

[THOREAU; RISHI OF THE POND](#)

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THOREAU; RISHI OF THE POND

He stole a spot in the woods, built a cabin, stilled his mind and burrowed into nature. By day, whip-poor-will melodies drifted through the tranquil glen. At dusk, bullfrogs bellowed deafening nocturnes. Slowly a higher presence embraced the solitary advances of the kindly Lincolnesque form, yielding a flurry of pristine secrets. By the time he died at 44, with two million words quilled in broad journals, Thoreau had softly cracked nature's subtlest codes and thundered forth his primal civil command-obey conscience first, society second. Half a century later, curled up in a dank South African jail cell, a persecuted Mahatma Gandhi nursed himself on Walden Pond-Thoreau's nature odyssey-and sealed the fate of India's independence studying a copy of Thoreau's Duty of Civil Disobedience, the germ spark of Gandhi's firebrand Satyagraha.

Around the globe, the soulful ruminations of the son a New England pencil-maker spread, pricking at the tap root of a perennial truth-that when life is lived yielding to the seasons, close to the earth and pruned of distraction, nature unveils her innermost pulse and subtlest rhythm. A divine lustre subsumes the most ordinary action.

Thoreau knew this well, and also how Hindu scripture hugged this perception as dearly as he. He assiduously probed Hindu writings borrowed from Harvard's library. The contours of his driftwood bookshelves were lined with Upanishadic texts. "Beside the vast and cosmological philosophy of the Bhagavad Geeta, even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green." Thoreau concluded. Uninterested in the separate-from-man-and-nature God of the Occidentals, he allied his deepest sympathies with the "gods of the Orient." He once shared: "The Laws of Manu [a Hindu scripture] comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed to me over the plains of Hindustan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches, or the sun in the water, or the shadows of the trees, it seems to signify the laws of them all. They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted down from those old times and no more to be refuted than the wind."

He identified with the austere lifestyles of the rishis: "One may discover the root of the Hindu religion in one's own private history, when, in the silent intervals of the day or the night, he does sometimes inflict on himself like austerities with a stern satisfaction."

Thoreau was born in 1818 in a squirrel and chipmunk of a town. Concord, Massachusetts. Though Christian by count, this homely Atlantic seaboard region spawned an unusual tribe of Orientalized minds America later proudly identified as the Transcendentalists. This loose metaphysical brotherhood of brilliant, highly educated writers-including later compatriot Walt Whitman were versed in Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian thought. Like a band of devonic blacksmiths sent from inner worlds, they pounded on society's repressive puritanical moral mind-set, intent on refashioning it back to some semblance of America's embryonic vision: individual freedom, abhorrence of enslavement and reverence for a more mystical, undocinaire approach to God. The clear anvil ring of their message today echoes through every high school and college in America. India fondly adopted the Transcendentalists as kindred souls, especially Thoreau. Every English-medium-educated Indian boy or girl studied Thoreau's classic weapon of nonviolence. Duty of Civil Disobedience, and Walden's meditative message has such an Indian appeal, it has been translated into Tamil, Gujarati, Telegu, Malayalam, Hindi, Kannada and Bengali.

Thoreau was junior to Emerson by 14 years, shorter with a graceful beak of a nose and grey, owlsh eyes that gazed more inward than out, the two writers were very close. It was on Emerson's land that Thoreau built his immortalized Walden Pond cabin. But Emerson scolded Thoreau for lacking ambition, coaxing him to shoulder more of the literary burden of their clandestine mission to reform America's stiff mentality. He railed one day at the incontrovertible introvert:

"Instead of being the head of American Engineers, you are captain of a huckleberry party." Thoreau ignored the lifelong spur, and maintained an icy dispassion to all self-conscious, master-minded literary strategies to recompass America's future. Lack of fame also failed to concern him. "I have now a library of 900 books, over 700 of which I wrote myself," he once said jesting about a heap of his unsold books.

He and Emerson were invited to join Brook Farm, the commune and heady vortex of the Transcendentalist movement. Both declined. The idea disgusted Thoreau: "I

would rather keep bachelors' hall in hell than go to board in heaven! I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. A man thinking or working/is always alone."

When Thoreau graduated from Harvard, he took up the occupation of his three brothers and sisters - teaching. It lasted barely a semester. Asked to flog one of his students, he refused, left and started his own school. Concord Academy. At Harvard he had seen everything he hated about schooling in his day-intellectually dehydrated professors, mind-dulling recitation and a police-state behavioral demerit system. His school was the opposite - co-educational, free tuition for the poor, no flogging and discipline maintained by an honor code. Discussion was allowed and classroom walls often evaporated as field trips took the students to dig for Indian relics, visit craft shops and plunge deep into the woods where Thoreau taught his specialty, nature. But his brother became ill and forced them to close the school after two years.

"I am a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot," he barked at a cocky bunch of scientists come to badger him for the scientific basis of his naturalist theories. Regular townsfolk acknowledged him less and tagged him an "idle fellow"-a rank insult in those proud pioneering days. But actually, inside the pensive nature lover a wordsmith was constantly at work, hammering thousands of walk-through-the-woods impressions into passages the world now calls gems. Every play of weather brought him pleasure: "There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not dreary and melancholy, but good."

Getting himself published was irregular at best. Needing steady income, he worked for his father making pencils and ink compounds and finally settled on surveying "working" three days a week. The other four he walked, mountain climbed, canoed, idled ambitiously and kept his Journal. "I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that for yesterday, today and tomorrow they have only one word-pointing backward for yesterday, forward for tomorrow and overhead for the passing day. This was sheer idleness to my fellow townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting."

His cabinside pond he treasured "at least as sacred as the Ganges" and one

morning visualized: "Now I go for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin priest of Brahma, Vishnu and Indra who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas." With the mellowed voice of a Vedic forest sage himself, he wrote: "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 sumachs, in such undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and forsaking of work."

As the yogi soars to the Divine on breath, Thoreau soared inward on the simple beauty of form itself, often entering the still energy plexus of life, Sutchidananda. He writes: "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something so kindred to me that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again."

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