

## **Thoreau: An Avatar Of Indian Wisdom**

**Dr. Shruti Srivastava**

Senior assistant professor (English)

D.A.V. Degree College, Kanpur

**Abstract:** Of all the Transcendentalist, Thoreau stands at the pinnacle of this world wide mystic tradition of turning inward for attaining truthfulness through meditation and ecstasy . More than a writer, naturalist, transcendentalist, Thoreau was a yogi who attained the most abiding humility ,equanimity, and simplicity .Walden is ,truly, an inspirational book based on the theme of spiritual quest leading to God- realization As a philosopher Thoreau was , like his great mentor Emerson steeped in the Hindu scriptures of The Bhagvad Gita and The Upanishads. Thoreau had The Bhagvad Gita with him during his stay by Walden Pond .He makes an appeal to his readers to love life filled with virtues like humility and honesty so as to raise oneself from the stage of animality to the stage of divinity. Thoreau has withdrawn himself from the family and society in order to devote his best moments of life in deep meditation. While we read Walden we join in his life of simplicity, purity and renunciation which are the different ladders towards reaching the spiritual height. If we feel disturbed by the complexities of present day society, there is a way out .We can create our own walden anywhere. We can live more meaningful more joyous and elevated lives. That is the essence and relevance of reading Thoreau and realizing his dictums in our daily lives.

**Key Words:** Transcendentalist, Vedantist, Solitude, Renunciation ,Inner Joy, Purity, Self Realization

Of all the transcendentalists, Thoreau stands at the pinnacle of this worldwide mystic tradition of turning inward for attaining truthfulness through meditation and ecstasy. Thoreau was one of the earliest and profoundest scholars of Hindu and Buddhist texts in America. More than a writer, naturalist, transcendentalist Thoreau was a yogi who attained the most abiding humility, equanimity and simplicity. In many ways, Thoreau surpassed his mentor in living the ‘natural’ life as his marvelous book ‘Walden’ demonstrates. Simple living was Thoreau’s main goal, inspired by his Transcendentalist philosophy. Many admirers of Thoreau regard him as a ‘visible saint’. Walden is truly an inspirational book based on the theme of spiritual quest leading to God–realization. Thoreau lived a ‘Brahminical Inner temple life.’ Robert Sullivan rightly says: “As a transcendentalist, his art is didactic, and it seeks to inspire, to change; like the landscape

painters of the Hudson River school, he sees the divine in nature, and presents it so that we may act accordingly” (Sullivan 6).

As a philosopher, Thoreau was, like his great mentor Emerson steeped in the Hindu scriptures of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Thoreau has imbibed the basic tenets of Transcendentalism and was deeply influenced by Emerson’s ‘Nature’. Thoreau had the Bhagavad Gita with him during his stay by Walden Pond. Walden is divided like the Bhagavad Gita into eighteen chapters. The narrator makes an appeal to all men to purify themselves for realising the true self (atman) or God (Brahma). When he starts to construct his cabin, he informs the reader that he is going to search his true self and a new, beautiful, spiritually elevated life. He prefers solitude in nature to society .He writes: “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” (Thoreau 125).Thoreau is interested in showing that one can escape from the bondage of materialism by seeking the company and guidance of nature. Thoreau has written much on what religion is.The numerous quotations from the Bhagavad Gita and references to Hindu writers such as Vishnu Sharma and Kalidas illustrate Thoreau’s appreciation of the literature and philosophy of the East. Some of his sentences look like Sanskrit sentences as direct translation of Indian philosophic thoughts:

‘Let the motive be in the deed and not in the event .’

.....

‘He who enjoyeth but the Amrit which is left of his offerings obtaineth the eternal spirit of Brahm,the supreme.’

.....

‘He is both a yogi and a sanyasi who performeth that which he hath to do independent of the fruit thereof;not he who liveth without the sacrificial fire and without action ‘.

Vedantic themes appear throughout the works of Thoreau. In Emerson’s library he had found and read Sir William Jones translation of ‘The Laws of Menu’. He read the Dharmashastra in 1841 when he was 24. Reading the Mundakopanishad at Walden, Thoreau felt nourished. Thoreau finds Christianity lacking in Joy. So he is impressed by the Hindus lofty conception of human destiny .He considers the water of the Walden pond as sacred as the Ganges. Thoreau invites the reader to follow and repeat his experience of the pond as an object of meditation. To Thoreau Emerson is calling him into the game, calling for a new kind of literature a kind of writing that comes from looking at ourselves and nature. In this way the ancient precept ‘know thyself’ and the modern precept ‘study nature’ becomes at last one maxim. It is a call to pursue literary activity that could reform the souls and thus the whole world. Walden is said to be the best book in American literature on how to live a focused life of simplicity, inner joy, and perpetual soul – searching. Thoreau’s interest in oriental thought and religion may be seen in ‘A Week’ where he makes direct use of the Bhagavad Gita and its dialogue between Krishna and Arjoona. According to Richard Gray: “Thoreau deploys a complex web of natural imagery throughout Walden to enact the various stages in his self - emancipation .And his withdrawal into his shell is compared to the condition of a grub or a chrysalis; out of that comes eventually

in the second spring, the butterfly, a beautiful and winged life that embodies the idea of resurrection, renewal” (Gray 64).

If we feel disturbed by the complexities of present day society, there is a way out. We can create our own Walden anywhere. We can live the simple life in the village, the town or the city. In that Walden we can live more purposeful more meaningful and more joyous lives. That is the essence of Walden. Simplify, simplify, simplify is his byword. Simplicity, according to Thoreau, should be the watchword in the quest of one’s true self. In the words of E.B. White: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts nor even to find a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, as life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust” (Thoreau 10).

Thoreau wanted the reader to go with him on what he called his excursions into nature and into himself. He does not simply instruct as Emerson does, he makes us share the experience. While we read Walden we join in his life of simplicity, purity & renunciation which are the different ladders towards reaching the spiritual height. Thoreau drew his nourishment from the concord river lakes and woods which became his constant friends. Nature was his ‘companion’, ‘friend’ and ‘bride’. For him nature was full of Joy. Referring to his profession in his journal, Thoreau writes: My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature ,to know his lurking places ,to attend all the oratorios ,the operas , in nature. ’More than a writer, naturalist, transcendentalist, Thoreau was an Indian yogi in American garb. He tells us flatly that he is a mystic and the wood path and the boat are his studio where he maintained a sacred solitude. Thoreau’s life is a fine example of a saintly life cultivating inner peace and bliss. Thoreau was pained to see the woods disappearing under the blows of the axe. “Thank God” he said, “they cannot cut down the clouds”. To quote Robert D .Richardson: “Walden was not only the place of his own renewal and rebirth. It has become an internationally recognized symbol of the possibility of taking your life into your own hands and of awakening to the real joy and beauty of a life close to nature” (Richardson 330).

Each time Thoreau reiterates the image of renewal, he emphasizes his hope and belief that mankind will renew his spirit and be led to greater accomplishments not physical accomplishments but spiritual one. Such a belief is the very epitome of Transcendentalism. Negotiating the depth of Walden Pond, Thoreau is negotiating his own possible deepness; contemplating its mysteries he is also contemplating the mystery of his own individual soul. It is also legitimate to suppose that Thoreau’s action was partly due to his desire to experience the life of a yogi. Walter Harding, a noted scholar of Thoreau, is of the view that Walden can be read as a guide book to the higher life. Thoreau says: “Loving wisdom is that it is most important to cultivate the highest faculties and spend as little time as possible in planting, weaving, building etc” (Jacobs, 29).

Thoreau realizes that the more he gives up craving for social contact and tries to realize his identity with the Divine Being, the more he would feel inner Joy. Nothing then remains unattained and nothing left to be desired. The chapter entitled ‘The Pond in winter’ concludes the

quest of the narrator in locating nature as the true source of spiritual stimulation. Thoreau asks his readers to love life and cultivates the virtues like humility and honesty so as to raise oneself from the stage of animality to the stage of divinity. His desire to commune with the spirit of the universe is perennial and constant. Purity was the key to this search for the true self. In 'Higher Laws' Thoreau elaborates: "Man flows, at once to God when the channel of purity is open" (Thomas146).

Like a true Vedantist, Thoreau has practiced pure detachment. The Walden experiment is itself renunciation put in action. Thoreau's renunciation may be perceived as a search within, a soaring in the higher spiritual realms or liberation from the grosser elements of life. Retreat to the forest in search of peace and in quest of divinity has been the trademark of Indian holy men. It is inner victory. Thoreau was busy within. He was searching inner light. His literary pieces transport us to the realm of celestial bliss. Thoreau's journal is flooded with passages of such serene high spirits. This search for perfection & holiness owes a great deal to Gita. Thoreau has withdrawn himself from the family and society in order to devote his best moments of life in deep meditation. Walden like the Gita is a visionary scripture. In a chapter entitled 'House-warming,' Thoreau talks about his effort at self-reliance for spiritual survival. Hence in building the chimney, the narrator is metaphorically describing his final attempt to build a spiritually strong soul that can contain the fire. It is in this fashion the narrator baptizes and purifies his self. As the new day is born the narrator believes that with each dawn a new spiritually elevated life begins for him. He states: "Morning is when I am awake and there is dawn in me" (Thoreau 80).

-----  
"To be awake is to be alive" (Thoreau 80).  
-----

"In vain I look for change abroad,  
And can no difference find,  
Till some new ray of peace uncalled  
Illumes my inmost minds" (Jacob 99).

Thoreau's Walden expresses very well his commitment to the transcendental ideal of self enrichment, a task that is much more needed than any other worldly tasks. Thoreau is one such pure soul who has perfectly directed us how to unwrap the gift of inner peace and bliss and thereby encountering God face to face in this short span of life.

### Work Cited:

- Gray, Richard. *A Brief History of American Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2011. Print.  
Jacobs, Alan ed. *Thoreau*. London: Watkins publishing, 2012. Print.  
Richardson. *Nineteenth century prose*. Vol. 30 numbers ½ spring / fall 2003. 330. Print.  
Sullivan, Robert. *The Thoreau You Don't Know*. New York: Harper perennial, 2009. Print.  
Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1964. Print.

Thomas, Owen ed. *Walden: Walden and Civil Disobedience*. By Henry David Thoreau. New Delhi: PHI. Print.

**Bionote-**

Dr. Shruti Srivastava is a senior assistant professor in English in D.A.V. Degree College, Kanpur. She holds a Ph. D. in English from D.D.U., Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur. Her main area of interest is in Indian Bhakti Poetry, Transcendental Literature and Mystic Poetry. She has been granted a minor research project by UGC New Delhi. She also worked at various engineering colleges where she taught papers like Human Values & Professional Ethics, Professional Communication and Environmental Studies.