarianism and eschewal of tradition have consistently run high in the American cultural stream—starting with the emigration of the Puritan fathers to establish a community based on their personal faith, to the American Revolution itself, which not only cast off the political shackles of Britain but was also a revolution in launching the power of the ordinary person, the power of the "individual." Kazin elaborates:

> The American Revolution raised the individual and above all the theory of individualism to new heights. There was a political revolution, even a religious revolution, above all an intellectual and literary revolution. There was eventually a revolution of the common man. . . . (as cited in Mount Jr., 1981, 363)

America had established itself as a rebel. The truly exceptional brand of autonomy and self-rule percolated every layer of life and society—the ideal of absolute democracy on the political front, *a laissez-faire* system of economy, the immense scope for social and economic mobility, and cultural self-sufficiency. According to Eric Daniels, Americans substituted European socio-economic classifications like class, status, rank, and position with their own alternative vision of individual self-definition and self-identity. Its socio-economic hierarchy obliterated inherited privileges and forms of succession like primogeniture and titles of nobility (Daniels, 2011, 72). The Protestant religion added to the tide by offering a religion that divested the scriptures and sacraments of their authority and power by promoting the pursuit of every individual's direct, personal relationship with the divine. Founding fathers Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Thomas Paine extolled a cult of individualism, which bestowed upon every American the absolute autonomy and freedom to make moral choices, and life decisions and pursue their own private welfare and personal interests. However, American individualism has one essential aspect, which eludes the eye if it is read carelessly—the aspect of social welfare and communitarian interest (discussed a few paragraphs later). However, before proceeding to the social dimension of American individualism, we need to understand the origin and interpretations of the term individualism itself.

The term individualism was drawn from the French term *individualisme,* which arose in France in the 1820s, deployed by French nationalists, conservatives, counter-revolutionary, Socialist thinkers, coined to denote the flaws and inadequacies of Enlightenment ideals (Patell, 1994, 444). It was seen as a form of "negative liberty" (Patell, 1994, 442), an endorsement of individual and private self-interest at the expense of the social and collective. Counter-revolutionary French thinkers deemed it

a source of social anarchy and disorganization. The glorification and deification of the individual was a challenge, an attack on their vision of "an organic, stable, hierarchically organized, harmonious social order" (as cited in Patell 1994, 444). In the 1830s, when individualism reached the shores of the New World, it shed its negative connotations, primarily because it was highly amenable to America's egalitarian and democratic ethos. However, it underwent its own share of alterations, chiefly the addition of social concern and public interest. Americans tempered the rough edges of European radical *individualism* by bridging a middle path between personal well-being and social welfare, private self-interest, and public interest. Individualism in the American tradition made up for the defects and fears of selfish indifference and complete indifference to social responsibilities and obligations with their own model of the inextricable link between the individual and the social, the personal and the communal, the private and the public, as evident from John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin's exhortations of collective responsibility.

The strain of social conformity and social obligations in the ideology of American individualism was further stressed by William Ellery Channing, the unitarian minister, a former idol and teacher of Emerson. Channing perpetuates the paradoxical mix of social conformity and individuality because, to him, the path to self-fulfillment lay not in fulfilling their unique potential but in conforming to universal social laws (Lyttle, 1995, 90). Channing grants the individual the power of free will, yet an individual's responsibility lies in what is uniform across all people. Individualism, therefore, by extension, implied universalism. Channing expounds the quintessential American common call to promote a form of individualism that would ensure conformity and uniformity under the guise of universalism—an idea which was abhorrent to Emerson: "The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion." Therefore, he says, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (Emerson, 1983, 261).

A discussion of the tradition of American individualism necessitates the critique outlined in French historian Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840), where Tocqueville, despite praising America for its uniqueness, ardent religiosity, economic strides, provincial decentralization, and voluntary associations. It could not restrain his trenchant observations on the troubling subject of individualism in a manner that is tinged with a mingling of admiration and skepticism:

> . . . a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself . . . individualism at first only dams the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all the others too and finally merges in egoism. . . They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands . . . each man is forever thrown back

> on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart. (As cited in Patell, 1994, 445-46)

Tocqueville did not associate individualism with selfish egotism or "a passionate and exaggerated love of self." However, he feared that isolation induced by individualism would encourage negligence of social ties, public duties, and obligations and further end up in an atomistic world—a world comprising of indistinct, identical, isolated individuals, radically free from all external and communal duties and restraints. This democratic individualism, in the long run, ends up on a self-destructive spree, explains Peter Augustine Lawler: "Without communal resources to shape and limit self-determination, the democratic self chooses not to determine itself, i.e., not to exercise its freedom. It passively defers to public opinion, Tocqueville says. …Radical individualism makes individual distinctiveness—individuality in any meaningful sense—impossible" (Lawler, 2014).

However, what Tocqueville predicts next, is more critical to this paper. Tocqueville highlights the paucity of self-confidence and self-knowledge in people that threatens to disrupt the ideal of individual autonomy. The liberated American individual was not a fully self-aware and self-reliant person because it "is all too aware that it is not a God. It is aware primarily of its radical contingency or neediness. It knows that it cannot really satisfy its own deepest longings" (Ibid). When a society begins to comprise a mass of men who are all alike, indistinct from one another, nurturing radical solitude and isolation, the notion of the *self* as different, unique, and "individual" would dissipate. Tocqueville points out that individualism would fail, even in America, in the long run despite the best intentions.

I. What is Emersonian "Self-reliance"?

Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays: First Series*, which contained the essay "Self-reliance"—the celebratory hymn of individualism in American discourse, came out in 1841, around the publication of the second volume of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840). Emerson, born in 1803, had lived his young years through the tumultuous decades of the early nineteenth century, mired in severe socio-economic and cultural turmoil. Successive economic booms and busts, the passage of inhuman discriminatory legislation like the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, among several others, escalated socio-cultural and inter-racial tensions, epochal changes stemming from rapid strides in industrialization and urbanization. Without a proper moral and spiritual fallback, the cumulative effects of all these had debilitated the American spirit. Americans lost all sense of purpose and identity; their idealized notion of self and self-regard were severely wounded from repeated blows of the crises. The split in Harvard Divinity School and the failure of the Unitarian church to provide an appropriate alternative added to his dismay and disillusionment compelled him to turn Eastwards in his intellectual and spiritual quest. Moreover, the all-encompassing richness and non-dualistic theology and philosophy helped Emerson

formulate his credo of American Transcendentalism and transformed the meaning of American individualism. However, before moving ahead with the influence of Buddhism on Emersonian individualism, a basic understanding of his understanding and definition of self-reliance becomes pre-emptory. The first paragraph of his monumental essay "Self-reliance" reads:

> To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, —that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. (Emerson, 1983, 259)

The above passage betrays the same traces of an almost brazen sense of self-regard and self-interest for a reader unacquainted with Emerson's philosophy. However, what Emerson paints is a vision of individualism where individual interests, desires, actions, and well-being, inevitably become public—they go on to embody the social, the communitarian, and the *universal*. Emersonian individualism completely deviates from the flaws and doubts cast upon European individualism by the Socialists. Emersonian self-reliance does not refer to what is today understood as "rugged" Hooverian individualism. Emersonian individualism is not the society-negating, self-serving, and isolating type. In his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville reviles as desiccation of the sap of public virtues, finally merging in egoism. Instead, it was a new form of individualism, deriving its fuel from the untaught sallies of the soul, emanating from "Spontaneity or Instinct" (Ibid, 269), intuitive insight into the self, which in turn expands into an insight into the world.

Emerson's individualism cannot be reduced to egoism or egotism, as Tocqueville alleges, for Emerson in *Nature* emphatically clamors for the dissolution of self-hindering "mean egotism" (Ibid, 11). It does not suffer from the fallacy of an exaggerated sense of ego—a characteristic of the dualistic Western philosophy. His self-reliant individual is not what David Lyttle terms the "false individual" (Lyttle, 1995, 90)—an individual divorced from God and other people, pursuing only his own personal interests, in complete indifference to others' welfare. Emerson tinges his dictum of "self-trust" and "self-reliance" with ubiquitously epistemological, humanistic, and spiritual tones, rather than reiterating only the intellectual aspect of the European Enlightenment and French Revolutionary ideal of individualism. On these grounds, Emersonian individualism aligns itself with the Buddhist conception of individualism, to the elaboration of which the subsequent sections of the paper are devoted.

II. Is Buddhism Individualistic?

Before moving on to a parallel study of the two schools of thought, it needs to be understood how and why individualism lies at the crux of Buddhist thought and

philosophy. Buddhism is fundamentally an atheistic tradition. It has no conception of a God or a divine force overseeing human affairs and actions. It reserves no space for the scope of divine intervention or assistance because at its very foundation lay Siddhartha Gautama's conscious eschewal of rites, rituals, and ceremonies addressed to God to achieve human ends. On the night of his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha saw the countless lifetimes of himself and all other beings. He discerned how the law of cause and conditionality connected the numerous lives of sentient beings—the law of *karma*—the idea that good volitional (intentional) actions, thoughts, and speech bring good results to the doer. Evil volitional actions, thoughts, and speech bring punishment and ill effects on the doer. Karma leads to rebirth and the endless cycle of birth, death, rebirth, or *samsara*. Every living being within the Buddhist scheme of thought is, in G P Malalasekera's words, "a singly determined existence" (1964, 150)—determined by the forces of karma and interdependence (a doctrine that shall be taken up later in this paper).

It is the force of karma that accentuates the individualistic element of Buddhism. Every individual is empowered with the ability to determine and construct his or her present and future. Life is a self-sustaining, self-evolving process—the fruition of the individual's volitions or *cetana*—constituted and conditioned not by outward impetus or forces but through the mechanism of one's deeds and actions. Thus, I fashion myself the next moment with the present life and the life that shall follow in every moment of my life. In the most literal sense, I am, and I become the architect of my fate, my destiny. "The self is the Lord of the self; who else is the Lord?" Every individual is unique by his actions and the result of his actions. (As cited in Malalasekera, 1964, 150)

> Difference between egoistic self-obsession and self-trust…our torment is Unbelief, the Uncertainty as to what we ought to do; the distrust of the value of what we do; . . . (Emerson, 1983, 165)

As previously expressed in the paper, Emersonian self-reliance should not be misinterpreted as another embodiment of insolent self-obsession or a self-centered pursuit of personal interests in complete abnegation of concern for others. Emerson has bestowed upon it a substantial degree of purity and sanctity. The term "Self-reliance" is used by Emerson, self-professedly, as the only "language of sufficient energy to convey my sense of the sacredness of private integrity" (Emerson, 1983, 163). Emerson, in his significant essays, lectures, and addresses, reviles the disposition of his American fellow citizens for the diffidence which has seeped into their minds; their reluctance to cast the "iron lids" off their "sluggard intellect" (1983, 53). The Emersonian conception of individualism emanates from the particular context of nineteenth-century America—dispirited. Socio-cultural and economic upheavals disillusioned it; an America still chained to ancient Europe's ideas, usages, and literature; an era where the scholar lacked personal inspiration and insight sought to replicate the courtly muses of Europe merely. Transcendentalism was an

exhortation to forsake schools of antiquity; to question tradition and authority which were holding the people back; and to arrive at an epiphanic realization of the need to live "for ourselves, —not as the pallbearers of a funeral, but as the upholders and creators of our age" (Ibid, 97).

Emerson viewed history as an external objective story and a biography of the individual—a subjective, personal, mental, and spiritual biography of the individual soul. As he defines it, history is the account of an individual's subjective life. Moreover, its value lies in increasing the reader's "self-trust, by demonstrating what man can be and do" (Ibid, 97). Emerson's belief that "Heroes" were to be seen in their roles as "Representative Men" is akin to the conception of the Buddha, who in Theravadan Buddhist metaphysics and cosmology serves as a representative, an ideal of an enlightened being, for the slumbering, common folk to aspire to be. Endowed with superior abilities, occupying a higher sphere of thought, Emersonian "Representative Man," similar to the Buddha, serves as a paragon of virtue, greatness, enlightenment—a state of mind, morality, and character, which all people can attain. Their stirring deeds displaying knowledge, wisdom invite others to emulate them is parallel to the symbol of Buddha, the enlightened sage who, having attained awakening himself, symbolizes the innate potential in all of us to attain the same.

Buddhism ostensibly extols the conviction that all sentient beings foster within themselves the seeds of *Buddhahood* or the seeds for awakening, often termed Buddha-potential or *Tathāgatagarbha*. Yoshio Takanashi has previously demonstrated the analogy between Emerson's "God-within," and "Buddha-womb" or Buddha-nature (Takanashi, 2019, 1-14). Emerson ascribed to the Buddhist belief that all human beings are innately perfect. Those evil and wrong deeds on humans were privative and temporary. All people were imbued with the doctrine of "divine nature" (Emerson, 1983, 79)—teachings that have dwarfed their constitution since being forgotten. "He is born to be good and perfect, unlimited. What he venerates is his own" (Emerson, 1983, 76). Emerson's insistence on the individual's illimitable greatness and divinity scants any traces of uncompromising arrogance or narcissism. Instead, it reinstates in men and women the sense of necessity to wake up to their infinite worthiness, to reinstate "Faith and Hope" (Ibid, 146) in their self, voice, and inner potential.

In Buddhism, owing to its atheistic character, the self is the chief object of study, work, and improvement. The individual is the site of improvement, the ground from where liberation and spiritual awakening begins. It posits the individual's responsibility of liberation and deliverance instead of some external divine power or authority. This emphasis on individual and personal progress has led people unfamiliar with Buddhism to misconstrue that Buddhism is a self-centered, world-negating tradition, espousing celibacy and asceticism and renouncing worldliness and social duties. Buddhism has suffered misreadings and misinterpretations because it is too self-pandering and self-centered. There is a thin line between selfish individualism and wise individualism. Dalai Lama explains the boundaries:

> While one form of self-interest is selfish, stingy, and irritable, another is wise self-interest that understands that benefiting ourselves and helping others need not be contradictory…While one sense of self—self-grasping ignorance—is a troublemaker, stable and realistic self-confidence is necessary to accomplish the path. Bodhisattvas must have exceptionally strong self-confidence to be able to complete all the perfections. Free from arrogance, such self-confidence aspires for what is positive without clinging to it. (Lama and Chodron, 2015)

Buddhism views self-confidence and self-belief as crucial to walking the path of "Budh," or awakening. Only firm faith in one's abilities may enable and empower the practitioners to embark on the path. Nyima Tsering elaborates, "However, since the goal of Buddhahood is very difficult to attain, it is necessary to have a firm conviction that it is possible to reach that goal . . ." (Tsering 58). Emerson echoes the same stress on the cultivation of faith and self-trust, to transform the intellectual and spiritual "Mere thinker" to "Man thinking" (Emerson, 1983, 54) by shedding the veil of disconsolateness and acquiescence. Emerson's greatest principle is the "doctrine of the soul" (Ibid, 79)—that all nature, the entire universe, and the laws which traverse them. It emanates directly from the Soul and mind of man, which is an extension of the greater "Over-soul" and the "One-mind" common to all beings.

III. Epistemological Individualism: Search for Self-knowledge

Emerson's individualism entailed a vision of a "self" or an individual as a self-reflective, self-introspective person whose mind and spirit were attuned to the finer ethereal springs of his or her own life. A true individual endeavors to know and understand himself instead of submitting and giving free rein to his baser egoistic instincts. The crux of Transcendentalist philosophy recognizes one's innate goodness; one is an inherent potential for perfection and wisdom. Within such a paradigm of thought, self-knowledge and self-cognition become key facets of an individual's life and actions. Emersonianism is a form of epistemological individualism—the belief that a search for knowledge and wisdom should underlie every American's intellectual and spiritual quest. Emerson comes so close to Buddhism, which is principally grounded on the quest for knowledge of the self. The problems afflict the self and how to overcome the problems.

Buddhism is a science of the mind, a study of the self, and, more importantly, a guide for self-help. Lama Yeshe, the Tibetan Buddhist monk known for introducing Tibetan Buddhism to the Western world in his classic Becoming *Your Own Therapist*, says, "When we are studying Buddhism, we are studying ourselves, the nature of our minds"; and its methodology teaches the development of "a deep understanding" of ourselves and all other phenomena (Yeshe, 1998, 7). An epistemological and soteriological dimension underlies the fourfold structure of Nobel Truths. It is often considered the essence of Buddhism—the cognition of the vagaries of existence that afflict us, the sufferings' reasons, the search and application of the appropriate physic

to root the afflictions out. One of the fundamental physics to end ignorance and delusion in Buddhism is to understand the self of things and reality as *they really are* (*yathabhuta*). Emersonian quest for knowledge asks the same questions, "What am I? and What is? asks the human spirit . . ." (Ibid, 75). Like Buddhism, which insinuates the insistence that the source of all knowledge, all answers lie within the self, the mind, Emerson intimates the same urgency of self-examination in his writings and lectures. The world is nothing; the man is all; yourself is the law of all nature in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. (Emerson, 1983, 70)

According to Buddhists, *Prajñā* or *paññā* (wisdom) is present in every individual without discrimination. The term *Prajñā* refers not only to intellectual ingenuities or metaphysical reasoning and speculations but an insight of a higher-order—one that would lead to enlightenment. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the Zen monk who introduced Zen Buddhism to the west, primarily America, defines *Prajñā* as ". . . the understanding of a higher order than that which is habitually exercised in acquiring relative knowledge. It is a faculty, both intellectual and spiritual, through the operation of which the soul is enabled to break the fetters of intellection" (Suzuki). *Prajñā* is to be cognized, intuitively realized through personal exertion, cultivated through spiritual conduct and discipline, and mindfulness, awareness, and meditation practices. Buddhism is a way of life revolving around the question of identity, the knowledge of suffering and to free oneself from suffering—the knowledge of these had to be arrived at through a process of personal reflection, rumination, and foremost, by understanding the self. G. Malalasekera expounds on how the question of "I" is a fundamental one in Buddhism:

> But he (the Buddha) recognized that the question of how cannot be satisfactorily answered without a knowledge of what—the question, what am I? I must know what am I and what are the things and beings outside me. I must learn my relation to the external world. I must apprehend the meaning and significance of life . . . (Malalasekera, 1964, 146)

> Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. (Emerson, 1983, 7)

To Emerson, the answers to all the questions raised by order of things in the universe could be sought and uncovered from the self. All the laws which traverse the universe have their origin in the mind and spirit of the individual. The whole lesson ought to be learned firsthand by the self— "We must in ourselves see the see the necessary reason of every fact. . ." (Ibid, 240). Therefore, an insight into the self, a knowledge of the self was the formula for "manipular convenience" (Emerson, 1983, 240). It could grant the individual access to personal as well as universal history, the forces which shaped its epochs—materially as well as spiritually. The entire motive behind all endeavors was the primeval yearning for satisfying the curiosities of self-knowledge

and self-revelation: "We go to Europe, or we pursue persons, or we read books, in the instinctive faith that these will call it out and reveal us to ourselves"; but it is in the "absolute insulation of man" (Emerson, 1983, 353), and the assurance that all we need to know is in ourselves already: "We are sure that we have all in us" (Ibid, 353).

In Buddhism, the word dharma has various connotations, one of which implies the law—the law that exists in a person's heart and mind, besides residing in the universe. Emerson believed the world and the universe to be manifestations of the "Soul," and the laws common to the universe were, in turn, accessible to the mind and the spirit. They are all the laws that traverse the universe, which regulate our lives, and are to be revealed by the mind (Ibid, 75). Knowing the self meant knowing the world, and the access to spiritual truth and spiritual knowledge lay in the acts of self-cognition and self-introspection itself. The secret to the deepest mysteries of the soul, the answers to the most perturbing questions, lay within in man's "Reason"—Emerson's terminology for what is commonly understood as intuition. Every individual is an "inlet into the deeps of Reason" (Ibid, 78), and this acquaintance with one's deepest instincts or intuition is the source of greatest insight, knowledge, and wisdom.

Spiritual self-reliance: Carving the path to awakening

> Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; . . . and dare to love God without mediator or veil. . .. Yourself a new-born bard of the Holy Ghost, —cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with the Deity. (Emerson, 1983, 88-9)

> A special transmission outside the Scriptures; No dependence upon words or letters;
> Direct pointing to the soul of man; Seeing into the nature and the attainment of Buddhahood. (Suzuki, 2011, "Introduction")

American Transcendentalism principally arose as a reaction to the theological crises in the Unitarian church. Marred by spurts of philosophical and religious skepticism, Emerson, from his early life in the 1820s and 30s, was dogged by feelings of the flaws and inadequacies of what Christianity had become. Dissatisfied with the standard answers of the Church fathers, Emerson was hankering for a religion centered on the soul, which would make one realize that one too was an "infinite soul" (Emerson, 1983, 84). His vision of Christ was as the figure of a Representative Man, who embodied the highest moral and spiritual greatness, to be aspired to by fellow Christians. Emerson derides his fellow Americans to stop aspiring to be a secondary self— "secondary to some Christian scheme" (Ibid, 88). The defiantly emphatic clarion to forsake conformity and consistency needs to be seen in the light of the need to recognize a doctrine of personal ascendancy quintessentially spiritual and soteriological in character. The remedy to their (Church's) deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul. (Ibid, 91)

Christianity, torn apart by the forces of institutionalization and dogmatic maneuvers, had been rendered a pale, distraught shadow of its once glorious past—what remained were the vestiges of, in Emerson's words, a "dead church" and a "dead Bible society" (Emerson, 1983, 263). Emerson meant to explain that the age of inspiration and revelation was not lost; rather, the onus was on the individual to seek its flashes within— "detect and watch the gleam of light which flashes across his mind, from within" (Ibid, 259). This line resembles the famous Buddhist Pali phrase, "*Atta dipa viharatha atta saran, annana sarana.*" The term *atta* means the "self," *dipa* means "light," and *vihartha* stands for "identity"—what the Buddha implies is that the divine light *is* us, wisdom *is* us. Buddhism's non-dualistic, interdependent tendencies locate wisdom *as* us, *not in* us; light *as* us, *not in* us. The term "*Sarana*" translates to trust; *annana* to "nothing else"—the phrase is an almost direct corollary of Emerson's dictum of self-trust, and *Sarana* translates to "refuge"—the whole phrase connotes the principle that the refuge from suffering is in the self, in the divine spiritual light and wisdom which exists in our most profound minds and consciousnesses.

It is for you to strive ardently; Tathagatas simply point out the way. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 95) The Buddha posited the entire responsibility of spiritual liberation and enlightenment on the Buddhist practitioner. As mentioned in the previous section, the place and role of the Buddha in Buddhist cosmology, particularly Theravadian tradition, is not as any divine authority or source of deliverance but as a common person who attained self-knowledge through contemplation and reflection, attained supreme wisdom, and awakening. After that, this person exemplified the path to enlightenment for other practitioners. In the context of Zen Buddhism, the spiritual truth is, invariably and inevitably, a product of spiritual self-effort and self-reliance. D. T. Suzuki elaborates on how satori or enlightenment is to be located within the self:

> As to the opening of Satori, all that Zen can do is to indicate the way and leave the rest all to one's own experience, that is to say, following up the indication and arriving at the goal—this is to be done by oneself and without another's help. With all that the master can do, he is helpless to make the disciple take hold of the things unless the latter is inwardly fully prepared for it. . .. the taking hold of the ultimate reality is to be done by oneself. . .. the looking into one's own nature must be the outcome of one's own inner overflowing. (Suzuki, 2011, "Satori")

For Emerson, the remedy to the church's ills, the debilitating yoke of fear, diffidence, and sense of lack, was to be found within the soul, that is, the self. Redemption had to be hearkened and sought by the individual soul (Emerson, 1983, 88). Transcendentalism, in essence, signifies a secular religion, at the heart of which lies the foundation of a direct, unmediated, "original relation to the universe," to the divine (Emerson, 1983, 7). The scripture, the preacher, and the sacraments hold no significance in this direct original relationship. The paucity of self-trust and personal

exertion impede the path to awakening. The seraphic spark, the beatific truth, lies within, waiting to be discovered through intuition and insight— "When he can reach God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts and their readings" (Emerson, 2007, 88).

IV. An inter-dependent Self-reliance: Awakening of Self and Awakening of Others

As established in the first half of the paper, one of the ostensible characteristics of individualism in the American ideological tradition is its social and communitarian bent. The inextricable links between the private and public, the individual and social, were not entirely forgotten or ignored by Emerson either. Joseph J. Blau has expounded on how Emerson's individualism is a social philosophy, how self-reliance is a transcendence of the limiting self, the discovery of the universal within the individual (Blau, 1977, 82); an expansion of the social applicability and validity of personal intuition (Blau, 1977, 89). The argument that this section attempts to put forward is that this interdependence between social and individual, between private welfare and public benefit. It is not a product of the singular force of the American cultural rubric or ideology but also an indirect reverberation stemming from the influence of the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination on Emerson's mind and understanding. Unlike Western metaphysics and philosophy, which view people as isolated, autonomous, distinct individuals with a fixed and concrete self, Eastern wisdom, especially Buddhism, shattered these *self-other* distinctions. Dualities have no place in Buddhist ontology, and they do not have much position or eminence in Emersonian philosophy. It is indeed a social self that Emerson has formulated. However, this section highlights that this social aspect has a spiritual dimension to it, the study of which merits an examination from a Buddhist perspective.

> . . . man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the center of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. (Emerson, 1983, 21)

Emerson was an ardent admirer of unity. Western philosophy is predicated on Cartesian duality, informed by a sharp distinction between self and other, between this and that— "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles" (Emerson 1983, 386). Emerson sought to replace this sense of disunity, disharmony, and dualism with a zealous vision of unity and identity. Emerson's voracious reading of Eastern philosophy and religious scriptures liberated him from the Western dualistic perspective. He was a self-professed believer in "unity in nature and consciousness" (Emerson, 2007, 168). Emerson's individualism is informed by "a sufficient belief in the unity of things" (Emerson, 1983, 570). In his lecture "Method of Nature," Emerson denounces any attempts to differentiate, to concretize fact or cause:

> It (nature) will not be dissected . . . Away profane philosopher! . . . This refers to that, and that to the next, and the next to the third, and everything refers. (Ibid, 119-20)

Emerson's rejection of the conventional notions of central cause, an aboriginal source, a concrete fixed self or entity, accentuates his principal conviction that nothing is individual, all are universal, all interdependent—something that the Buddha had assiduously pointed out centuries before Emerson. In the aforementioned excerpt, the last line about all things referring to one another is eerily similar to the Buddha's central thesis of *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit) / *paṭiccasamuppāda (Pali)* or interdependence—the idea that *dharmas*/*dhammas* arise, subside and dissolve in dependence upon other *dharmas* (Sanskrit)/*dhammas* (Pali)— "This is because that is. This is not because that is not. This is born because that is born. This dies because that dies" (Hanh, 2017, 172). Emerson's assertion of the inter-referential, inter-relational fiber of people and entities is a restatement, albeit in different terms, of the identity and unity propounded in the Buddha's theory of inter-origination and inter-being. Like the Buddha, Emerson saw all human beings not as self and other but as one—emanating from "one mind common to all" (Emerson 1983, 237), one Over-Soul, "the eternal ONE" (Ibid, 386).

Within such a paradigm of thought, Emerson's comments on how private conviction, private thought, and sentiment expand on to become the universal should be reassessed and viewed as harbingers of how individualist aspirations ringing in personal benefit contemporaneously institutes the foundation for communal welfare. Individual reforms and growth are the seedbeds for social reform. At a time when state, legislative debates, lyceums, and churches reserved no "lofty counsels," life and affairs bereft of any innovation resembled a "market," "and air tight-stove of conventionalism" (Ibid, 226). Personal and communal responsibility is imputed to the individual Soul; its sole duty—to cultivate goodness and truth—the access to which is granted by the private mind. Emersonian philosophy encompasses the society and state of all of their power and responsibilities, ascribes social reform and revolution to the domain and actions of the individual will and Soul.

In Buddhism, the source of all events and phenomena, all problems and solutions, are traced to one single source—the individual, the individual mind, and cognition. Since every sentient being, every phenomenon, every *dhamma* are interlinked within an inextricable web of connections and dependence; social reform, progress, world peace—everything begins at the root of the spiritual progress of each individual. When individuals liberate themselves from the fetters of spiritual ignorance, delusion, and mental afflictions or *kleshas*, when individuals attain awakening, they become enlightened not just themselves but also procure the power. They assist other sentient beings to attain the same state—the state of enlightenment. In Mahayana tradition, such a practitioner is a bodhisattva; the altruistic motivation to perpetually assist

others in attaining enlightenment is *bodhichitta*. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, defines *bodhisattva* and *bodhichitta*, respectively:

> . . . a being, who, through wisdom, heroically focuses on the attainment of enlightenment out of compassionate concern for all beings. (Gyatso, 2005, 77) The bodhichitta aspiration is twofold, comprised both of the wish to help others and of the wish to become enlightened. (Gyatso, 2005, 86)

In his definition of "self-reliance," Emerson's expression of the inmost becoming the outmost, the most private thought carrying the seed of the universal sentiment, self-trust leading to trust in others— "what is true for you, in your private heart, is true for all men" (Emerson 2007, 78) enliven the affinities between individual reform and social reform; between "absolute self-sufficiency" (Ibid, 73) and the individual's "innumerable relations" (Ibid, 81). Reliance on the personal sentiment of man, the pursuit of the higher goal of personal spiritual awakening is, in Emerson's eyes, "the soul of reform" (Emerson, 1983, 162). Individualism, therefore, becomes not the ruthless, apathetic, self-centered pursuit of spiritual ends; but a pursuit of one's inner voice, the greater principles enshrined in the "inward life" (Ibid, 161) to reform and revolutionize the state, the society, and the church. Self-improvement and self-actualization entail, by extension, collective advancement. If the society is constituted of individuals, where individuals are *a-priori*, and society a second-order construct, every individual's spiritual progress and enlightenment is expedient for social awakening and illumination.

Conclusion

Self-Trust is not a faith in a man's own whim and conceit as if he were pretty severed from all other beings and acted on his own account, but a perception that a mind common to the Universe is disclosed to the individual through his own nature. (Emerson, 2007, 77) In conclusion, it may be ascertained that Emerson absolved western, particularly American individualism, from the possibilities of descending into narcissistic self-obsession by conferring upon it a sense of regard and concern for the self, which was essentially epistemological and spiritual. The Emersonian convention of individualism demarcates the differences between the western ideology of individualism grounded on dualistic distinctions and his version, a crystallized form fashioned from the seminal Buddhist tenets of interdependence, self-knowledge, self-confidence, and self-trust, Buddhahood, and Bodhichitta. Emerson locates "self-reliance" as a belief and practice that aspires for distinctively spiritual self-advancement. Personal yet communitarian—a modality of life and existence where attainment of self-cognition, personal welfare, and self-improvement is undertaken to usher spiritual enlightenment in self and others. It contemporaneously brings about social reform universal illumination.

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