

Maitreya in *Hamatreya*:
Religious Analysis of Emerson's Work *Hamatreya*

The poem *Hamatreya* was based on one section of *Puranas*, ancient Hindu texts contain various deities, primarily the divine Trimurti God (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) and explain the discourse of Mahapuranas.

Puranas may also be described as a genre of important Hindu religious texts alongside some Jain and Buddhist religious texts, notably consisting of narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction, genealogies of kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography. (Wikipedia)

Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhist revere *Puranas* as one of holy texts and believe it to be the construction of Navadharmas (nine Buddha Dharmas –teachings-).

Hamatreya first appeared in print in *Poems*, published by Chapman in London in the late of 1846. This poem contains the image of an interesting conflict between agriculture and wilderness.

Ralph Waldo Emerson drew on a passage of *Vishnu Purana*, one of the eighteen Mahapuranas in *Puranas*, wrapped in this poem. This passage contains 23,000 verses and describes the many deeds of Vishnu and various ways to worship him. The origin of the poem's title is actually unclear for there is neither Hindu word nor name, either Sanskrit or Pali languages have the word "Hamatreya." Later on, Emerson noted in his annotations to the poem in the Centenary Edition that "Hamatreya" is an adaptation of "Maitreya," one of the prominent character both in Hindu and Buddhism religions. In the original passage of *Vishnu Purana*, Maitreya is engaged in a dialogue with Vishnu. Vishnu tells Maitreya about the Hindu kings who mistakenly believed themselves as the possessor of earth. However, the kings have disappeared but the earth endures. Vishnu then recites the chants of the Earth, who laughs and pities the egotistical kings and their blindness to their mortality.

Both in Hinduism and Buddhism, Maitreya is pictured as a young man who loses all his earthly ambitions, particularly since the Earth chants a song to him.

In *Hamatreya*, Emerson associates the character Maitreya and his role in Hinduism and Buddhism with human treatments, ownership and ambitions towards earth and environment and how they relate each other, whether humans own the land or the land owns

the human. He opens the poem with a list of the first settlers of Concord, “Bulkley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint”, whom are Emerson’s ancestors.

Concord is a town in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, in the United States. It is notable for playing a significant role in American history and literature. In 1635, a group of Britain settlers led by Peter Bulkley and Simon Willard negotiated a land purchase with the local people. Emerson tries to show the close association between those names with the land and list of products of the land, which these men took benefit. “Hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool and wood.” (line 3) Emerson portrays the human dependence towards earth by taking what it produces. However, because the landlord is the one who has the capital and control over the worker, he sees the crops as the results of his work and develops a sense of ownership of the land. “Each of these landlords walked amidst his farm, Saying, “’Tis mine, my children’s and my name’s.” (line 4).

Emerson opens the second stanza by asking, “Where are these men? Asleep beneath their grounds.” It shows paradoxical reality which exists in human life. In the beginning, those landowners were so proud and fearless in exploiting the earth. However, they are still unable to avoid the basic nature of human being, which is death. They are asleep beneath their grounds, they are dead and buried beneath the land that they affirmed as theirs. And then Emerson writes that Earth laughing at her ‘boastful boys’ who were so proud of owning the land which was actually not theirs, but who could not avoid death. The image of ‘boastful boy’ is taken by Emerson from the character in original *Puranas*. In the following lines, Emerson gives the reader some details what human have done towards the land and how they are blinded by their property. They plough the land for farm, pond and mine, and they appreciated the stability of their property as they sailed back and forth across the sea, never realize that death would transform them into ‘a lump of mould’, turning them back into the land they owned.

The Earth Song which Emerson writes as ‘poem inside a poem’ deliver the image of Nature’s answer to the landlord’s strong statement of ownership. “Mine and yours; Mine not yours,” recalls the concept of Hinduism and Buddhism, which ‘I and mine’ constitutes ignorance; the thought of ‘I’ will result suffering in life and must be eradicated to gain true wisdom. These lines also indicate the relationship between the landlords and the earth; when they were alive, they had a partnership with nature so it will give them opportunity of ownership, but when they are dead, the earth belongs to itself. In her song, the Earth points out her endurance, something which human being does not have. The Earth mocks the efforts

done by the landowners in order to keep the ownership in their hands by asking the help of lawyer and establishing laws, so the property might be inherited to their heirs. Everyone wants to stay, but no one is unable to get away from the mortality. Then in the end of The Earth Song, Emerson shows the Earth's power as she holds the people, not the other way around like how human being thinks when they are alive.

In the last stanza of *Hamatreya*, sudden change occurs in the speaker's point of view. The speaker expresses as himself and we can sense the feeling of guilt, regret and fear. It is such a confession of sin; that is avarice, greed, proudness. Once again Emerson recalls the tale of Maitreya who loses all his earthly ambitions after he heard the song chanted by the Earth. Emerson gives an ending to the poem on a note of sober awareness.

The idea of the fight between materialism and spiritual is emerged in this poem. The settlers of Concord who later became the landowners, they are being described in the first section of the poem as materialist men and defined solely in ownership business. The readers are not served with the picture of religious men, but a bunch of human who are blinded by worldly life.

There is a quite concrete bridge which Emerson tries to build to associate his poem with the concept Hinduism and Buddhism, for he is able to touch the core of those religious teachings, which is human greediness that cause them sufferings and bring them afar from happiness and wisdom. And the reason why Emerson chooses intentionally the character of Maitreya in this poem is quite clear, because Maitreya in Hinduism and Buddhism is believed to be the savior of human being after the destruction they have been making in earth.

Maitreya, is regarded by Buddhists as a future Buddha of this world in Buddhist eschatology; part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. Maitreya is only mentioned in the Sihanada Sutra of the Pali Canon and not in other sutras. In this sutra, mentioned the dialogue between Maitreya and Buddha. Maitreya pictured as a messiah when Buddha Dharma is no longer practiced in the world. He will be the fifth Buddha of the present aeon, a relatively long period of time by human calculation in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. His coming to the earth is characterized by a number of physical events occur in the nature, such as decreasing ocean which allowed Maitreya to travel through it.

Maitreya is typically pictured seated, with either both feet on the ground or crossed at the ankles, on a throne, waiting for his time to approach the earth. He is dressed in the clothes of either a Bhiksu or Indian royalty. Usually he wears a small stupa in as his headdress which seen from disciples when Maitreya received teachings from his master Buddha as a sign of his outstanding devotion.

In one Sanskrit text, the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa* (The Prophecy of Maitreya), it implies that Maitreya is a teacher of meditation and states that gods, men and other beings:

will lose their doubts, and the torrents of their cravings will be cut off: free from all misery they will manage to cross the ocean of becoming; and, as a result of Maitreya's teachings, they will lead a holy life. No longer will they regard anything as their own, they will have no possession, no gold or silver, no home, no relatives! But they will lead the holy life of oneness under Maitreya's guidance. They will have torn the net of the passions, they will manage to enter into trances, and theirs will be an abundance of joy and happiness, for they will lead a holy life under Maitreya's guidance. (Trans. in Conze 1959:241)

This poem may not be considered as a religious nor spiritual poem, but Emerson successfully makes an important connection between Hinduism and Buddhism ideals with his own world.

Source:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puranas>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maitreya>

Hindu Purana (E-Book Edition)