

THE HERMIT OF THE WOODS

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Abstract:

American Transcendentalism was a cult which encouraged people to find their true selves. It was a movement which took people towards liberation of the soul urging them to abandon established traditions, customs and norms. The harbingers of the movement themselves were iconoclasts in the sense that they broke form established religion and carved out their own niche. They knew exactly what they were looking for and sought to help the spiritually starved humanity. This paper talks about Henry David Thoreau who was one of the pioneers of the Transcendentalists Movement. His is a striking personality as he was the essence of all that the Movement stood for. He was one person who actually practiced the tenets of this liberating philosophy by living in the woods amidst nature. His was a way of deliberate withdrawal and asceticism. He was a seer who walked alone even among the Transcendentalists. He was a hermit who was deeply inspired by Oriental Literature. This paper is about Henry David Thoreau and the influences that shaped his thinking and his attitude. The paper primarily talks about his interest in Oriental texts and literature and its effect on him.

Keywords: *American, Transcendentalism, Cult, Religion, Iconoclasts.*

Every time we think of Solitude, identity and Nature, the name of Henry David Thoreau comes up in our minds. Apart from Emerson & other Transcendentalists, if there is one person whose name deserves mention, it is Henry David Thoreau. One of the pioneers of the Transcendental Movement, which connected humans to their God, he reflected all that the Movement stood for, namely, simplicity, freedom and love for nature.

The origins of the transcendentalist movement date back roughly to the 1830s. Geographically, the movement was mostly situated in the New England region of the United States. The foundations for the transcendentalist movement are considered to have been set by Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*, published in 1836. In this essay, Emerson claims that man can only understand reality through studying nature. In order to know himself fully, and get answers to all his questions, man should be in the company of nature, for this is where he will find his true self. Emerson believes that solitude is the only way man can fully adhere to what nature has to offer. "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society." As a senior Harvard scholar, Henry David Thoreau took Emerson's essay to heart and it is clear and evident that it essentially influenced his life and literary career.

American Transcendentalism was a confluence of many disciplines, major among them being Eastern Thought and Oriental writings. In the words of Dale Riepe, "They found Indian wisdom attractive because it was profound without being gloomy." (qtd. in Bharadwaj 45). Thoreau was no exception to this and he far surpassed his fellow Transcendentalists in his fondness for Oriental texts and Eastern literature. His familiarity with Hindu Texts began in his Harvard years and continued throughout his life. Gradually his fondness started turning into a deep passion and profounder understanding of the Indian scriptures.

Henry David Thoreau came in contact with India through Emerson's library of books. Emerson influenced Thoreau with a certain enthusiasm for the Wisdom of India. During his stay in 1838 with Emerson's brother, Thoreau had unrestricted access to Emerson's library which contained the great works

of India such as The *Vedas*, The *Laws of Manu*, and the *Hitopadesha* of Vishnu Sharma, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Thoreau read the Hindu scriptures with delight and with each reading, he was raised into an untouched and pristine region of thought.

When Thoreau began his intensive study of Hindu scriptures, he wrote in his journal:

I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindu's without being elevated upon the table land of the Ghauts....It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges and seems as superior to criticism as the *Himmaleh* mounts. (Bharadwaj 51)

Thoreau sought throughout his life to live a life of meaning - a life in which he would understand the truths of his own nature, his relationship with other men and his relationship with Nature and with the Universe. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Thoreau found clues for his quest which he transposed into his Journals: "The man who, having abandoned all lusts of the flesh, walked without inordinate desires, unassuming, and free from pride, obtaineth happiness. The wise man . . . seeketh for that which is homogenous to his own nature". (qtd. In Meenakumari 2)

Thoreau calls The *Bhagavad Gita* "one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures which have come down to us". For Thoreau, the *Gita* is more colossal than any other masterpiece of the East. Thoreau speaks of "the sanity and sublimity" of the *Gita*, which has impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants and tells American contemporaries to study it with reverence, for it is a part of man's common heritage:

I would say to the readers of scriptures, if they wish for a good book to read the *Bhagavad Gita*..... known to have been written..... more than four thousand years ago..... it matters not whether three or four or when..... it deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees, as a part of the sacred writings of a devout people".(Meenakumari 5)

Thoreau's reading led him to an interest in *Yoga*. '*Yoga*' is the effort of a man to unite him with the deeper element. It is the union of the human with the divine within him. The underlying idea of all these terms is 'linking'. *Yoga* is getting to the Supreme, touching the Absolute. It is 'yoking' all the forces of heart, mind and will to the Supreme or God. We must discipline the emotions and realize the Supreme. Renunciation of worldly affairs is a prerequisite to self-discipline. Self-discipline is essential to all activities of a yogi, if complete identity is to be sought with the object desired. Thoreau was a yogi, a yogi who represented not an escape from life but an escape into it, who, both by example and precept, told a nation that what matters is not the impressiveness of the external trappings or the outward show that one covers oneself with; it is the individual that is invaluable, that it shall be a terrible bargain if he possesses the whole world, but loses his own soul (Meenakumari 7). He wrote in a letter to a friend:

Free in this world as the buds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the *Yoga* gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works. . . . The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation . . . Divine forms traverse him . . . and united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original.(qtd. in Meenakumari 2)

Thoreau was also influenced by the reading of *Laws of Manu*. He had read the *Manu Dhramasastra* translated by Sir William Jones and it greatly affected him. The book and its teachings remained with him for the rest of his life. He referred to it time and again as a gospel and made mention of it in his essay *Walden*:

Nothing was too trivial for the *Hindoo* lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like, elevating what is mean and does not falsely excuse himself by calling these things trifles". (qtd. in Bharadwaj 52)

Transmigration was another theme that interested Thoreau. According to Dombrowski, "Thoreau's views on the after-life owe more to Classical or Oriental sources than to Christian ones" (Bharadwaj 55). These references reflect Thoreau's debt to India. He developed great warmth for India from his early years. In one of his poems, "To a Stray Fowl", he personified himself as a bird, and identified himself with the ancient race of India and expressed his grief on being cut off from his natural roots and being forced to live in a

hostile region. Throughout his life, Thoreau had an intuitive feeling that he might have been born in India in his previous births. (Bharadwaj 60)

Thoreau advocates the life of simplicity, a lesson which he had taught himself at Walden Pond and which he tried to teach others. Simplify - Simplify the outward circumstances of your life, simplify your needs, your ambition and learn to delight in the simple pleasure which the world of Nature affords. It also meant scorn public opinion, refuse to accept the common definitions of success and refuse to be moved by the judgment of others. Thoreau not only advocated simplicity, but also put them into practice. He says in Walden "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"

For nearly two years, Thoreau lived the life of a hermit at the shores of the Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau chose to undergo this experiment to find answers to questions he could not answer living in the cosmopolitan society. He also hoped to find a way to connect his inner self with nature. Thoreau's concept of "civil disobedience" inspired many intellectuals and renowned figures, whose actions altered the flow of history - most notably Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On his return to Concord toward the end of 1843, he surrendered himself completely to the allure of the woods and fields and waters of the vicinity. He minimized all his material needs and comforts. He began to wear corduroy clothes, eat simply and frugally, and deny himself the things which cost money. Indeed, he soon went after poverty as others go after wealth. Thus ridding himself of all his material possessions gave him what he desired most-leisure, peace of mind, freedom. Reversing the biblical stricture of six days work and one day rest, he worked one day a week and turned the other six into a long-lasting Sabbath (Madison 111).

Thoreau not only preached but practiced simplicity and voluntary poverty and was impressed by the ideal of the philosopher. He was not in favour of over indulgence in pleasure and comforts. Thus he says in Walden: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrance to the elevation of mankind" (qtd. in Meenakumari 8). He adds that with respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. Thoreau says further, in Walden that the ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek were a class among whom "none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward" (Meenakumari 9). Much like Swami Vivekananda, Thoreau was fascinated by the ideal of the Indian Monk. The *yogi* or the *Sannyasi* of India appealed to Thoreau. He states:

I lay down the book and go to my well for water and lo! There I meet 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 get together in the same well (Meenakumari 10)

According to the Indian scripture, the body is the temple of God and should be looked upon as such. Thoreau too speaks of the body in a similar thought. He says:

Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the God he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any boldness begins at once to refine a man's features, any meanness or sexuality to imbrue them. (Meenakumari 9)

Thoreau not only talks of the presence of God in man but also of the consciousness of an animal instinct in us, He says:

We are conscious of an animal in us which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sexual and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled, like the worms which even in life and health occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that

it may enjoy a certain health of its own that we maybe well, but not pure. (Meenakumari 9)

Thoreau says, "From exertion come wisdom and purity: from sloth ignorance and sexuality." (Meenakumari 9) In these words, one can discern the influence of Indian thought. Thoreau's life was a quest for self-realization. He was a seer who endeavoured to teach humanity the virtues of non-attachment, non-conformity and self-discipline. His relentless search for truth made him person true to his work. He was a *Karma Yogi* who believed in a life of action. His name would be remembered as long as there are individuals who see God in nature and the divine in humans.

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