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The Poetic Vision of *Walden* and the Idea of Human Freedom in the *Bhagavadgītā*

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In his seminal essay on "Nature" (1836) Emerson writes:

> In the woods, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years.

Thoreau's *Walden; Or, Life In The Woods* (1854) is more than a tribute to Emersonian ideas; it is a forceful plea for the renewal and regeneration of the self. It is concerned with the deeper significance of reality as a whole. It demonstrates that through active and creative participation in the processes of nature one arrives at "the inner meaning of the universe and of human life." Its organic form embodies mythic consciousness and portrays Thoreau's transcendental vision of cosmic unity and oneness. Its archetypal imagery and symbolism are expressive of a syncretic view of the world, which illuminates and harmonizes the polarities of human existence. Invoking the mandala symbols of the sun and the earth, the sky and the pond, Thoreau sharpens our awareness of the underlying relation between light and dark, growth and decay, death and rebirth, time and eternity, and so on.

By going into the woods, Thoreau explores and contemplates the essence of human condition. This metaphoric journey into the hinterland of the human mind constitutes Thoreau's continuous struggle to be free from the tyranny of time and a desire to be reborn, to become whole and free like 'the child who chases butterflies in a meadow.' In this process of freedom Thoreau develops "merciless knowledge of himself and selfless understanding of others." He undertakes the practice of meditation (Rājayoga) and leads a life of utmost simplicity in order to transmute and purify his existence. He cultivates a deliberate life-style and writes with authenticity:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...

Thus, living deeply, Thoreau identifies with birds, animals, rocks, lakes and ponds, treating the whole of nature "as raw material of tropes and symbols" with which he describes his life. For him, "a lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is [the] earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." The metaphors of experience, such as economy, reading, solitude, beans-planting and house-warming, the images and symbols of circular motion, such as sun, earth, moon, ponds, rivers, leaves, spring and winter, and the central symbol of the Walden Pond, implying wholeness and perfection—all express a profound experience of self-realization in the *now* and *here* of time and space. Thoreau believes that man can
achieve freedom and wholeness in time, but he
must have creative imagination to transcend
time's linearity/temporality, and a vision to
penetrate beyond the surface of things. With
prophetic realism, Thoreau writes:

In eternity there is indeed something
true and sublime. But all these times
and places and occasions are now and
here. God himself culminates in the
present moment, and will never be more
divine in the lapse of all the ages. And
we are enabled to apprehend at all what
is sublime and noble only by perpetual
instilling and drenching of the reality
that surrounds us.

And, with poetic vision, he states:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.
I drink at it; but while I drink I see the
sandy bottom and detect how shallow it
is. Its thin current slides away, but etern­
ity remains. I would drink deeper; fish
in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with
stars.

The earth and the sky meet in Thoreau's
imagination, and he reveals the secret of hu­
man freedom and wholeness through the reli­
gious symbols of fish and water. Through the
language of symbols, Thoreau castigates those
who have lost themselves in the prison-house
of dead traditions and prejudices which stifle
their spiritual and artistic growth. He laments
the fact that "most men, through mere igno­
rance and mistake, are so occupied with the
factitious cares and superfluously coarse la­
bours of life that its finer fruits cannot be
plucked by them." He exhorts people to
economize every moment of their lives, so that
they may learn the way of shaping their exis­
tence, so that they may become aware of their
destiny. To all of them, he says: "Direct your
eye right inward, and you'll find/ A thousand
regions in your mind/ Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be/ Expert in home-cosmog­
raphy." The mood of castigation prevails
throughout the narrative; Thoreau warns
against the reading of cheap and shallow books,
and praises the ancient Classics, the Scriptures
of various lands, and the works of the great po­
ets like Dante and Shakespeare. He finds the
sounds of nature (birds and animals) more en­
during and self-awakening than the echoes of
human history and civilization. He recom­
mends solitude as a mode of encounter with one's inner reality, enabling one to 'hear be­
yond the range of sound [and] see beyond the
verge of sight'. He prefers the friendship of
seasons to the company of human beings, par­
ticularly those human beings who retard one's
spiritual freedom. He values human action
(Karmayoga) which is performed without any
desire for reward or anxiety for its results. He
makes a strong case for the life of intellectual
and spiritual fulfillment rather than that of in­
stinctive and sensual indulgence. He writes:
"We are all sculptors and painters, and our ma­
terial is our own flesh and blood and bones.
Any nobleness begins at once to refine a man's
features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute
them." And, above all, Thoreau regards the
human imagination as an essential ingredient
of man's life which is also his work of art. It is
through the creative imagination that Thoreau
visualizes the image of his purified self in the
Walden Pond. In his creativity, Thoreau per­
ceives the rivers, the woods, the ponds and the
meadows as eternal symbols of organic life, as
sources of renewal and regeneration, or what
Sherman Paul calls "the green flame[s] of
life." Through poetic imagination, Thoreau
transcends the limits of time and space, and
celebrates his vision of simultaneity and unity
of all life in the following epiphany:

Thus it appears that the sweltering in­
habitants of Charleston and New Or­
leans, of Madras and Bombay and Cal­
cutta, drink at my well. Before the sun
rises, before the east is well above the
horizon, I am known to 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 mas­
ter, and our buckets as it were grate to­
gether in the same well. The pure
Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.17

In *Walden*, the art of living by loving and the life of art are identical. Creativity is perfection and redemption; imagination is youth and freedom. The creative process is 'the expansion of the particular into the universal,' of microcosm into macrocosm.18 Thoreau's vision of life and art is brilliantly expressed in the allegory of "an artist in the city of Kouroo." The artist's quest for perfection and his self-absorption in the quest liberate him from the bondage of time; he achieves 'perennial youth' and radiant wholeness, and a world with full and fair proportions.

There are many similarities between the poetic sensibility of *Walden* and the intuitive vision of the *Bhagavadgita*. The *Gita* teaches us the art of living in harmony with ourselves and with the world that surrounds us through a fourfold structure of yogas or paths, known as Jñānayoga or the path of knowledge, Karmayoga or the path of action, Rājāyoga or the path of meditation, and Bhaktiyoga or the path of devotion. Thoreau demonstrates his understanding of the yogas which he practiced throughout the Walden experiment. Thoreau's vision of human freedom and wholeness is indeed consistent with the creative idea of human freedom in the *Gita*. In order to be free and whole, man must perform his actions and duties disinterestedly and with a sense of detachment. The *Gita* recommends that man should have a sense of non-attachment to sensuous objects even while experiencing them, that he should renounce the desire to enjoy the fruits of actions while doing them (Karma-Phala-Tyāga), and that he should possess an equilibrium of all his mental faculties. The *Gita* says:

But great is the man who, free from attachments, and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action. ... The world is in the bonds of action, unless the action is consecration. Let thy actions then be pure, free from the bonds of desire.19

Thoreau was deeply influenced by the *Gita* and perceiving the paradoxical wisdom of the *Gita* he writes:

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.20

Both *Walden* and the *Gita* offer spiritual strategies towards free acts of the imagination; both lead to a process of awakening the mind without fixing it on any thing; both encourage what Emerson calls "the original relation with the universe" in which all mean egotism vanishes; and finally, both provide the context of a vision and a perspective which enables one to remain like the persona in Whitman's "Songs of Myself": "Both in and out of the [life's] game and watching and wondering at it."21

Footnotes

1 Stephen E. Whicher, ed. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 24.
3 The merging connotations and the paradoxical attributes of the god of light and the Mother Earth cannot be grasped rationally. The sun brings light 'that gives meaning to all things' and symbolizes the spiritual vision, but the sun always comes out of and vanishes into the 'unfathomable darkness.' The Mother Earth gives birth to food which sustains life and symbolizes fertility and growth but she also takes back everything into her dark womb. In nature, however, the opposing forces are always held in a state of balance. See Philip Wheelwright, *Burning Fountain*, p. 138, and Jacob, *The Psychology of C.G. Jung*, p. 97 f.n.
5 Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, trans. from the German, and with an Introduction by Michael Wilson, p. xii. There are many similiari-
ties between Steiner’s idea of human freedom and
the concept of freedom in the Bhagavadgītā.
6 Brooks Atkinson, ed. Walden & Other Writings of
Henry David Thoreau, pp. 81-82. Thoreau also
writes: “I know of no more encouraging fact than
the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his
life by a conscious endeavour.... Every man is
asked to make his life, even in its details, worthy
of the contemplation of his most elevated and
critical hour.” (p. 81).
7 Henry Seidel Canby, ed. The Works of Thoreau,
p. 21 [Journal of May 10, 1853].
9 Ibid., p. 87.
10 Ibid., p. 88.
11 See J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, pp. 101-
103 [Fish] & pp. 345-347 [Water].
12 Walden, pp. 5-6 (“Economy”).
13 Walden, pp. 285-86 (“Conclusion”).
14 In “Solitude,” Walden, Thoreau writes: “I find it
wholesome to be alone the greater part of
the time...I love to be alone. I never found the
companion that was so companionable as
solitude. We are for the most part more lonely
when we go abroad among men than when we
stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working
is always alone, let him be where he will.” (pp.
122-123).
16 Sherman Paul, “Resolution at Walden,” Charles
Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. eds. Inter-
pretations of American Literature, p. 168.
17 Walden, p. 266.
18 See Edward J. Rose, “‘A World with Full and
Fair Proportions’: The Aesthetics and the Politics
of Vision,” The Western Thoreau Centenary: Se-
19 Juan Mascaro, edited with an Introduction,
20 Walden, p. 122.