

Yudhishtira's Wisdom and Emerson's Brahma: The Power of Self-restraint/Samyama and the Awakened Soul

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Alisha Dahal¹

Abstract

This research examines how wisdom and "brahma" are instrumental in handling critical situations and adverse moments in life as portrayed by Yudhishtira in "Yudhishtira's Wisdom" and Brahman in Emerson's poem "Brahma". The Pandavas regain their lost lives because of Yudhishtira's restrained emotions and calm response to Yaksha's ordeal of answering his questions. Ralph Waldo Emerson's character Brahma also stands for an awakened self that sees beyond sensory things, finds oneness in dualities so can accept death as a part of life itself. Such a supreme self keeps a person in a state of mind which transcends all kinds of differences and brings in the realization of meaninglessness of the transient realities and sensory perceptions. To substantiate the argument that wisdom and brahman are the spiritual forces within us, this paper uses Heinrich Zimmer, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's interpretations of the holy book of Gita and its life lesson about Samaya. Few critics' insights regarding Emerson's "brahma" are also borrowed to support the proposition that the ultimate Truth termed variously as Soul, Supreme Self, Awakened Soul, Brahman and others is within us--omnipresent and imperishable. In a world where cruelty, violence, political and religious outrages, and technological disasters are mocking humanity; love, harmony and peace, this research can help to inculcate in people peaceful ways of resolving crises, the art of surviving them and coping with great dilemmas of lives.

Keywords: Supreme self, soul, wisdom, Brahma, ultimate truth.

Introduction

Yudhishtira's wisdom justifies the power of Brahma as a life force that defeats the undefeatable. His self-restraint at the moment of deep sorrow and grief saved not only his life from its untimely doom but even helped regain the lost lives of his brothers. Because of the sensible replies to Yaksha and the calm response to the overwhelming moment of sadness, he stands as an iconic figure of wisdom that is foundational to resolving the great dilemmas of our lives. Similarly, Ralph Waldo Emerson's short poem 'Brahma' deifies the soul as the Ultimate Truth which is within us, omnipresent and imperishable. It refers to the awakened

¹ Ms. Dahal is a Lecturer of Shahid Smarak College and has done M. Phil in English Literature from Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Email: risalelisa@gmail.com

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state of the Self that transcends all the dualities, sensory illusions and fear of death. Likewise, Emerson's "Brahma" personifies Brahma itself as the narrator parallel to Lord Krishna preaching to Arjuna the importance of 'Dharma' or 'Karma' over the 'Maya' and attachments. Both of the characters *Brahma and Yudhishtira* stand for the 'Sakti' and the mysterious Soul that ignorant people fail to realize. Such people engage in unwanted activities and cause suffering to themselves and others as well because it is said "ignorance is the mother of all miseries". (cited in Vivekananda, 2012 p.23) Ignorance keeps them off from knowing the basic concept of Hinduism 'Bhavachakra' related to the Immortal soul that keeps the circularity of life and death, and the main message of Gita termed as 'Devattva' that signifies the realization of the ultimate Self. Hence, this paper will explore the importance of cultivating self-control, getting over the transient perceptions and illusory worldly materiality to achieve spirituality, peacefulness and wisdom termed as *Brahma*- the ultimate truth, the Soul.

Similarly, different thinkers and religious traditions name *Brahma* with various terms like *Atman*, *Purusha*, soul, holy power and Self— all conforming to it as the ultimate truth that is impersonal and immortal. It has pervaded from the West to the East: there is the quest for the Self under different names like Plato's soul, the Holy Grail, Gilgamesh's elixir or Nietzsche's Superman over the "meekness" of the "herd", or *Zarathrustha's* "will to power" for freedom. Hard penance and the renouncement of worldly desires can illuminate us with the ultimate Real and enable us achieve the state of trance when we get the sense of oneness and a holistic vision of lives and the world. The internalization of the outer experiences and their dissolution with the mind helps us cultivate the undifferentiated consciousness. It elevates us to the state of tranquility, self-restraint and calmness when the outer and the inner experiences merge into one and the delusive contradictions disappear. Evil and good become one, vice and virtue blur, friends and enemies dissolve, life and death intermingle and all merge with the cosmic Soul, the Brahma. We should develop patience and control to respond to the contradictions wisely by sacrificing greed, attachment and temptations. Recognizing the immanent unreal world, sacrificing the sensory attachments and striving for the ultimate Real within us impart us wisdom and illuminate us with the divinity, the Brahma.

This article uses qualitative research methodology. To support the argument, the researcher brings in the philosophers and great thinkers like Heinrich Zimmer, Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda regarding their interpretations of the holy scripture of *Gita* and the valorization of the Soul. Few critics of Emerson's concept of Brahma will also be brought in to discuss the inner divinity. But the textual analysis will be the major source of discussion to validate the overall arguments.

Zimmer (1952) explores the etymology of the term Brahman and infers its meaning as 'power-wisdom' that *Brhaspati* had used to help Indra conquer 'the anti-gods or titans(asuras)'. Regarded as "the heavenly archetype . . . a divine personification of ritual skill and inventiveness, unflinching in cunning devices, embodying the very quintessence of the highly developed intellectual faculties of the Hindu genius" (Zimmer, p. 76), *Brhaspati's* descendants stand for 'soul-force', 'the inward vision' or the 'holy power'. Vedic hymns take Brahman as 'the powerful magic spell' that "make[s] you free from disease"(p. 78). But Brahman lies dormant and needs to be stirred up and awakened through concentration and brooding under profound religious meditation. Zimmer claims that Brahman transcends both the "gross body" for the sensory experiences and the "subtle-body" with its notions, ideas, thoughts and fantasies. It is identical with the 'Self' (*Atman*) that the Westerners indiscriminately use as the "soul" exclusive of "the bounded ego" and is "an invisible source of life". As the cosmic power, its omnipotence and transcendence can be realized and accessed only through "a practical, mental and physical discipline . . . in life through an awakening and adjustment of the mind" (p. 82).

Radhakrishnan (2015) interprets the individual self-called *Purusa* which is known as *Atman*. *Bramha* is known as atman and also as the cosmic soul. The biological *Jiva* consists of *Prana and Manas* and is activated by the sensory organs. The mind is *Buddhi or Vijnana* that organizes sense perceptions and actions and identifies the ego of an individual. But behind all these, there lies the most important Self- the Universal Consciousness, *Atman* that "survives the death of the physical body"(Radhakrishnan, *Principles* p. 90). The individual ego is subject to avidya or ignorance, leads to *Ahamkara* and fails to harmonize and unite with the universe. The *Avidya* must be overcome by rising up to self- knowledge and realizing the plurality of individual souls. Then, we are awakened to the Divine Being, the Infinite, the Universal Consciousness- the Brahman.

Swami Vivekananda appreciates *Gita* for its supreme message in Lord Krishna's embodiment: "The first is the harmony of different ideas; the second is non-attachment"(Vivekananda, 2012, p. 18) that can lead us to perfection. Parallel to Emerson's *Brahma*, himself the speaker "I" asks us to find him, Vivekananda asks us to worship the God that is within us as Krishna thinks about himself. The Lord is inside, Krishna is within us, *Brahma* is dormant in the "deep cistern" and we have to concentrate to awaken it. Vivekananda (2012) claims: "Krishna talks of himself as God, as Christ does. He sees the Deity in himself. And he says, "None can go a day out of my path. All have to come to me. Whosoever wants to worship in whatsoever form. I give him faith in that form, and through that I meet him . . ." (p. 20) Thus, disentangling ourselves from the attachment, we can enlighten us and find "the mystery of the universe—the impersonal and the personal in one, the infinite and the finite in

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one" (p. 23). The secret is revealed, unfolded to a Yogi when he uplifts himself from the mockeries and mummeries of lives. All the three thinkers discussing Gita and *The Upanishads* have focused on the importance of the Brahma that I will bring in to support my argument over the topic.

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Emerson's (2004) *Brahma* presents a speaker who himself claims to be an immortal and omnipresent entity. People fail to see and realize his presence because of ignorance. He critiques the illusions people are living with about death that it is the end of life. His conditional remark implies that killing and dying is merely the dysfunction of the physical body but not the end of the soul that is immortal. It is just the transfer of the soul from one entity to another. This circularity of soul cannot be realized until we overcome the worldly desires, bonding and sense of differences. We suffer and undergo sorrow because of the lack of realization of the ultimate truth. The soul, also known as the Cosmic Self is immortal and is dormant within us. The vidya or intellect can help us delude from the sensory experiences and their transience and know the true self that is within us. The speaker, an embodiment of the soul, the Brahma, asserts: "They know not well the subtle ways, I keep, and pass, and turn again" (Emerson, 2004, lines 3-4). This portrayal of the Brahman is almost similar to the *Biswarupa Krishna* who is in us all, our own Self- the Supreme truth we fail to have a vision of. The first two lines suggest how ignorance leads to warfare and killings which is but an illusion and self-betrayal. They imply the need to realize the vanity of external experiences that need to dissolve with the mind and get elevated to the state of oneness.

The state of oneness is possible when the soul is awakened after all the contradictions have vanished, the differences blurred and the fragmentations unified. The speaker means to widen our worldview regarding all lives and entities that enables us to create harmony and wholeness. The narrator is an illuminated self and positions himself as an indeterminate seer who doesn't have any fixed vantage point to look at people, problems and the world. He is the cosmic self and has limitless movement throughout the world. The dichotomy of far and near, sunlight and shadow, and shame and fear have, so, merged into one because he has transcended the contradictions and is unified with the Brahma, the divine Self- "the vanished gods" stirred up by his concentrated devotion. His omnipresence and universality are further justified by his manifestation in everything from people's flying to the "hymn" of the *Brahmin's* singing. Brahma is the life force and energy that propels us further. The use of imagery of wings, flying and singing relates to the same cosmic energy that the illuminated soul pervades one with. The Hindu deities reside in stones, plants, books and idols as external entities but they

are still good because they are the linkage to connect to the inner God. Vivekananda (2012) observes various rituals and religious practices and gives a meaning to them:

So, the ceremonials, worship of gods, and myths, are all right, *Krishna* says Why? Because they all lead to the same goal. Ceremonies, books, and forms—all these are links in the chain. Get hold... the rest is bound to come... Hold on to one of these links, and it will pull you to the centre. Your heart will teach all the rest. The teacher within will teach all the creeds, all the philosophies. (p. 19)

These varied performances and practices are also like the stream of oblations that we pour into the fire while performing *Homas* and *Havanas*. These external rituals, if performed with concentration, slowly get integrated into the fire of self-discipline and control and illuminate the inner light of the Self. These are the deliberate and gradual processes of *Pratiharana*, attempts for abstinence from the attachment, “maya” or ignorance in Shankaracharya’s word, with the sensory world, that lifts you up to the higher Self.

Besides, the speaker labels himself both as ‘the doubt’ and ‘the doubter’ which implies the presence of good and evil within us. Warring with others is because of ignorance that does not help us because the enemy is within us. We can resolve the conflicts and disagreements by seeing ourselves and overcoming the prejudices, negativity and ego of our own, but not by hating, villainizing or killing others. People who are carried away by emotions and instincts suffer and regret because of their failure of peaceful responses and control over emotions like fear of death and ‘*Maya*’. The speaker warns people not to ignore *Brahma*: “They reckon ill who leave me out” (Emerson, 2004, line 9). *Krishna* asks us to look for him within ourselves or suffer in case you fail to find his abode. Vivekananda (2012) reasons the same way: “Attachment to the unreal will bring misery...But unattached love will not hurt you. Duty for duty’s sake: work for work’s sake” but having expectations brings misery and frustration (p. 23). He valorizes the concept of ‘*Dharma*’ that *Gita* has propounded and appreciates its pervasiveness from the Eastern to the Western traditions as well. But Europe is living *Gita* by cultivating faith in work and the East is undergoing misery because it is still reading *Gita*.

At another level, Emerson is a little ironical on the followers of gods and believers in the concept of heaven for their ignorance of looking for the Divine in the external world as in the Sacred Seven and the heaven. The poem is ironically framed between the idea of killing at the beginning and the concept of heaven at the end. ‘The red slayer’ and ‘slain’ might be the reference to the rituals of sacrificing animals for virtuosity and the afterlife in heaven. Christ himself embodies the Sacrifice for liberating the sinners, the humans. KR Chandrashekhara (1960) relates the ‘red slayer’ to Siva symbolic to ‘death or dissolution’ that proceeds from

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Brahman, "the Absolute Soul [which] regulates the cycle of birth, growth and death, and rebirth" (p. 507). But, the end of the poem overtones a mockery of Christianity and even Hinduism with the expression "Find me, and turn thy back on heaven" (Emerson, 2004, p. 501). Finding in oneself the divinity calls for peaceful avenues to enlightenment and liberation against the provocation of killings for sacrificial rituals and wars for power.

Moreover, the speaker claims he is the destination of gods themselves but inside the human body as his abode. He epitomizes the 'Biswarupa' Krishna who accommodates the whole cosmos within himself. But, the 'meek' lover of the 'good', out of ignorance and meekness is living on illusion wandering for the search of God. Emerson's questioning of the 'good' reminds us of Nietzsche's objection to the Christianity's suppression of people's freedom in the name of morality. The element of pathos in this expression appeals to our sense of humiliation and asks us to rise above the herd mentality to gain Superpower- the liberated Self. Elisabeth Hurth observes Emerson's stance on Christianity: "Emerson's rejection of historical Christianity is against its stagnation of spiritual life... He interiorized religion and insisted on the literalness of the Scriptural verse" (Hurth, 2014, p. 337). The images like red slayer, wings, Sacred Seven, Brahmin and the use of contrasting images like sunlight and shadow, shame and fame, encompass most of the major religions that put the devotees ignorant and baffled about the Supreme Truth. Hence, he advocates for spiritual autonomy and religion as a "first hand" experience. A transcendentalist, he proposes the idea of confirming the truth intuitively rising above the intellect and the senses. He asks the ignorant people to cultivate abstinence from the unreal and be disillusioned with the quest for heaven outside but find the true Self, the Brahma within.

Likewise, Yudhishtira's wisdom justifies the same principle of control over outraging emotions and the power of wisdom to succeed over certain undefeatable complexities in lives, at the operational level. First, overwhelmed by the sudden and mysterious demise of his brothers, the eldest brother Yudhishtira blames the water as the culprit and wants to kill himself by drinking the same water. But the immediate patient and controlled response over the ignorance he shows to the unknown voice at the first notice of the dead, takes him to a different level of wisdom. Unlike the four brothers who bypass and overhear the voice for their thirst, he controls his instinctual human emotions, physical needs and answers all the questions by the voice, Yaksha wisely. His sense of dharma, justice, selflessness and mastery over the illusive and transient emotions testifies him as the wisest, 'a great soul' that parallels to Emerson's '*Brahma*', the awakened self— an answer to conflicts, contradictions and a path to success in life. Radhakrishnan (2010) interprets *Krishna's* enlightening advice to Arjuna: "Gita insists not on renunciation of actions but actions with renunciation of desires"

(*Bhagavadgita*, p. 416). It relates to Lord Krishna's persuasive sermon to *Arjuna* to overcome fear and bondages, concentrate on his duty with bravery and success is bound to come.

Relating to Yudhishtira's self-restraint and wisdom, his twelve years of life in exile and the reflection on his past doings and decisions might have transformed him to the realization of intuitive power and the inner Self as the life force. The secluded life in the forest for so long is symbolic to renouncement of worldly affairs like the family bondages and attachments. The long penance of forest exile doesn't prove a curse but is transformational in Yudhishtira's case. The selfish ego of *Yudhishtira* before was indulged in greed and did not hesitate to put his step-brothers in '*Juwa*' with the least care of their being. His temptation to materialistic achievements and the instinctual passion for *Juwa* pushes him to abandonment even at a psychoanalytical level. The hardship in banishment might have brought in him the knowledge of vanity of the external realities and experiences and elevated him to the realization of the inner reality as the true-life force.

If we associate *Yudhishtira*'s earlier character attributes, he would have been enraged and presented himself violently against the killings of his brothers. His reckless blame for water 'the enchanted pool' as a culprit on the first notice of the disastrous deaths and his emotional reaction of dying with his brother by drinking the same water would not demystify the event. The story captures Yudhishtira's moment of sorrow: "For a long time *Yudhishtira* wept on the bank. Then feeling his thirst overpower him, he dragged himself to the edge of water" (Nissani and Lohani, 2008, p. 20) and Impulsive responses would not answer the mysteries and complexities of life. That ignorant response would just cause more miseries and indecisiveness. The four brothers who met their fate of death because of their lack of control on the desire of drinking water represent the evil inside everyone. Yudhishtira's wisdom stands for the good or virtue within us. But like a mahout or a rider reining in an elephant trying to grab something, Yudhishtira cooled down to respond to *Yaksha*. His disillusionment with greed and temptations to other's belonging works here. He has developed tolerance, patience and control over his emotions that testifies him as a wise hero, the '*Vira*' with an awakened soul that gets victory even over deaths. He is not the knight regarded as heroic for his victory through "mutual slaughter, the self-extermination" in the history of chivalry as remarked by Zimmer (1952, p. 74). He embodies Emerson's '*Brahma*' or 'power-wisdom' that is attributed to ". . . saints who have become the master, the sages not of others, not of the surrounding kingdoms of the world but of himself" (p. 82). Thus, the attempts to recognize the power of wisdom and the quest for the Self has been a perennial human adventure under different names in human history.

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Conclusion

Hence, Emerson's valorization of the Brahma to overcome ignorance and Yudhishtira's wisdom triumphant over the deaths call for cultivating self-control, identifying contradictions, internalizing sensory experiences and getting mastery over oneself. The Brahma that is dormant within us must be awakened through concentration, meditations, practices and knowledge because it is the state of oneness that blurs the differences, finds wholeness between the outer world and the inner Self and empowers us to love, create harmony and liberate ourselves from the illusions of the external world.

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