

Transcript ~ Henry David Thoreau

The Rediscovery of Ancient Wisdom

A Podcast by Kirk Gradin

STUDIO VACH ~ NOVEMBER 2021

Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862) is typically referred to as a leading Transcendentalist, poet-naturalist, proto-environmentalist and philosophical anarchist. As an American visionary of penetrating wit and consummate literary craftsmanship, he is best known for his landmark book [Walden](#) and his gripping essay on "[Civil Disobedience](#)." As a man whose life marked the transition from the first to the second Industrial revolution, he is widely remembered for his distrust of the value of new technologies, his plea of "Simplicity!", his semi-monastic retreat to a tiny, self-built cabin on the shores of Walden Pond and his deep appreciation of our natural environment in both mythic and scientific terms. The precise observations he collected at Walden are still used by climate scientists today, and later in his life he sent some [900 different plant specimens](#) to the Swiss-born Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz. However, it has not as often been emphasized that Thoreau was also a deeply intuitive spiritual seeker and natural mystic. Though he was an outspoken critic of the dogmas and empty rituals associated with institutionalized religion, the more profound strains of Thoreau's writing reveal a depth of interior spiritual experience and communion that generations since have turned to for insight and nourishment. Moreover, a careful reading of his journals reveals that his mystic reveries and ecstasies, were not confined to his youth or his retreat at Walden. Joyous "influxes" of what he called a "serene and unquestionable wisdom" coupled with "intimations of immortality"¹ continued even into his troubled later years. As one of his most intimate and lifelong mentors and friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson called him "a man of rare, tender and absolute religion." While on his death-bed in 1862 Thoreau was reportedly asked by his aunt if he had made peace with God and he replied, "I did not know we had ever quarreled."

All this begins to explain why professor Laura Walls, author of an extensive 2017 biography, stated that Thoreau has never been entirely captured in written description. "He defies classification." He was too multi-dimensional and unbounded, nuanced, mischievous, brilliant and paradoxical. Even the friends who knew him best while he lived, she says, despaired of offering an accurate portrayal.

¹ *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, Allan Hodder, 2001

So rather than another biographical account, we might instead attempt to answer two questions. 1. In what way is Thoreau's life and thought relevant to us today? How is it applicable in an era where political, social and economic elitism and inequality plague the globe, where zoonotic pandemics arise with increasing frequency, where climate change and vast species extinction is accepted as a fact of what we call modern civilization. Does Thoreau's voice help us to see the fundamental roots of these devastating problems? 2. As students of ancient wisdom ourselves, we might also ask in what way does Thoreau's life and thought align with the primary themes of the modern Theosophical movement as it began to emerge on the American continent just a few years after his death? An approach to these questions leads us to examine four broad interconnected themes:

- 1) Thoreau's Legacy
- 2) *Ex Oriente Lux*: "Light from the East."
- 3) Walking the Talk
- 4) The Mystic Path

Thoreau's Legacy

Compared to many iconic figures of American history, Thoreau left us an abundant record. Unable to make a living either as a writer or public speaker, this did not prevent him from fulfilling his vocational calling as "a man of letters." During the 25 years from his graduation at Harvard, until his death at age 44, his books, articles, essays, journals, and poetry amounted to more than 20 volumes. The vast majority of that creative work occurred in his two million word journal, what some scholars refer to as his true masterpiece and from which his more formal pieces emerged.

Though mentored and at times promoted by the more popular and sagely Emerson, many of his literary contemporaries either criticized, dismissed or studiously ignored Thoreau's writing. And his first major publishing venture, a book titled *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) was a small disaster for him. Four years after its release he finally acquiesced to his publishers' plea to accept the 706 unsold copies piled in the warehouse and to pay for them. Having famously built a cabin in the woods for \$28.12.5 just four years earlier, Thoreau now owed \$290 to his publisher, a debt which took him 4 years to pay off. Thoreau noted wryly in his journal: "I now have a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven-hundred of which I wrote myself."

His second book, *Walden*, enjoyed some success upon its release, but still took five years to sell 2,000 copies, and then went out of print until his death. Decades after his passing, the American poet Robert Frost wrote of *Walden*, "In one book ... he surpasses everything we have had in America." Today *Walden* is widely considered one of the finest classics of American literature, available in at least 17 different editions. By the late twentieth century, the book had been translated into 11 languages. In 2002, the *Walden* scholar Ken Kifer wrote:

Thoreau's careful observations and devastating conclusions have rippled into time, becoming stronger as the weaknesses Thoreau noted have become more pronounced ... Events that seem to be completely unrelated to his stay at Walden Pond have been influenced by it, including the national park system, the British labor movement...the hippie revolution, the environmental movement, and the wilderness movement.

Walden is not disconnected from Thoreau's revolutionary influence in other arenas. Besides being a lifelong student of classical scripture, American Indian culture and the reverential preservation of nature, Thoreau was also a lifelong opponent of all forms of injustice, especially of government sanctioned oppression. This included slavery, the slaughter and abuse of indigenous Indian populations and imperialistic war. In 1845, age 28, having withheld paying poll tax for six years to the US government on the basis that it's actions were morally unsupportable, Thoreau famously was arrested and imprisoned. The time spent in Concord jail lasted only a single night, for that very same evening, an unsolicited and anonymous donor brought cash to his jailor to cover the unpaid taxes. Still, the experience inspired an essay by Thoreau which came to be titled "Civil Disobedience."

The question the essay raises has not grown old with the passing of time. It is just as biting and relevant to every person today as it was when written. What is our duty as citizens and moral agents, Thoreau queries, when we see government enacting policies or laws which are unjust or immoral? Are we not obligated to act on the basis of conscience and universal ethical principles, at whatever the cost to ourselves, despite what might be expedient or in our best economic interest?

Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Thoreau was articulating aspects of what H.P. Blavatsky 40 years later called the heart of *Theosophia*. It is that of divine ethics promulgated by sages and adepts down through the ages.

Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience became a corner-stone of 20th century protest against unjust laws and oppressive regimes across the world, impacting the lives of millions.

The two most notable examples would be M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.. In 1908, his *satyagraha* movement in South Africa well underway, Mohandas K. Gandhi first read Thoreau's essay while in prison. The idea of non-violent civil disobedience reinforced Gandhi's thinking already based on the Sermon on the Mount, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the ancient ideal of "holding onto truth" found in the great Indian epics. Gandhi wrote and published a synopsis of Thoreau's argument, calling it "the scientific...essence of his political philosophy," containing an "incisive logic ... that is unanswerable." Years later Gandhi recommended the study of Thoreau's essay to all those who sought to help the cause of Indian Independence and called Thoreau "one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced."

Almost a full century after the essay appeared, Martin Luther King Jr. had his first encounter with the idea of nonviolent civil resistance in 1944 while attending [Morehouse College](#). He wrote in his autobiography:

Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writings and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest. The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed, they are more alive than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, these are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice.

Ex Oriente Lux

Ex oriente lux may still be the motto of scholars, for the Western world has not yet derived from the East all the light which it is destined to receive thence.

H.D. Thoreau
The Week

H. P. Blavatsky taught that when rightly translated and understood in their esoteric meaning, ancient Hindu and Buddhist teaching will be found to be one of the richest expressions available to us of divine wisdom. The study and appreciation of these traditions would be an invaluable

aid to the Western mind in the effort towards true spiritual and moral awakening. This drawing together of East and West, she wrote to the American Section in Boston just a few decades after Thoreau's passing, was so "that each may supply the qualities lacking in the other," thus aiding in "more fraternal feelings among Nations." The recognition of universal truths in nature common to many traditions, would help dissolve the barriers to harmonious relations, to the cultivation of true and authentic brother and sisterhood. Towards this aim, the modern Theosophical movement has produced and supported the publication of many fresh translations and recensions of ancient sacred texts, both Eastern and Western, along with insightful commentaries thereon.

Woven into Thoreau's journals, books and essays, is a similar underlying keynote. Long before it was popular or acceptable, the Transcendentalists openly embraced and revered the ancient sacred texts of central Asia and incorporated these scriptures into their poetry and prose and in varying degrees, into the moral tenor of their lives. Philip Goldberg, author of *American Veda, How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*, called Emerson "the first American jnana yogin," Thoreau was the karma yogin and Whitman the bhakti yogin. And it is through their influence, Goldberg asserts, that millions of educated Americans, now spanning several generations, began to be touched by and interested in the fundamental religious and philosophical precepts of ancient India.

The sub-title of this essay, the "rediscovery of ancient wisdom" points to the fact that the relatively modern interest in the Orient is a repeated theme in the larger history of Western culture. According to Iamblichus for example, in the 6th century BCE, Pythagoras, called by some scholars the father of Western philosophy *and science*, sought out and was accepted by the hierophants of the temples of India, the Middle East and Egypt, and was initiated into their deepest mysteries. It was not until the age of 56 that he returned to Greece to begin his public teaching. His "music of the spheres" and geometrical decade were reformulations of Brahma Vach. Likewise Plato, known as the foremost student of Pythagoras, is described by Blavatsky much like the true Jesus, as an Initiate and emissary who put the core tenets of Eastern Philosophy and ethics into fresh formulation. She asserted that the purest strains of the ancient Greek Mystery Schools, before their corruption and demonization, were deeply rooted in Oriental wisdom, ancient India having been the spiritual alma mater and preserver of nature's deepest truths. Blavatsky taught and Raghavan Iyer confirmed that in the last quarter of each century, a concerted effort has been made by Eastern Adepts and sages who have sent their messengers to the West. Their mission is to further the aims of universal enlightenment and the

continuity of collective growth through the revival of the perennial philosophy and the centrality of the Bodhisattva Path, the common inheritance of the whole of humanity.

It is a well-documented fact that in the modern West, beginning around the late 1700's the ancient East was filtering westward through other, more publicly known literary channels. This literature is said to have given birth to what is called the European Oriental Renaissance, initiated through the first scholarly translations of ancient Sanskrit texts into western languages. Sponsored by the Asiatic Society of Bengal founded in 1784, the initial intent was quite different than that of the promulgation of wisdom. The financing of linguistic scholars such as Sir Willian Jones, Charles Wilkins and Max Muller were made in order to serve the commercial and imperial interests of the British empire. It also was intended to serve the missionary aim of converting "the natives of India to the Christian religion." In order to convert, it was argued, the missionary must first understand the viewpoint of the natives. Combined with the shallow philosophic prejudices of Western orientalist and symbologists, these purposes tended to bias both the translations and the commentaries. Despite the drawbacks, there were cultural benefits that followed. Not only the *Bhagavad Gita*, but other key scriptures, translated directly from Sanskrit to English, were reaching Boston harbors starting in the 1830's and became deeply influential to Transcendentalist thought.

There are several of these translations which are known to have especially caught the attention of Thoreau: a) The *Hitopadesa*, which is a traditional collection of Hindu folk tales. b) Some portions of the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* or 'Laws of Manu.' This was Thoreau's early favorite and is a text which we also find many references to in *The Secret Doctrine*, as having deep esoteric significance. c) Colebrooke's translation of the *Samkhya Karikas* (1837) which is a summation and commentary on the Sankhya system of Indian philosophy. d) The *Vishnu Purana*, a core text of the Vaishnava tradition, and e) a French translation of the *Harivamsa Purana*, a sacred text from the Jain tradition. In addition to being deeply influenced by these texts, Thoreau himself translated an episode of the *Harivamsa* from French into English. Never published as a stand-alone book, Thoreau translated the title as "The Transmigration of the Seven Brahmins." At one level it depicts the activity over several reincarnations of wise rishis. Allegorically, it also draws attention to the seven-fold principles of cosmic and human nature, a core feature of eastern philosophy found in the Vedas and Upanishads which H.P. Blavatsky went to great lengths to explain as a central keynote of Trans-Himalayan philosophy, i.e.: *Theosophia*.

Thoreau's initial engagement with these texts appears to be somewhat conditioned by the platitudes of European Orientalism. But *Walden*, by the time of its publication in 1854, had gone through at least six significant re-writes and revisions over a ten year period and therefore

represents his more mature thinking. There are over forty quotations from Eastern texts in *Walden*. Oriental lore had become a sublime touch stone by which Thoreau measured wisdom, a kind of ancient hymn in which Thoreau's own inner voice and luminous insights found confirmation and resonance.

"In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges."

(*Walden, The Pond in Winter*, p 159)

In an 1849, age 32, in letter to his friend H.G.O. Blake, Thoreau wrote about yoga and its meaning to him:

Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who practice yoga gather in Brahm the certain fruits of their works. Depend upon it that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully. The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation; he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. Divine forms traverse him without tearing him, and united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matter. To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi.

Of course, the yoga of which Thoreau is speaking is not the *asanas* and *pranayamas* of Hatha Yoga whose watered down versions are so popular in modern culture. It is rather more akin to what W. Q. Judge called the "Kingly Yoga" or the *Raja Yoga* of Patanjali's aphorisms. The *Bhagavad Gita* delineates this path in such extraordinary depth that Judge also called it "the study of adepts," the "science of devotion" which will arouse the conviction that there is One Spirit, not several. The Gita portrays the allegorical *Mahabharatan* war by which the mind which perceives and acts on the basis of a separate, self-seeking identity is entirely overcome. All the boundaries of finitizing consciousness and personal desire are progressively conquered and all veils lifted as microcosm merges with macrocosm, the aspirant with Krishna. As Thoreau seemed to grasp, the discipline not only re-unites one with the whole, but with all enlightened beings and all seekers in all times, in all cultures and climes.

The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

In another passage from *Walden*, we find the fundamental message of Chapter XIII of the Gita filtered through Thoreau's own words and internal experience. It is the teaching regarding the distinction between the mortal vs the immortal self, in Sanskrit the *Kshetra* and *Kshetrajna*. The *Kshetra* or the "field", refers to the vestures of incarnation and the manifold conditions and circumstance which arise through them. These are all mutable, transitory and perishable. While *Kshetrajna* refers to the conscious knower of the field, the Witness or the Perceiver, what Thoreau calls "the spectator", which in the Gita is of the same essence as Knowledge--immutable, eternal and imperishable.

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned..

H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*

The spectator, Thoreau explains, is no more the personal I, than it is the personal you. It is beyond self and other, past and future, an utterly transcendent and immortal point of consciousness, the God within each. At the same time, Thoreau is not separating his true self from nature, even in its most transitory forms. He is "the driftwood in the stream," as much as any other ephemeral thing in continual evolution and change. Thus, in a single paragraph the ancient Upanishadic teaching of *maya* as well as of deity, both Transcendent and Immanent is suggested.

Blavatsky taught that the true pantheistic "idea of a general Spirit-Soul pervading all Nature" is the oldest of all the philosophical notions," and is intimately bound up with idea of humanity and nature as differentiations of deity, rather than creations apart. This appears to have been no

mere doctrine for Thoreau, but a living reality to which he dedicated his life. For Thoreau, evidence of that truth could be most easily found in the untamed wilds. He spoke of the deepest, un-touched forest as his “cathedral” and “sanctum sanctorum.” “All the motions of nature... the running stream, the waving tree, the roving wind,” he called the “circulations of God.” He thought himself more favored than other men for he directly experienced an unending “*sweet and beneficent society in Nature...an infinite and unaccountable friendliness,*” and sustaining atmosphere. *Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended*” him. In every scene which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, he was distinctly aware, he wrote, of “something kindred,” such that he thought he could never be lonely, nor any place ever strange to him again.

Walking the Talk

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.... To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically...What is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in our own lives?

Ibid

To truly renew ancient spiritual wisdom, Thoreau believed, he must first find a way to live it—he must exemplify it in his daily life, he must attempt to walk the Path of awakening, to become a true sage, even a Buddha. It was not enough to mirror wisdom in his writings. Among other things, this meant applying his deepest insights to all seemingly secular or trivial involvements. It meant fearlessly following an ethical standard that the vast majority would consider impractical.

For Thoreau, the reality of immanence also meant that when the nourishing energies of divine life flow freely, unhindered by the profaning hand of man, they become a life-giving nectar. “In Wildness is the preservation of the world,” he wrote. The restorative and life-giving qualities of the morning forest air, for example, which Thoreau connected with “the elixir of Aurora” and the “cup of Hebe,” with its “power of restoring Gods and men to the vigor of youth,” cannot be captured, bottled and sold. Nor can the wild huckleberry, ever be taken to market without destroying “the ambrosial and essential part of the fruit.” As soon as it drops into the vendors bucket, it is ruined. “*As long as Eternal Justice reigns, not one innocent huckleberry can be transported thither from the country’s hills.*”

Contemporary science is confirming the fact that preserving pristine natural environments and restoring or re-wilding those which have been degraded, is a necessary precondition in avoiding the catastrophic effects of human created climate change.

This conviction had far-reaching consequences for Thoreau. Wherever humanity has taken “the commons” of nature and brought it to the market place merely for profit, amusement, comfort, for superficial pleasures or ego-boosting, there have we profaned it and destroyed its naturally elevating and life-enhancing qualities. The principle applies, for example, to the several forms of livelihood Thoreau tried his hand at, including the profession of teaching. Thoreau wrote of teaching as “democracies highest civic calling” and from biographical accounts we know that his brilliant and lucid intellect, precise memory, linguistic genius and love for classical literature lent themselves in that direction. Thoreau taught at the Canto, Massachusetts grammar school while in college in order to supplement his meagre scholarship income. Shortly after graduating he was hired to teach at the Concord grammar school for ten days until his refusal to flog students for mis-behavior forced him to resign. 66 Two years later, in 1839 he and his brother John, also an inspired teacher, opened the Concord Academy in which Henry taught at the college prep level. This was no small contribution to the revolution in teaching methods pioneered by Transcendentalist thought.

However, in *Walden*, in his chapter on “Economy”, we hear his self-critical commentary on these efforts. Because he taught as a means of livelihood, he says, and not purely “for the good of my fellow-men”, it was a failure. “I have since learned that trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business.”

At the same time, we also know that lifelong learning and teaching were avocations that Thoreau never surrendered. Why should we “leave off our education when we begin to be men and women”? he quired “It is time that villages were universities,” uncommon schools where citizens could pursue education for their entire lives”, banding together to fund the arts and learning. New England, he wrote, “is wealthy enough to hire all the wise men in the world” to come and teach her and should do so even if it means omitting to build another bridge over the river. Instead, the effort should be to “throw one arch at least over the gulf of ignorance which surrounds us.” Besides donating written contributions to the Dial, in the years before his stay at Walden and in periods after, Henry was an unpaid yet avid supporter, lecturer and at times curator of the Concord Lyceum, an institution which held public lectures pertaining to a wide variety of educational topics; science, literature and philosophy. Emerson had also spoke passionately in favor of the public lecture hall as replacing the function of the church.

But in the *Walden* chapter titled "Reading", we are told that fine orations are not sufficient. That "*the written word is the choicest of relics...Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations.*" But not just any books, the heroic books," the worthies" as he called them, the great classics and scriptures of the ancients, each word and line of which we must laboriously seek the meaning.

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object...That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last.

It may perhaps be said that such a pile does now exist. In *The Secret Doctrine, Isis Unveiled* and other writings, H. P. Blavatsky demonstrated the universality of the fundamental truths of archaic wisdom by pointing to their rich variety of expression in science, religion, poetry and philosophy. And the Theosophical movement of the 20th century has continued in that vein, encouraging the study of many great traditions by keeping fresh and accurate renderings of core sacred texts available at a nominal cost to the common man. For Thoreau, there is no doubt that intense reading of sacred scripture also meant intense contemplation of that which was read.

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at 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...

Ibid.

For Thoreau, a spiritual life could not be properly undertaken without the paring down of all other involvements, the ruthless examination of all actions and possessions. In that sense and in others, Thoreau exemplified a form of secular monasticism. While he never married or raised children and appears to have lived a chaste life of higher aspiration, learning and search, he did participate in and sustain himself in the community through various means of what he considered honest labor, from surveying, to the family pencil factory, to shoveling manure, when that was all that could be had. Though often depicted as a recluse and misanthrope, Thoreau was only a part-time hermit and even at his small cabin at Walden he kept three chairs

“one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” He had more visitors there than at any other time and it was also the most prolific period of literary outpouring.

It may be said that Thoreau cultivated what Mahatma K.H. latter called a "refined form of mentality commingled with spiritual intuitiveness". In theosophical writings, this buddhi-manasic faculty is the key to what Professor Raghavan Iyer called “the spiritual essence of the self-regenerating civilizations of the future.” Through right livelihood, right ethics and right mindfulness, “devoted spiritual seekers and moral pioneers may learn to sustain their spiritual vows and altruistic labors even in the midst of society” and without the conventional trappings of institutionalized monasticism. Of course this means avoiding the excess, waste and sham of mere convention. It means independence from mere societal norms and thought forms which weaken or undermine higher human purpose and the dictates of conscience. For Thoreau, as for W.Q. Judge, duty was the great talisman to be followed, even at the cost of social acceptance, reputation and any shallow estimation of virtue or success.

Thoreau is famous for his stinging admonitions. We waste our days and “our vitality” on “trivialities”, he wrote. We undergo “Herculean efforts” to secure a livelihood, to own or inhabit a home, to obtain prestige, presumed conveniences, comforts and amusements, all symbolized by the railroad which ran alongside *Walden* Pond. Walking from one town to the next, required far less time and effort he found, than the labor needed to afford a single railway ticket. What we sacrifice to afford what society deems of value is stolen from our true purpose. “As if you could kill time” he wrote “without injuring eternity.”

In the opening chapter of *Walden* he wrote:

Talk of the divinity of man!” Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him?... See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears...the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself...

Instead one should:

Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends...Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts...Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail... Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion...Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour...but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers (i.e.: timbers laid down beneath railroad tracks), and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them,

who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them.

In *The Key to Theosophy*, published 27 years after Thoreau's passing, in the chapter on "Practical Theosophy", H.P.B. states those who live lives of careless indifference, material luxury and selfish indulgence on the one side of the scale, are most closely connected with the stunted and arrested development of the poor, the forgotten and the voiceless on the other side. In very similar language, Thoreau pointed out the same, that in every unnecessary luxury we seek, that someone, somewhere is denied a necessity. Justice will not allow the imbalance. "We think we ride upon the railroad, but it rides upon us." This is the law of karma in a nutshell.

The Mystic Path

In 1889, H. P. Blavatsky translated from Telegu, an ancient Dravidian dialect to English, a few fragments from *The Book of the Golden Precepts*, a work she says was put in the hands of all true mystic students in the East. The small treatise called *The Voice of the Silence*, was one of the first authentic descriptions of the Bodhisattva path available to the Western world. Although Thoreau did not have access to this treatise, he had experiences which pointed to at least some of the mysteries of the "small, old Path" described therein. For example, like many mystics and seers, Thoreau was apparently endowed with an almost preternaturally acute sense of hearing. In his journal he explained that he "was always conscious of sounds in nature which my ears could never hear" but of which he did catch "the prelude". "The earth itself," he wrote, was "the most glorious musical instrument," listening to which brought to his mind and soul "elevation and expansion...an indescribable infinite all-absorbing divine heavenly pleasure." To listen properly meant cultivating a new sense, a deeper hearing than that of the mere physical ear.

Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery, that its divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not see God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?

To a reader unfamiliar with ancient teachings regarding sound and hearing, this passage from the *Week* may seem both perplexing and audacious. In *The Secret Doctrine*, H. P. Blavatsky explained that the true Occultist and mystic know that what the Vedic Aryans taught was no fairy tale. They knew of the seven-fold nature of the human constitution and of a double set of senses, seven on the material and seven on the spiritual planes. They understood that in the long untold story of human evolution, that the five physical senses were differentiations of the 6th sense, that of manas, the self-conscious, thinking, reasoning and choosing mind, and that manas is to be understood as a ray of the 7th sense, that of Buddhi, spiritual intuition, universal compassion and divine discrimination. They taught that as self-consciousness becomes emancipated from captivity to a separative sense of self and from the grosser senses of the physical plane, the noumenal and the archetypal essences hidden within the veils of nature begin to open before the eye and the ear of the Soul. "All sights and sounds," Thoreau intuited, "are seen and heard both in time and eternity." In *The Voice of the Silence*, this is put in terms of a ladder of mystic sounds, the ascending path in which one hears the voice of the inner God in seven manners. At the pinnacle it is said that all lesser sounds are merged into the Soundless Sound, called *Nada*, the "Voice of the Silence."

Again from Thoreau's journal:

All sound is nearly akin to Silence—it is a bubble on her surface which straightway bursts—an emblem of the strength and prolific-ness of the undercurrent.—It is a faint utterance of Silence—and then only agreeable to our auditory nerves—when it contrasts itself with the former. In proportion as it does this—and is a heightener and intensifier of the Silence—it is harmony and purest melody.

Many of Thoreau's ecstatic reveries were linked with nature sounds. Even as late as 1957, he wrote in his journal that "the voice of eternal wisdom reaches me even, in the strain of the sparrow, and liberates me, whets and clarifies my senses, makes me a competent witness." A rainstorm was "Aeolian music." A distant hound baying in the night, the faint creaking of crickets, the trill of a tree sparrow after a shower, the lowing of a cow: all these and many more were apt to solicit deeper perceptive capacities, what George William Russel, the Irish Theosophist called the mythic imagination.

Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord bell, when the wind was favorable, a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness. At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre...There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had

conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale.

In the Voice of the Silence, the disciple who would enter the Path is questioned:

Hast thou complied with all the rules, O thou of lofty hopes?...Hast thou attuned thy heart and mind to the great mind and heart of all mankind? For as the sacred River's roaring voice whereby all Nature-sounds are echoed back, so must the heart of him 'who in the stream would enter,' thrill in response to every sigh and thought of all that lives and breathes.

Our closing selection from Thoreau's writing is one of the most frequently quoted passages from *Walden*. What is not as often included is where the reverie begins, with the hum of a mosquito. The hum of a single mosquito darting about his one room cabin on the shores of Walden Pond leads Thoreau into myth and epic. It evokes a soul-memory with cosmic dimensions corresponding to interior capacities of wakefulness, that inner genius by which every aspect of our daily lives could be progressively and morally reformed.

Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement...of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour... Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius...are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air—to a higher life than we fell asleep from;...That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way...All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, "All intelligences awake with the morning"...All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep...The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face? We must learn to

reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.

Kirk Gradin, 2024