

# Henry David Thoreau: Solitude as a Path of Realization

## Abstract

Henry David Thoreau a well-known American transcendentalist is known for his uncompromising spirit and seer like living. Loneliness is a misused word because man is never alone, for deep within he is constantly occupied with his thoughts & affection. Thoreau's love for solitude was a path of self-realization- a communion with one-self and Parmatman.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalist, Uncompromising, Solitude, Self-Realization, Communion, Parmatman.

## Introduction

Love for solitude was the natural outcome of Thoreau's uncompromising spirit and his highly individualistic approach. He was a strong believer of the philosophy of individualism and as Randolph Bourne wrote in the seven Arts:

He marks better than any figure in our social history, the distance man has travelled from the unity of one to the unity of many.

If individuality can be defined as self-coherence of total occupation with self-Thoreau was certainly an individual. His thoughts began with the relation of man and society, but he negated the use of society for his personal ends. He hoped instead that society could be used to create individuals, to forward the general welfare, but he found that society never welcomes the precious gifts of the individual. The society, as it exists, has cognizance of people as a mass and Thoreau would never accede to be leveled down to being an unidentifiable part of the mob, he would not lose his identity in the non-entities around him and he would not 'prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' (Eliot 1969). He proposed then, a society of the real selves as differentiated from merely the physical selves. It was mainly the loss of momentary harmonies of consciousness that Thoreau feared would certainly occur due to the necessary interaction between the members of society. Doubtlessly, in society one cannot 'so live' as to secure all the advantages of consciousness without suffering many disadvantages. His retreat to Walden for the urgent solitude evolved from his firm belief and decision that to maintain his individuality, he would have to stand fast and firm; he would have to remain fixed where all was chaos and principled, where all was expediency.

This religion of the solitude is somewhat different from that of the ascetic. It does withdraw from the world into solitude, but in no way it is the denial of the physical world. Thoreau needed solitude, because it is conducive to contemplation and meditation. Prone to solitude he was often restless, dreamy, sensitive by nature, but firm to extract all he wanted from life and the physical world. In Walden he confessed his inmost desire which he cherished from the beginning-

'But for my part, I always preferred the solitary dwellings' (Walden 120).

This whole earth, according to Thoreau, was but a speck in the space that fit so well with the universal plan and therefore one had no feel lonely "why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the milky way?"(Walden 120).

Loneliness is a misused word, said Thoreau, because man is never alone, for deep within, he is constantly occupied with his own good thoughts and affections, attachments and relationships. He realized that, a man with high intellect, a Man-Thinking or working is never alone, be it a farmer or a student, and no exertion of legs can bring the two minds nearer to each other. He never found any companion that was so companionable as solitude. In the journal entry of December 28, 1856 he wrote;

'I thrive best on solitude. If I have had a companion only one day in a week, I could name I find that the whole of the week to me has been



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seriously affected. It dissipates my days, and often it takes another week to get over it. I laugh when you tell me the danger of impoverishing myself by isolation' (Thoreau 1892).

Thoreau realized that even the poor misanthrope or a melancholy man can find sweetly tender, innocent and encouraging society in any natural object. For himself, he found an infinite friendliness in every sound and sight of nature and the rich store of his mind was not only filled with learning, but with the vivid imagery of nature. The love of nature and his 'sweet converse with nature' was associated with the pleasure of solitude.

Solitude was also one of the needs of the literary man, a necessity of 'those minds most devoted to study and elevated by genius'. It was a fundamental condition of meditation to view the world moving within ourselves. The requisite for this pure enjoyment however, was an enlightened and cultivated mind. Thoreau's solitude grew more out from a desire for intellectual distinction than from an opportunity for communication with nature. Knowledge, Thoreau wrote, 'creates the difference between man and man'. It was this superiority of the richly stored mind that made solitude pleasurable and important.

'Happy is the man who is furnished with all the advantages to relish solitude. He is never alone, he holds secret converse with the sages of antiquity and gathers wisdom, from their discourse, he enjoys the fruits of their labors- their knowledge is his wisdom, their wisdom, his inheritances' (Patri 123).

No doubt Hindu writing appealed to him more as a confirmation of his own ascetic habits of living than anything else. Whereas Emerson accepted the intellectual & philosophical concepts of Indian mythology such as the concepts of the over-soul, Maya, law of karma, rebirth etc. that expanded his vision, Thoreau took the Hindu ideals of spiritual life as dictates to be and applied it to his own life. For him the practical ideals, such as renunciation, detachment, need for solitude etc. had precedence over the abstract and speculative ideas. The pursuit of solitude is a quest for soul's unification with the supreme soul, while the pursuit of personality ideas to possession of power and worldly success. The former leads to the selfless- devotion, while the other ends in utterly self-centered occupations. This practice of selfless- devotion and renunciation, as preached by the Hindus, resulted in the Walden experiment. Thoreau's persistent refusal to get involved in the affairs of the world is proof only of his conviction of this creed. Even his idea of simplicity is only an approximation to the concept of renunciation.

"Let our affairs be of two and three and of a hundred and thousand. The wants, if they cannot be completely done away with, are to be brought to a minimum. The food, dress and furniture are all to be ruthlessly simplified. And the whole world and its affairs are to be regarded as of no consequence" (Walden 81).

But renunciation or solitude to the Hindus as also to Thoreau was not escapism as is commonly contented. It was not running away from the harsh realities of life to seek shelter in a forest, but it was living and acting in a way that the fruits of his action

do not bind a person. The action is performed in a spirit of utter detachment, for involvement and desire often vitiate judgment and failure dulls the edge of enthusiasm. The Geeta, which teaches the three ways of karma, jnana, sanyasa, actually advocates a course of detached action informed by knowledge, gained through contemplation and solitude,

The austere programme of Thoreau at Walden has been termed as a spiritual quest of a modern yogi. His love of solitude, withdrawal from society, hatred of materialism, frugal living, practice of Ahimsa and vegetarianism and his experience of Samadhi are some of the aspects of his yogi like existence. Though Thoreau never followed the rigid steps of yoga prescribed by Patanjali, he was a Yogi in a broad way. He accepted the essentials and rejected the superficiality. Consciously or unconsciously he practiced some of the basic tenets of Ashtanga-Yoga. As the Bhagwad -Geeta says-

"A Yogi should always try to concentrate his mind living alone in solitude, having subdued his mind and body and get rid of desires and possessions" (Bhagwad Geeta 318).

His experiment at Walden was made in the spirit of a seeker of truth, a Vanprasthin who goes to the forest to cast off the superflux of life and to realize the truth. Alone like a solitary Yogi he constantly meditated on the divine nature of the soul and obtained ecstasy which is the ultimate goal of the individual. For Yoga solitude is prime requisite. A Yogi should practice Yoga for self-purification, concentration and restraining his senses. In this practice of solitude whatever was boyish and romantic in his attitude was transformed and consolidated to the patience of a truth-seeker. Significantly, Thoreau once commented that he had as immense an appetite for solitude, as an infant has for sleep. Throughout Walden Thoreau insisted upon this search for solitude for the purpose of spiritual sadhana -

"As the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into silence... silence is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly"(Thoreau 599).

The bizarre experiment of Thoreau suggests a grand spiritual project of a Yogi, a life of tapasya or tranquil meditation. It is also associated with creation as well as akin to patanjali's concept which describes Tapasya as a methodical effort to attain perfection, through the control of the different elements of human nature both physical and psychical. Anderson called it symbolic of spiritual rebirth. Commenting upon a significant passage from his journal such as-

"You think that I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken-web or chrysalis and nymphlike, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society"(Thoreau 246).

Anderson remarked that his withdrawal was a preparation for spiritual rebirth, since it enabled him to become a Yogi in true sense, fulfilling the required prerogatives of absolute purity and contemplation,

How far Thoreau succeeded in his mission to attain the state of spiritual bliss with the help of solitude is not very clear. Samadhi is the tensionless state of mind in which ecstasy and stasis are conjoined to produce beatitude. De. Radhakrishnan

defines Samadhi as, ... ecstatic condition, in which the connection with the outer world is broken. It is the goal of Yoga discipline, since it leaves the soul from its temporal, conditioned, changing existence into a simple eternal and perfect life (Indian Philosophy 358) In this state the individual soul or Jivatman merges with the oversoul or the paramatman and no distinction between the seeker and the sought, the observer and the observed remains. It is a state of total unity and total bliss. There is one key passage in Walden which shows that Thoreau was prone to such a beatific and trance like state-

"I have spent many an hour, when I was young, floating over its surface as the zephyr willed.....dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the sand and I arose to see what shore my fates had impelled me to"(Thoreau's writing 213). Closely related to Samadhi is Thoreau's experience of listening to the cosmic sound which is mentioned in the various texts of Hindus. The anahata dhwani, the sound requiring no interaction between any two bodies for its birth, is a kind of cosmic sound whose vibration none but a Yogi may feel. He listens to this sound through his intuitive faculty. W B. Stein has worked out in great detail how Thoreau has given us many instances in A Week of hearing the music of the

universe similar to the sound of the oom- the cosmic sound Hindus refer.

#### Conclusion

The withdrawal of Thoreau, the love for solitude was a path of self- realization and preparation for rebirth, since it enabled him to complete his development from the nymph or pupa stage to the highest ever achieved by men.

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