

THOREAU AND EASTERN SPIRITUAL TEXTS:
THE INFLUENCE OF SACRED SOUND IN THE WRITINGS OF
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

A Thesis presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by
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MAY 2007

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THOREAU AND EASTERN SPIRITUAL TEXTS: THE INFLUENCE OF SACRED
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Thomas Quirk, John Evelev, and Signe Cohen for their astute questions and guidance in the development of this thesis. I also am grateful for all the support and help of the creative writing faculty at MU, most especially my creative portfolio advisor, Professor Marly Swick.

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Introduction

**As if the possible combinations of sound, the last wind that sighed,
or melody that waked the wood, had any history other than a perceptive ear might hear
in the least and latest sound of nature! It has no history more than God.¹**

~Henry David Thoreau

**There are powers above and shapes written in the sky which sound in
your own soul, which concern you most vitally, and which belong to
the Godhead as much as do you in your innermost self.²**

~Hans Kayser

Henry David Thoreau articulated his beliefs through Eastern spiritual ideas of nature and its cycles. From his own account, he was an iconoclast and bore no one religious stamp; however, the Hindu idea that nature is our teacher and if there are spiritual laws we ought to be following, they should be apparent in the cycles of the stars, the flow of the mountain streams, and in the way the mind itself operates, was revealed in his seminal work, Walden. Thoreau used the Hindu texts to identify and support his developing beliefs. He found much confirmation in the ancient Indian work on daily living, the Laws of Manu, to favor ascetic rule and his defiant individualism over the mercantilism order of his day. He also agreed with the Vedic concept of creation as

¹ Henry David Thoreau, Journal, Ed. John C. Broderrick et al, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 1:325.

² Hans Kayser, Akroasis: The Theory of World Harmonics (Boston: Plowshare Press, 1970), 60.

separation³—of the propping apart of heaven and earth—and that the only way back to unity and its accompanying enlightenment was through close attention to the present moment. The strongest avenue to that orientation for Thoreau was sonic. Throughout Walden, for instance—day or night—it is the sound of woodland creatures, trees, loons, and more, that consistently awakens consciousness for Thoreau. In “Sounds,” Thoreau describes at length the night in terms of sound. Nighttime, when vision is at a minimum, closes no doors to hearing. He hears

distant rumbling of wagons over bridges, --a sound heard farther than almost any other at night, --the baying of dogs, and sometimes again the lowing of some disconsolate cow in a distant barn-yard. In the mean while all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and was-sailers, still unrepentant...⁴

Eastern spiritual texts emphasize sound as well as present moment awareness as primary avenues for transcendence. As Arthur Versluis says in American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions, Thoreau was no yogi, nor Buddhist priest, but he was nearer to these than was anyone else in mid-nineteenth-century America, and yet few recognize the importance of this influence. Indeed, I argue that you cannot fully understand Thoreau without understanding the impact Asian religious texts had in his writing and in his thinking over the course of his life.

Thoreau is known historically for transcendentalism, for nature writing, for living alone in the wood with joy. These attributes stem from an ability to listen to the world around him, and hear it speaking in a way few others at the time in West were accustomed. Thoreau says in In the Maine Woods:

³ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, introduction, Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit (London: Penguin, 1975) 25.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, Walden; Or, Life in the Woods, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995) 82.

There is something singularly grand and impressive in the sound of a tree falling in a perfectly calm night like this, as if the agencies which overthrow it did not need to be excited, but worked with a subtle, deliberate, and conscious force, like a boa-constrictor, and more effectively than even in a windy day.⁵

Like the agencies overthrowing the tree, Thoreau was overcome by the voice of the world. This predilection of his personality, the ability to notice the base note Eastern thinkers describe from time immemorial, strongly links his ideas of present moment awareness, of simplicity, of work, into a cohesive theology. All of these tenets of Indian philosophy and of Thoreauvian perspective lead to the greater goal of personal freedom. Freedom from the binding and blinding world for Thoreau could be attained via soundscape, much like the “immense ‘auditorium’ of sonic manifestations”⁶ key to Hindu thought. In this paper, I have emphasized the certain influence of sound as the generator of Thoreau’s worldview. This aspect infuses his work, ignites his vision and is previously underestimated in importance. Rather than noticing the sounds of nature as a counterpart to spiritual life, they underpin and generate the known world for Thoreau. They bring him closer to self than all other avenues.

⁵ K.P. Van Anglen, Simplify, Simplify, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 165.

⁶ Guy L. Beck, Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 218.

Historic Context of American Transcendentalism

Throughout the Transcendental writings of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman there is the prominent mark of India. Europeans such as Shopenhauer, Hartmann and Neitzsche also felt the captivation of the East as did the American Transcendentalists following them. “This discovery of India by the Western man,” says S.K. Das in Western Sailors, Eastern Seas, “is one of the most significant events in the history of India, and indeed in the history of human civilization.”⁷ R.K. Dhawan, in Henry David Thoreau, A Study in Indian Influence, says of Hegel:

In his The Philosophy of History, Hegel wrote that the nations were gravitated by India for “the treasures of this land of marvels, the most costly which the earth presents...as also treasure of wisdom.” Early European and American interest in India was guided by both these “treasures.”⁸

Dawning interest in Indic texts in the West was fueled by new and first translations into German, English and French increasingly available to Europe and America by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Sir William Jones, appointed a judge in India in 1783, convinced a Hindu physician to teach him enough Sanskrit to translate the Laws of Manu and the Hitopadesa, both of which influenced the Transcendentalists. Jones’s translations, “without exaggeration profoundly and almost single-handedly transformed the European view of Asia from the earlier presupposition of the East as barbarous, to a

⁷ Sisir Kumar Das, Western Sailors Eastern Seas (New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1971) 1.

⁸ R.K. Dhawan, Henry David Thoreau, A Study in Indian Influence (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Co., 1985) 10.

vision of an exotic and highly civilized world in its own right.”⁹ His recognition of a proto-Indo-European language marked the birth of modern linguistics. And, importantly for this research, his influence on German poetry and philosophy and on the English Romantic movement, central to Transcendentalism, was pervasive. Goethe, Herder, Raymond Schwab, and the Romantics headed by the brothers Schlegel, and Thomas Moore influenced and were influenced by the times. However, “for every enthusiast (like Jones) there were many who considered the Eastern teachings nothing but a mass of superstition, a hodgepodge of polytheistic ‘mummery,’ to use a common epithet.”¹⁰ The importance of the times to the later Transcendentalists, however, is that many writers used an amalgamation of the various traditions—Christendom, Islam, Hindu, Buddhist—in their images and this ferment later gave rise to the American Transcendental movement that called for a universal religion and for recognizing the unity inherent in all traditions, despite outward differences among them.

It was widely accepted, Robert D. Richardson says in Henry Thoreau, A Life of the Mind, that “while the transcendental philosophy corroborated and infused new vitality into many other forms of thought—Platonism, Neoplatonism, mysticism, Eastern thought, French eclecticism, Goethean classicism, Stoicism, and the ideas of Gale, More, Pordage, Cudworth, and Berkeley—the immediate source of the present ferment of reappraisal was to be sought in one place above all others.”¹¹ That place of origin was Immanuel Kant, whose Critique of Pure Reason was published in 1781 in German, and opened a new era in metaphysical thought. Emerson says in an 1842 address:

⁹ Arthur Versluis, American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 18.

¹⁰ Versluis 31.

¹¹ Robert D. Richardson, Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986)72.

It is well known to most of my audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant of Konigsburg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired: that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*.¹²

Intuitive thought is by nature individual, which struck a cord with New England transcendentalists who also stressed individual autonomy and freedom over isolation. Like the Hindus, they believed that universal human nature is revealed to individuals through their own particular nature. The affinity between the New England transcendentalists, like Thoreau, and Hindu mystics stems from a striking similarity in philosophy. Kant's orientation heavily influenced the West and shows a quite clear affinity with Indic thought. His work, in part, made the ideas of India more accessible to the West. This can be seen by taking a closer look at Kant.

Kant's Critique of Pure Reason parallels Hindu philosophy in many spheres in its attempt to understand of the ineffable nature of the divine. As Kant observes, all experience is within the field of time and space and, in fact, man cannot experience anything except within that field. Joseph Campbell in Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor, says, "Kant calls this 'the aesthetic forms of sensibility.' This is what in India is called *maya*. *Maya* is the field of time and space that transforms that which is transcendent of the manifestation into a broken up world."¹³

¹² Quoted in Richardson 72.

¹³ Joseph Campbell, Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2001)17.

As Campbell goes on to explain, as understood particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is a final term. However,

In almost all other systems [such as Hinduism], the gods are agents, manifestations, or imagined functionaries of an energy that transcends all conceptualization. They are not the source of the energy but are rather agents of it. Put it this way: Is the god the source, or is the god a human manner of conceiving of the force and energy that supports the world?

In Thoreau's writing we see his affinity with the energy emanating from the divine ground. In another point of differentiation with prevailing religious teaching in the West, that energy—the Hindu divine ground—has no gender. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is a male. Campbell explains the Kantian and Hindu perspective: “This male and female differentiation is made, however, within the field of time and space, the field of duality. If God is beyond duality, you cannot say that God is a “He.” You cannot say God is a “She.” You cannot say God is an ‘It.’”¹⁴ In Thoreau's Walden writing, the energy he refers to in nature has no gender.

Opening the mystery of the transcendent energy underlying the field of time and space—the material world—is the goal of language metaphors about God. Campbell again:

When Yahweh says, “I am God,” he closes off that possibility. When your God is transparent to transcendence, however, so are you. That which is of the transcendent is the same in the god as in yourself. If the god opens to transcendence, you are one with what you call “God.” Thus the god image introduces you to your own transcendence...that is why, to appreciate the language of religion, which is metaphorical, one must constantly distinguish the denotation, or the concrete fact, from the connotation, or transcendent message.¹⁵

¹⁴ Campbell, Thou Art That 18.

¹⁵ Campbell, Thou Art That 19.

Campbell in “The Power of Myth” interview says, “In Oriental thinking you experience God without form. Here [points to his forehead]. This is heaven.”¹⁶ Thus, the experience of the sublime is of tremendous space, energy and power and it is diminishment of your own ego that causes consciousness to expand to this recognition.

In the West, “God made the world and God and the world are not the same.”¹⁷ In fact, it is heresy for anyone else to say “I and the Father are One,” as Jesus did in John 10:30. The best that can be achieved in Western teachings is a *relationship* with God: a further experience of duality. There is no equivalent for this distinction between creator and creature in the East. The Brahmins of India observed on the issue, “*Tat tvam asi*, that is you.” Kant observed, too, that the “unity itself is of the mind and may not be attributed to any supposed substance, person, or ‘Ground of Being.’”¹⁸ According to basic Hinduism and Buddhism, the image of God itself becomes the ultimate barrier. Thoreau concurred and juxtaposed the open religion of nature with the closed walled-in religion of the churches.

These and other Hindu ideas connect to Kant almost directly and are apparent throughout the work of Thoreau. For the purpose of showing other Kantian influence on transcendentalist thinkers and Thoreau, in summary:

- 1) The Hindu account of personal freedom and identity analyzes the subject-object from the point of view of the subject; Kant does as well from the perspective of an outsider looking in.

¹⁶ Joseph Campbell, interview, “The Power of Myth,” Bill Moyers, ed. (Apostrophe S Productions 1988).

¹⁷ Campbell, Thou Art That 11.

¹⁸ Campbell, Thou Art That 13.

2) For Kant, it is a precondition of human reasoning that there be a subject who is reasoning. As with Hinduism, Kantian personal identity is essentially what thinks when the phrase “I think” is used.

3) Furthermore, Kant believes that space and time are simply the structure in which appearances are presented to the understanding. The subject itself exists outside space and time, outside the structure of appearances. It is the eternal reasoning which understands and interprets temporal appearances: in essence, the Kantian model of personal identity is a third person account of the Indian ātman. The Upanisads make the claim, you are ātman; the Critique claims that every human is an ātman.

For Kant, as in Hinduism, freedom is freeing the will from temporal desires. When the will is directed by a desire, it is part of a temporal causal chain that stretches back to the first instant of the temporal universe. In Thoreau’s Journal, August 28, 1841, he says of Hindu scripture,

The very indistinctness of its theogony implies a sublime truth. It does not allow the reader to rest in any supreme first cause, but directly hints of a supremer still which created the last. The creator is still behind, increate. The divinity is so fleeting that its attributes are never expressed.¹⁹

Kant says when the will is directed by pure reason (or, “mind” in Hinduism), action is being caused by the rational subject, or ātman, and this comparison necessarily arises from the first-person perspective. This comparison is reminiscent of the relationship between Brahman and ātman. Kant also makes the point that we cannot know whether

¹⁹ Thoreau, Journal 1:276.

there is a God (Brahman), from the third person perspective as we cannot know the universe as it exists independently of subject-object relationships.

Kant had a profound impact on the Western world, making these extant Eastern perspectives more accessible to western thinkers. At least partially because of his work American Transcendentalists were open to Indic texts rapidly becoming available in Concord. The ideas contained in the Indic translations indeed found fertile ground in America. Transcendentalists read much to confirm their emerging pragmatic idealism.

Indic texts available to Thoreau outlined a totally different religious perspective from most western doctrine taught at the time. In the biblically grounded Christian West, ethics—good and evil—lay out duality at the onset. The absolutes of good (to which you must align yourself) and evil (nature corrupted after the fall) is a system in which nature is held at arm's length and every natural impulse is sinful unless purified and corrected. In the East, the processes of nature cannot be evil. Thoreau's view mostly aligns East on this point as attested by his writings: for Thoreau nature is at times cruel but he casts little judgment on its actions.

Another point of differentiation, at least at first glance, is the imagery of the End of the World. Jesus describes it as a horrific time and that “This generation will not pass away, but these things will have come to pass” (Mark, 13). And since these things did not come to pass, Campbell says,

The Church, which interprets everything concretely, taking the denotation instead of the connotation as the term of the message, said that, no, this

did not come to pass but it is going to come to pass, because what Jesus meant by generation is the generation of Man.²⁰

This is not necessarily the final word, Campbell continues:

Now in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, part of the great mid-century discovery of ancient texts, Jesus says, “The Kingdom will not come by expectation. The Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth, and men do not see it.” Not seeing it, we live in the world as though it were not the Kingdom. Seeing the Kingdom—*that* is the end of the World.

The Hindu texts concur. The temporal world is but illusion (the veil of *maya* in Hinduism) and Truth resides eternally outside of space and time. This realization (“Seeing the Kingdom”) connotes the end of the (temporal) world. Thoreau’s sense of sound connected him to the ground of being—the ground of one’s own being—unlike available readings of the Christian texts and gave him a documented avenue for transcendence.

The reception of the Indic ideas in Concord was based on a certain affinity between Indic and New England temperament and circumstances that brought America and India literarily and philosophically close in the early nineteenth century, in spite of geographic distance. Yankee independence corresponds well to the idea that the ground of one’s own being was an unfettered avenue to God unique to each individual. As Campbell says, “a dogma that tells you precisely what kind of meaning you shall experience in a symbol, explaining what kind of effect it should have upon you,”²¹ spells trouble for those who may not have the same reaction as “a council of Levantine bishops in the fourth century.” Politically, India had much in common with America as well: before the independence of the colonies, America shared the yoke of Britain with India.

²⁰ Campbell, Thou Art That 19.

²¹ Campbell, Thou Art That 29.

In fact, Lord Cornwallis surrendered America at Yorktown in 1781 and secured India at Mysore in 1792, a short ten year difference. The trade of the newly independent America activated the import of recently published Indian ideas to the West. It was sailors, then, and traders from the East India Company of tea, spices, silk, paintings and other commodities, that opened new vistas of knowledge to the New World. R.K. Dhawan says in Henry David Thoreau, A Study in Indian Influence, “Historically speaking, the re-awakened interest in Indian civilization coincided with the economic and colonial expansion of those countries in Europe which required new markets for the products of their factories and workshops.” Missionaries, too, played a key role. At home clergy were closest to Indian scripture.

Reverend William Bentley, a Unitarian clergyman and linguist, used his contacts with sailors to give him early access to Indian books, according to Dhawan. His high regard for Indian literature was influential in New England. Before Bentley’s time, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, Puritan Cotton Mather created a bridge between Madras and Yale University. In the 1720s, he published India Christiana, a manual for converting the Indians, and sent outreach copies to German Protestant missionaries in India.²²

In India, Raja Rammohan Roy was reaching West. He translated, with explanation, the Vedanta in Bengali from the original Sanskrit. The Bengali translation was followed by An Abridgement of the Vedant, a shortened English translation in 1816. Also in 1816, he published two other translations in English—the Cena Upanishad and the Ishopanishad. Roy’s work was housed in Concord and Dhawan says, “...this volume of the Ishopanishad was ‘very likely recommended to Emerson by his aunt, Mary Moody

²² Dhawan 11.

Emerson' when he was a student." In 1832, Roy published Translation of several Principal Books, Passages, and the Texts of the Veds, and of Some Controversial Works on Brahaminical Theology. Dhawan explains:

This was perhaps one of the most important Oriental books read in Concord, for it contained translations and the expository essay written by Roy. "To the extent Roy was responsible for the interest in the Orient, amongst Americans in general, and amongst New Englanders in particular," says Moore, "to that extent was he an instrument for the formation of the ideas of Emerson and his associates, with their love of Oriental literature, philosophy and religion."²³

To show the scope and detail of Roy's volumes, to follow are several essays by Roy included in the Ishopanishad: "Translation of an Abridgment of the Vedant, or Resolution of all the Veds; the most celebrated and revered Work of Brahaminical Theology; establishing the Unity of the Supreme Being, and that He alone is the object of Propitiation and Worship"; "Translation of the Uthurv-Ved"; "Translation into English of a Sungskrit Tract, inculcating the Divine Worship; esteemed by those who believe in the Revelation of the Veds, as most appropriate to the Nature of the Supreme Being"; "A Defence of Hindoo Theism, in reply to the Attack of an Advocate of Idolatry, at Madras"; "A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Veds; in reply to an Apology for the present State of Hindoo Worship." In The Orient in American Transcendentalism, Arthur Christy states the "archaic form of spelling may indicate the source of some of the spellings by the Concord men."²⁴ The absorption of these translations and myriad others²⁵ into Concord intellectual life, reflected the depth of study by Thoreau and his circle of the Hindu tracts.

²³ Dhawan 13.

²⁴ Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism, (New York: Octagon Books, 1978) 289.

²⁵ Robert Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 116-296. Sattelmeyer lists the following Indic oriented texts as part of Thoreau's reading: Bibliotheca Indica, Travels in the Regions of the Upper and Lower Amoor and the Russian Acquisitions on the confines of India and

The translated books from India available to Thoreau in Concord were extensive (see note page 16). Almost every major work from the East was available, if not in Harvard Library, which Thoreau visited and borrowed from, then in Emerson's personal library of which he had free reign. Among the texts listed in Thoreau's Reading by Robert Sattelmeyer are the Bhagavad Gita and Hitopadesa, a traditional collection of morality tales, translations of Kalidasa's Sakuntala, Jayadeva's Gitagovinda, The Institutes of Hindu Law (The Laws of Manu), Mahabharata (four editions), Puranas, plus the translation of several book passages and texts of the Vedas, some works on Brahmunicipal theology and lectures on the Vedanta, among at least a dozen others including works on Indian dramas and non-theological texts.

This absorption of all major translations available at the time shows the depth of Thoreau's exposure to the key ideas of India. His was no casual reading. Hodder says:

...Emerson invariably receives more sustained treatment in studies of early American Orientalism than does his protégé Thoreau. ... (but) Thoreau's case is far more interesting. Whereas Emerson's allusions to Eastern lore seem decorously constrained and even domesticated within his characteristically urbane

China, Calidas: Sacontala, or the Fatal Ring, A Code of Gentoo Laws, or Ordinations of the Pundits made from the original written in the Shanscrit Language, The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men, Without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery, Histoire de la Litterature Hindoui et Hindoustani, Gotama called Aksapada, Hindu Laws, Hitopadesa: The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma, Isvarakrsna: The Sankhya Karika or Memorial Verses on the Sankhya Philosophy, Jimutavahana: Two Treatises on the Hindu Law of Inheritance, Kalidasa, Mahabharata, Mahabharata, Bhagvat-geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon, Mahabharata: Nala and Damayanti and Other Poems, Manu: Institutes of Hindu Law with the Gloss of Culluca, Puranas: Bhagavatpurana, Puranas: Vishnupurana, Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages and Texts of the Veds and some Controversial Works on Brahmunicipal Theology, Sadananda Yogindra, Saddharmapundarika, Vedas: Rgveda, Vedas: Samaveda, Bhasha Parichcheda and its Commentary: The Siddhanta Mukta Vali, an Exposition of the Nyaya Philosophy, among other volumes related to philosophy, history of India, nature, poetry, and religion.

Arthur Christy in The Orient in American Transcendentalism, 283-301, breaks down the contents of these volumes on the sacred and secular literatures of the religions of India further. For example: In the J. Cockburn Thomson edition of the Bhagvad Gita in Thoreau's collection, a 119 page introduction includes the following subtitles: "On the Origin of Philosophical Ideas of India," "On the Schools of Indian Philosophy," "The Sankhya System," "The Yoga, of Patanjali," "The Philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita." Christy also illuminates principles of knowledge covered in the texts. See p. 283-103.

²⁵ Alan D. Hodder, "Ex Oriente Lux": Thoreau's Ecstasies and the Hindu Texts," Harvard Theological Review, 86:4, 408.

cosmopolitanism, Thoreau fashioned such allusions as links in his overall imaginative vision.²⁶

Even a cursory reader of Thoreau's published works, Alan Hodder states in "Ex Oriente Lux": Thoreau's Ecstasies and the Hindu Texts," can clearly see this fact. When collaborating with Emerson on the 'Ethnical Scriptures' column of the transcendentalist magazine The Dial, Thoreau used selections from the Laws of Manu, the "Sayings of Confucius," and the "Chinese Four Books." Large portions of the "Sunday" and "Monday" sections of A Week are taken up by extended citations, with commentary, of various Eastern texts, especially the Laws of Manu and Charles Wilkins's translation of the Bhagavad Gita.²⁷

In addition to available translations, trade contacts, sailors and missionaries, America came to know India's literary heritage through German scholars. Sanskrit studies began in Germany in the first years of the nineteenth century. Kant's influence has been mentioned, and also A. W. Schlegel published an edition of the Bhagavad Gita with a Latin translation in 1823. His younger brother, Friedrich Schlegel, wrote The Language and Wisdom of India in 1808.

In addition to reading, others in Thoreau's circle promoted discussion of things Oriental. In 1836, instigated by Frederick Henry Hedge whenever he was in Boston visiting from his pulpit in Bangor, Maine, a group formed that included George Putnam, George Ripley, Hedge, and Emerson. Orestes Brownson, James Freeman Clarke, Convers Francis, and Bronson Alcott joined by the second meeting just eleven days after

²⁶ Alan D. Hodder, "Ex Oriente Lux": Thoreau's Ecstasies and the Hindu Texts," Harvard Theological Review, 86:4, 408.

²⁷ Hodder, "Ex Oriente Lux" 408.

the first. Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Pebody and Thoreau came to be included later.²⁸

Though they did not always agree, virtually all Transcendentalists were drawn to Asian religions. Transcendentalism, historian Arthur Versluis says, more than interpreting an unusual affinity with Asian religion attempted to come to grips with a newly emerging intellectual movement on par with that of European Orientalism.

Versluis says,

What Walter Harding says of Thoreau—“It is obvious to any serious student of Thoreau that a sympathy with, and knowledge of, the great works of Oriental literature permeates his writings.”—is equally true not only of Emerson but also many intellectuals affiliated with the Transcendentalist movement.”²⁹

In fact, the transcendental group served each as a “sounding board” of sorts, building on each others insights. Emerson, indeed, had great influence on Thoreau. It was Emerson who encouraged a just-graduated Thoreau to start keeping a journal in October 1837, who housed him at times, and who promoted his work to Margaret Fuller for The Dial. In the fall of 1836, Emerson’s first book, Nature, was published and in April 1937 Thoreau checked it out of Harvard’s library. He checked it out again in the third week of June.

Emerson’s Nature was no modest little exercise in nature writing... Though written in language that has not fully shaken off the pulpit and that can therefore mislead one into thinking Emerson a spokesman for Christian values and Christian worldview, Emerson’s real purpose in Nature is radicalism itself.³⁰

²⁸ Richardson 72.

²⁹ Versluis 3.

³⁰ Richardson 21.

Though not always obvious with his style of language, Nature shows Emerson's remarkable openness to science. He believed that to study nature and know oneself came at last to the same thing. Like the Hindus, for him the laws of nature were the laws of human nature.

The belief that a just and good life could be based upon natural law was reflected in Emerson's journal of September 1837. He says, "I get no further than my old doctrine that the Whole is in each man, and that a man may if he will as truly and fully illustrate the laws of Nature in his own experience as in the History of Rome or Palestine or England."³¹ This orientation also sets the present up as high as any past epoch. It was enabling for Thoreau to connect to the essential uniformity of human nature, past and present. In his Journal of March 23, 1842, Thoreau says, "In my brain is the Sanskrit which contains the history of the primitive times. The Vedas and their Angas are not so ancient as my serenest contemplations. My mind contemplates them, as Brahma his scribe."³² Nostalgia for past greatness was misplaced. Man could achieve as highly as any "golden age" sage. However, unlike most transcendentalists and Europeans who based all their Orientalism on texts, Thoreau interpreted Asian religious texts, according to his bent, on lived experience.

Thoreau carved out space and time for that experience in a cultural climate of strange interpretations and outright falsifications of the East during the early years of contact: "one remembers the "Tibetans' being called cannibals, or Hinduism referred to as the 'fables' of 'stupid Indostan.'"³³ In general interest magazines of the day such as The Atlantic Monthly, The Christian Examiner, and the North American Review, the

³¹ Richardson 23.

³² Thoreau, Journal 1:344.

³³ Verslius 79.

East was also being discovered and it was barbarous, or mystical, or bestial, and rarely shown as equal to the intellectual depths of Christendom. Thoreau, however, in his work with Emerson on the Transcendentalist periodical, The Dial, shows no indication of this general disfavor with which many Americans regarded the “heathen” Hindu.

In the open-mindedness of its editors toward Eastern religions, The Dial is unusual even among Transcendentalist periodicals. Although later periodicals included articles sympathetic to the Asians traditions they discussed, no other Transcendentalist journal was so consistently supportive of non-Judeo-Christian, non-Western religious writings.³⁴

Other early Transcendentalist periodicals—The Western Messenger, The Present, The Harbinger, and The Spirit of the Age, seem to reflect popular ignorance to varying degrees, according to Verslius. Stories in their pages reveal foolish “heathens” that are “subversive” and in other ways denigrate the East. Orientals are treated as curiosities with little value to America.

Not so in The Dial. Even in reviewing classical text on Persius, The Dial published Thoreau’s critique that emphasized the eastern tenet of present moment awareness. In the first issue, organized in the fall of 1838, Emerson pushed Editor Margaret Fuller to accept Thoreau’s essay on Persius. In it, Thoreau is critical of Persius’s negativity, and essentially asks how to apply his classical satire to a lived belief. He picks two lines for a careful reading:

Two lines, “It is not easy for every one to take murmurs and low / Whispers out of the temple—*et aperto vivere voto*—and live with open vow,” permit Thoreau to insist on the distinction between the “man of true religion” who finds his open temple in the whole universe, and the “jealous privacy” of those who try to “carry on a secret commerce with the gods” whose hiding place is in some building. The distinction is between the open religion of the fields and woods, and the secret, closed religion of the churches.³⁵

³⁴ Verslius 190.

³⁵ Richardson 76.

Thoreau then takes Persius's rebuke against living casually, *ex tempore*, and takes it as a "summons to live outside time, to live more fully than our ordinary consciousness of chronological time permits. 'The life of a wise man,' says Thoreau, 'is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time.'"³⁶ For Thoreau, all questions rely on the present for their solution. Richardson continues, "Thoreau's Persius has gone beyond Stoicism to transcendentalism, insisting on open religious feelings as opposed to closed institutional dogmatic creeds, and on a passionate articulation of the absolute value of the present moment." This present moment awareness fits almost exactly into Hindu philosophical ideas of transcendence.

³⁶ Richardson 76.

The Noblest Sense

One reason for the divide between East and West in religious matters was the distinction in the way scriptures were and are taught. Perhaps for reasons of ease of dissemination, Christian doctrine was well printed, documented, and spread throughout the known world via the printing press. In the east, however, verbal transmission was still the primary means of scripture dissemination, from teacher to individual student. A shroud of mystery seems to encompass the teachings. From the medieval Parama-Samhita (6.2-4):

Very well, I shall describe to you the supreme character of the *mantras*, their key letters and the way to use them. This is however a secret...It is by *mantra* that God is drawn to you. It is by *mantra* that He is released. By secret utterance these are *mantras*, and therefore these are not to be published. Their form is not to be written and their features not to be described.

Authority is primarily vested in the oral word. The “prevailing attitude among traditional cultures toward the written word,” according to Guy L. Beck in Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound, is that transmission of sacred power and authority is not to be trusted to the written.

Western obsession with the visual, according to Beck, shows an “imbalance in the world of ideas, represented by an over-reliance on visual and written manifestations at the expense of the sonic...”³⁷ This “is said to reflect an acute phenomenon in Western culture itself: the overwhelming triumph of images and the visual dimension of life in

³⁷ Guy L. Beck, Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 1.

every sphere.” This reflects a deeper bias, Beck says, toward vision as the “noblest sense’ and toward geometry *qua* graphic-spatial conceptualization as the most exact way of communicating knowledge...inherited...from rationalist thought [Decartes] and from the empiricists [Hobbes and Locke].”³⁸ Beck continues,

Indeed, John Locke’s famous dictum “The perception of the mind is most aptly explained by words relating to the sight” has proven to be one of the most stubborn tenets of the empiricist. The situation continues today as “anthropologists of all persuasions have been in overwhelming agreement that their knowledge is based upon and validated by, observation.”³⁹

However, the oral recitation of scripture is a common dimension of almost every scriptural tradition. Howard Coward in Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions says, “The scholarly study of scriptures of the various religions will remain seriously limited and one-sided if it does not become more sensitive to the fundamental oral character of scriptures such as the Veda, the Qur’an, and even the Gospels.”⁴⁰ As the Hindu experience of the divine is shown to be fundamentally sonic, or oral/aural, the theological position of sacred sound constitutes a kind of central, peak experience: it is this heart and soul that held Thoreau’s attention in the West.

In fact, oral chant among different traditions such as Shintoist, Buddhist, Brahman, Moslem and Hebrew as well as that of Western Gregorian reveal a striking similarity: a monotone, one-note recitation that includes fluctuating pitch. The goal of sacred chanting, one obvious part of the sonic element in religion, is to uncover truth more quickly than text. Like a song that pierces memory, sacred chant can bring the listener lost in its rhythm to understanding rapidly and seemingly without conscious

³⁸ Beck, 1.

³⁹ Beck, 1.

⁴⁰ Howard Coward, Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religion, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988) x.

thought. Gerhard Ebeling in Word and Faith says understanding does not culminate in language but *through* language. “The word itself has hermeneutic function.”⁴¹ The job of hermeneutics is to bring clarity to text or religious acts and unveiling or uncovering truth lying within the text releases power. As Beck says, such truth must be experienced and sacred sound is a “fast track” to transcendence. Thoreau, though he does elevate the written word (“It is the work of art nearest to life itself.”⁴²), it is because “It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of ancient man’s thought becomes a modern man’s speech.”⁴³ That speech (sound) works as a way to uncover truth behind the temporal world is clear. The veil (Indian *maya*) hides this from most. Thoreau says in Walden:

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. . . . If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence—that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality.⁴⁴

Truth exists outside of time and space—is, in fact, eternal. Sacred chant, music, natural sound, poetry and speech can pierce its temporal covering for Thoreau.

Of course there is an extensive visual dimension of Hinduism that has been well documented by Western scholars. Beck says, “The concept of ‘seeing’ the divine image or icon has been particularly stressed in modern scholarship. For example, ‘To a Hindu, image-worship is the air he breathes; the food of his soul and the fountainhead of his

⁴¹ Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963) 318.

⁴² Thoreau, Walden 67.

⁴³ Thoreau, Walden 67.

⁴⁴ Thoreau, Walden 62.

hopes, both for this world and for the other.”⁴⁵ Temples, with their myriad carvings of the material world and their central icon, are well known in the West. The audible or sonic dimension of Hinduism has just begun to get attention by western scholars such as Madeleine Biardeau, Lilian Silburn, Andre Padous, Harold Coward, and Frits Staal, according to Beck. The dawning recognition today of sonic importance in Hinduism, Thoreau felt intuitively and was reinforced through his readings of eastern philosophy.

Sonic realms permeate Hinduism. The ambiance of traditional Hindu festivals, *pujas*, or other family events consist of a cacophony of sound: drums bells, gongs, cymbals, conch shells, flutes, lutes, and vocalizations. Temples and sacred spaces, especially their outer rooms, are not silent oasis points to the Hindu and this aspect may seem irrational, profane and chaotic to an observer: “On closer inspection, however, one finds that what are being heard are specific sets of ‘prescribed sound’ backed by an arsenal of oral and written sacred tradition.”⁴⁶ Sacred, sonic linguistic and non-linguistic modes (sounds of objects employed in worship, interior sounds heard in meditation, and musical sounds in both), reflect the nexus of Hindu thought: the universe as an emanation from cosmic sound, individual salvation through the use of sonic techniques, the nature of sound as an eternal substance in itself, the divine origin of sound including speech, language, and music. These tenets overlap within Sanskrit texts and would have been apparent within the texts Thoreau was reading in the 1840s.

Recovery of the sonic experience of religion appealed to Thoreau, especially as it applies to Nature. Hindu lore gives a voice to Nature unlike that of Christendom. The principle of *Vāk*, sacred speech which is subtle and eternal, applies to natural sounds as

⁴⁵ Beck, 4.

⁴⁶ Beck, 6.

well. The sounds of animals, stones, wind are also considered forms of speech according to this tenet. Beck says, *vāk* is a feminine noun that means the language of human and animal life (speech, talk, voice, language), the sound of animate and inanimate objects like a drum or stones pressing, a word, saying, phrase, sentence, statement and speech personified. Every sound, in essence, is a kind of speech though all not accessible to most humans. Beck says,

This language of nature and earth extended beyond the visible realm and into the non-visible heavens. ... *Vāk* is said to reside in the “upper-half of heaven,” with only a portion of herself known to mortals. The most famous verse in the Rg-Veda which describes *Vāk* (1.164.45) provides us with the clue to her mysterious and composite nature: “*Vāk* was divided in four parts [*catvari vāk*]. These [wise priests] with insight know. Three parts, which are hidden, mortals do not activate; the fourth part they speak.”⁴⁷

The importance of *Vāk*, or sound commonality between man and nature, in Hindu lore is detailed in this Satapatha-Brahmana myth of the rain god Indra and his lightning bolt with its accompanying sound of thunder, excerpted here in length:

Indra having hurled his thunderbolt at Vrtra hid himself together with the gods. They did not know whether Vrtra was killed. So they requested Vayu, the swiftest of them, to go and report whether Vrtra had died or not. Vayu asked for a reward and was promised the first share in the Soma-draught. Then Vayu brought the happy news that Vrtra was killed. Now Indra became jealous of Vayu and asked for a share of Soma for himself together with Vayu. Indra, being asked what would be gained by giving him a share with Vayu in the same cup, replied that by giving him a share the speech would speak distinctly. The gods granted Indra’s request, but then a quarrel started between Indra and Vayu about the division of their shares. Indra insisted that he should have one half of the cup and Vayu should be given only one fourth of it, while Vayu made the same claim for himself. They went to Prajapati [mind] for decision. Prajapati divided the cup in two equal parts and allotted the first half to Vayu. Thus Indra received only one-fourth of the cup. At this Indra said that his share being only one-fourth of the cup that much [one-fourth] of speech would speak distinctly. Now the Brahmana concludes by stating hence only that fourth part of speech is intelligible, which men speak, but that fourth part of speech which beasts speak is unintelligible; and

⁴⁷ Beck, 26.

that fourth part of speech which birds speak is unintelligible; and that fourth part of speech which small vermin here speak is unintelligible.⁴⁸

Prior to Indra's part in this contest, it is said that "Vāk spoke in only one fashion, which was more of a plangent sound without articulation: 'It was just a sound and did not have distinctive sound units, which constitute human speech... When Indra received a share, he separated sound from sound...'"⁴⁹ This separation made the sounds of nature and the animal world "unintelligible" for humankind.

The personification of speech in the goddess Vāk is revealed in this Rg-Vedic (10.125) and Atharva-Vedic hymn (4.30.1-8):

...I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. From there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head. I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures, so much I have become in my greatness.⁵⁰

In essence, Vāk gives voice to nature. She is represented and applied in Vedic ritual in the form of mantra, or "applied Vāk." *Mantra* (instrument of thought, speech, sacred text, chant of a Vedic hymn) is considered the sound form of reality. "Sanskrit words were not just arbitrary labels assigned to phenomena; they were the sound forms of objects, actions, and attributes, related to the corresponding reality in the same way as visual forms, and different only in being perceived by the ear and not by the eye."⁵¹ The roll of speech, of mantra in Vedic ritual is bound with cultural notions of cosmic creation, mythology, and poetry and becomes recast as pure cosmic sound, detached from

⁴⁸ Beck, 27.

⁴⁹ Beck, 26.

⁵⁰ *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, Trans. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, (London: np, 1981), 63.

⁵¹ Frits Stall, "Ritual, Mantras and the Origin of Language," Prof. R. N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume (Poona: Ajanta, 1984) 413.

linguistic meaning, in the later concept of Nada-Brahman. Regardless, sound, whether articulate or inarticulate, is seen as an eternal. Beck sites P. Chakravarti in Linguistic Speculations of the Hindus (82-83) “there is no cognition of the cause that might destroy it.” Sound, pervading and mysterious, features throughout the Hindu cosmos.

The net result of this emphasis is a revealed path to know Self, otherwise obscured to man. Thoreau uses an example in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” to reveal man’s misdirection:

I have read in a Hindoo book, that ‘there was king’s son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father’s ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul,” continues the Hindoo philosopher, “from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*.”⁵²

Sound is Thoreau’s holy teacher. He says in Walden: “There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear.”⁵³ Sonic versus other perceptual knowledge is critical for him for the unveiling of Self. He continues, “I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be.” Similarly, Krishna tells Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, “Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of *is* and *is not*.”⁵⁴ I argue Thoreau depicts intellect as a diviner of truth: “The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things.”⁵⁵ In Hinduism, the Sword of Manjushri depicts this same idea. Manjushri is shown with a

⁵² Thoreau, Walden 62-63.

⁵³ Thoreau, Walden 85.

⁵⁴ Bhagavad Gita, Trans. Swami Prabhavananda, Christopher Isherwood, Forward Aldous Huxley, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), 9.

⁵⁵ Thoreau, Walden 64.

flaming sword over his head. The sword is to distinguish the merely temporal from the eternal; it is “the sword that distinguishes that which is enduring from that which is merely passing.”⁵⁶ Thoreau’s perception of the intellect as a “cleaver,” a separator creating a rift in the “secret of things,” is repaired by sound. In A Week, Thoreau describes a far-off drummer:

These simple sounds related us to the stars. Ay, there was a logic in them so convincing that the combined sense of mankind could never make me doubt their conclusions. I stop my habitual thinking, as if the plough had suddenly run deeper in its furrow through the crust of the world.⁵⁷

Using the second meaning of cleaver, “to adhere, cling, be faithful to,” makes the case that if used correctly, the mind/intellect can reveal life’s secret. Thoreau, with his playful interest in language would have been aware of both meanings.

To Thoreau and Emerson and to Hindu philosophers, both language and nature are symbolic.⁵⁸ The primary impulses come from the mind. Richardson says,

As Emerson said in the “Language” chapter of Nature, “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.” Since it was also true for Emerson that words were signs of natural facts, his theory of language held that words were signs of signs. In other words, both language and nature were symbolic.⁵⁹

This symbolism points to the primacy of mind over both matter and words. Though Thoreau agreed, he never lost interest in language itself. “He loved language, loved to

⁵⁶ Campbell, “The Power of Myth”.

⁵⁷ Thoreau, A Week 141.

⁵⁸ Thoreau, Journal 1:243, 231, 274, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ed. William H. Gilman et al, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-1983) 5:221.

⁵⁹ Richardson 94.

play with words...He would talk about the white darkness in the winter woods, or the household warmth of a snow-covered tree...he describes the ‘blancness’ of a snow-covered scene ...talks about ‘soular rays.’”⁶⁰ His poetic predilection of “roping in” all available meanings gives his best writing a richly allusive texture. This corresponds to the significance of language for the Vedic priests. Each Sanskrit word conveys myriad meaning. The Vedic priests and poets studied, and impressed upon future generations to study, the influence of sound on “human consciousness and physiology by orienting the perceptual centers toward the inner acoustic space of the unseen.”⁶¹ From a high level of poetic intuition, the Vedic poets are said to have “heard” the original Veda. From this comes the concept of language as sacred, as poetry.

The intimate relationship of Vāk (speech) with Prajapati (mind) as shown in the earlier Indra myth excerpt, ensures the promulgation of intelligible speech and this, as Beck says,

...becomes more explicit only when suggested by the analogy of the interdependence of Mind and Speech commonly perceived in the phenomenon of language....Vāk [is] a complete entity of creative speech energy holding together her subjective and objective aspects in perfect synthesis...such that the earliest meaning of the word *Brahman* is “sacred word...”⁶²

Vedic ritual language (mantra) and the Sanskrit language in general is *samskrta*, (“well-formed,” considered the reproduction in sound of the structure of reality). Religious historian Gerardus Van der Leeuw makes the Vedic connection between sacred language and sacred sound itself:

⁶⁰ Richardson 94.

⁶¹ Beck 23.

⁶² Beck 29.

The word...is a decisive power: whoever utters words sets power in motion...Raising the voice, emphasis, connection by rhythm or rhyme—all this endows the word with heightened energy...[such that] singing, rejoicing and mourning generate greater potency than mere speaking...More important still is the vast power which always emanated from such cult terms as Hallelujah, Kyrie eleison, Amen, Om; a mystical tone-color is attached to them, while their incomprehensibility enhances their numinous power...Words possess the greatest power when they combine into some formula, some phrase definite in the sound of its terms, their timbre and their rhythm.⁶³

Vedic words were conceived as a formula for creating, conveying, concentrating and realizing intentional and efficient thought.

Thoreau shows affinity for this emphasis on word choice. He reveled in breaking down language and then building it up again. In his March 20, 1842 Journal, Thoreau says,

A plain sentence, where every word is rooted in the soil, is indeed flowery and verdurous. It has the beauty and variety of mosaic with the strength and compactness of masonry...If the words were sufficiently simple and answering to the thing to be expressed, our sentences would be as blooming as wreaths of evergreen and flowers...Simplicity is exuberant.⁶⁴

He uses words as a way to reach for figural richness, as a way to bring personal experience into play. “The unpretending truth of a simile,” he notes in his February journal, “implies sometimes such distinctness in the conception as only experience could have supplied.” In essence, Thoreau agreed with Vedic seers to whom language, its correct pronunciation and use, was central—enough so that two entire hymns to speech (10.125 and 10.71) are featured in the Rg-Veda itself. One personifies speech as Vāk and one speaks of the origins of sacred word, or language, as developed in three distinct stages: (1) inarticulate speech, (2) primitive articulate speech, and (3) language proper.

The Indian grammarian Patanjali stressed the proper use of words: “That man who

⁶³ Beck 34.

⁶⁴ Thoreau, Journal, 1:343.

knows the secret of words attains unending happiness in the next world...The great God is Sound...”⁶⁵ and man should live in imitation.

There is no doubt that Thoreau was finding confirmation in Indic texts of his belief that language has a primary relation to nature. He also was engaged by Richard Trent’s On the Study of Words and Charles Kraitsir who argued that all languages are composed of a few basic sounds common to all humankind. By Trent’s and Kraitsir’s emphasis on *spoken* language, Thoreau saw again that the core of language reflects the natural world. Thoreau response was exuberant to Trench’s expansion of Emerson’s idea that language is “fossil poetry.” Language suited the term “fossil poetry” for Thoreau because it captured history inherently in its makeup: it symbolized its own beginnings. For instance, Trench showed that “rivals” meant dwellers along the banks of the same stream and that “sierra,” as in Sierra Nevada, is a name for a ragged ridge and means “saw,” and more. Thoreau loved Trench’s treatment of “words we use to set forth any transcending delight,” like transport, rapture, ravishment, ecstasy—“transport, that which *carries* us, as rapture, or ravishment, that which *snatches* us out of and above ourselves; and exstasy is very nearly the same, only drawn from the Greeks.”⁶⁶ Thoreau’s response: “These are the words I want. This is the effect of music. I am rapt away by it, out of myself. These are truly poetical words. I am inspired, elevated, expanded.”⁶⁷

The timber and rhythm of language was powerful for Thoreau, and never more so as when it revealed itself in nature. From A Week:

All these sounds, the crowing of cocks, the baying of dogs, and the hum of insects at noon, are the evidence of nature’s health or *sound* state. Such is the never-

⁶⁵ Beck 64.

⁶⁶ Richardson 292.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Richardson 292.

failing beauty and accuracy of language, the most perfect art in the world; the chisel of a thousand years retouches it.⁶⁸

Thoreau's view is in sync with the Hindu theological idea that the inarticulate speech of Nature as well as human language is integral to the structure of the cosmos. As Campbell says in "The Power of Myth," the "Precise choice of words has implications that go past the word. Then you get what Joyce calls the radiance: the epiphany. The epiphany is the showing through of the essence."

⁶⁸ Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1963) 31.

Sonic Context

Literary and historical scholars have reviewed the influence of “Oriental religions” on Transcendentalism throughout the past century, though only indirectly mentioning the sense of sound as a motivator for Thoreau. Throughout any research, especially of foreign traditions, preconceptions and expectations interpret and transform data to suit. Motivations and preconditions determine the lens through which the new tradition is viewed. Raymond Schwab and Wilhelm Halbfass studied the meeting of East and European West, Edward Said’s work focused on how Europeans tended to distort Asian and Middle Eastern religious and cultural traditions, Arthur Christy studied the beginnings of American interest in Oriental thought in The Orient in American Transcendentalism, and Alan D. Hodder’s Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness reveals Thoreau’s religious expression and experience, among much other scholarly work. Prior to these, German scholars like Hegel, Goethe, the Schlegels, and early Platonist and Neoplatonist work which appear to have numerous correspondences with Vedantic and Buddhist teachings, have influenced Western perspectives on spirituality.

The characteristic features and elements of work under discussion have a base, however, where the ideas toe a common line. Henry Thoreau’s common line is that most of his experiences were germinated by a sonic element. Sound, for Thoreau, indicated the energy behind nature, an idea he noticed in eastern texts. He seemed able to step

outside his own religio- and ethnocentric perspective to incorporate Indic thought to the extent of setting up Walden as an experiment of life as a yogi.

In a November 1849 letter to his friend H.O. Blake, Thoreau quotes from a translation of the Harivansa regarding humans that are aware of their “inheritance:” “Free in this world, as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the *yoga* gather in Brahma in the certain fruit of their works.”⁶⁹ In the same letter, Thoreau produces another quote from the Harivansa (checked out of the Harvard College Library on September 11, 1849):

The yogin, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. Divine forms tranverse him without tearing him, and united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts, as animating original matter.

That Thoreau was writing this, and incorporating parts of the Harivansa into Walden, years after living in the woods testifies to his attention to eastern spirituality long after his living experiment at Walden. Bradley Dean notes in Letters,

Interestingly, Thoreau returned to this two volume set [the Harivansa] in May 1851, when he was revising his early Walden manuscript, and extracted both of these passages into his journal immediately after which he wrote, “Like some other preachers, I have added my texts, derived from the Chinese and Hindoo scriptures, long after my discourse [that is, the version of Walden he was working on at the time] was written.”⁷⁰

The lifestyle of a yogi was one that Thoreau consistently returned to, in thought if not in living condition, long after Walden.

Simplifying life to the extent of Walden, to the extent of the life of a Hindu seer, and returning to the ideas of the east later in life, suited Thoreau because sounds and

⁶⁹ Thoreau, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, Bradley P. Dean, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) 49.

⁷⁰ Thoreau, Letters 200.

ecstatic episodes are treated as points along a continuum of transcendence in Indic perspective. Christian teachings of the day did not address transcendence through sonic perceptions. In fact, as outlined earlier, Christian teachings focused primarily on the world of good and evil, the world of duality which Thoreau had already pierced with his moments of ecstasy. Living within the temporal world was not Thoreau's aim. Campbell states Indic view and what could have easily come from Thoreau: "The tick, tick, tick of time shuts out eternity. We live in the field of time, but what is living in the field of time is the eternal principal: Brahman. We call it God, but that personifies it. Whatever eternity is, is here, right now, and no where else, or everywhere else."⁷¹ Indic texts supported the yogic path of Walden and gave Thoreau an avenue for transcendence using his existing sonic awareness.

Thoreau was keenly aware of his other senses as well, especially sight and smell. Though his writings are marked by an intense interest the visible world, in many ways his pointed attention in translating what he saw into words was generated by his underlying perception of those visual elements as emanating from a sonic ground. He took little interest in the emerging art of photography, or in its new terms to describe landscape, Richardson notes. His own efforts at scenic description are at times, "remarkably inept. Abstract and wordy, they are loaded with scene-killing comparisons that cannot be visualized."⁷² He wanted qualities in his work that were beyond the simply pictorial. "How much virtue there is in simply seeing," he wrote, but Thoreau wanted what lay behind the vision more than most. Julian Hawthorne (son of Thoreau contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne), commented in his Memoirs that he didn't think Thoreau

⁷¹ Campbell, "The Power of Myth."

⁷² Richardson 52.

cared much for what is called the beauties of nature; it was her way of working, her mystery, her economy in extravagance; he delighted to trace her footsteps toward their source, and to watch her growths and developments...But of color or form as valued by artists I doubt whether he took heed.⁷³

Thoreau's verbalization of visual scenes is finest when he uses scene to convey his awareness of the energy behind nature, the energy that creates and animates what lies before us.

For Thoreau, nature connected with man-made sound to carry a deeper meaning.

From Thoreau's Journal, September 12, 1851:

As I was entering the Deep Cut, the wind, which was conveying a message to me from heaven, dropped it on the wire of the telegraph which it vibrated as it passed. I instantly sat down on a stone at the foot of the telegraph-pole, and attended to the communication. It merely said: 'Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now traveling on. Know that the goal is distant, and is upward, and is worthy all your life's efforts to attain to.'⁷⁴

Thoreau goes on to say "A human soul is played on even as the wire," on which the heavens fill with sonic vibration. The wire

... now vibrates slowly and gently so that the passer can hardly hear it, and anon the sound swells and vibrates with such intensity as if it would rend the wire, as far as the elasticity and tension of the wire permits, and now it dies away and is silent, and though the breeze continues to sweep over it, no strain comes from it, and the traveler hearkens in vain.⁷⁵

⁷³ Richardson 53.

⁷⁴ Thoreau, Journal II: 497.

⁷⁵ Thoreau, Journal II:497.

This ebb and flow of sonic energy mimics natural cycles of the moon, the seasons and the course of animal life. It also mimics Thoreau's own relationship with ecstatic experience over the course of his life.

This cyclic element to life becomes most apparent to Thoreau when in nature. Though sometimes it appears Thoreau saunters through the woods, it is what can be called the Perennial Philosophy that he walks towards. This philosophy, particular doctrines notwithstanding, has spoken almost all languages through more than twenty-five hundred years of history. As Aldous Huxley says in an introduction to a translation of the Bhagavad Gita, it has made use of the traditions of every one of the higher religions, has found expression in Vedanta, in Hebrew, in Tao Teh King and the Platonic dialogues, in the Gospel according to St. John and Mahayana theology, in Plotinus and the Areopagite, among the Persian Sufis and the Christian mystics. The pure state of the Perennial Philosophy seems to be elusive to man, the records left—by those who have seen a path to know it—“make it abundantly clear that all of them, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Taoist, Christian or Mohammedan, were trying to describe the same essentially indescribable Fact.”⁷⁶ Huxley says the Perennial Philosophy can be described as having four fundamental doctrines: (1) the phenomenal world of matter and of individual consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a Divine Ground; (2) human beings are capable of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference, and they can realize its existence by direct intuition, superior to reasoning; (3) man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man/the spirit/the spark of divinity within the soul, and it

⁷⁶ Huxley, Aldous, Introduction, Bhagavad Gita, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1987) xii.

is possible for man to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground; (4) man's life on earth has only one purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unity with the Divine Ground. Huxley writes:

Similar conceptions are perfectly compatible with Christianity and have in fact been entertained, explicitly or implicitly, by many Catholic and Protestant mystics, when formulating a philosophy to fit facts observed by super-rational intuition. Thus, for Eckhart and Ruysbroeck, there is an Abyss of Godhead underlying the Trinity, just as Brahman underlies Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.⁷⁷

However, Indic scripture, more so than Christian doctrine, was resonant with the perennial philosophy for Thoreau because its doctrine emanates from the sonic.

Indic texts seem to strum an existing awareness in Thoreau of natural sounds and it is this that appears in his work. In Walden, even church bells evoke communion with nature:

At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre... There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood...⁷⁸

More than this, Thoreau recognized sameness to all natural sound, as do Hindu texts:

At evening, the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the woods sounded sweet and melodious, and at first I would mistake it for the voices of certain minstrels... I do not mean to be satirical, but to express my appreciation of those youths' singing, when I state that I perceived clearly that it was akin to the music of the cow, and they were at length one articulation of Nature.⁷⁹

Strains of this awareness begin to appear in his journals in the summer of 1840. He was in a hopeful mood then, his literary career seemed a possibility with the appearance of the

⁷⁷ Huxley xiii.

⁷⁸ Thoreau, Walden 80.

⁷⁹ Thoreau, Walden, 81

Dial, his love interest, Ellen Seawall, had rejected John Thoreau and so Henry felt he might now have a chance with her (though that turned out to be a false hope). For the first time, he notes in his journal, “surely joy is the condition of life,” and other journal entries record his unusual attentiveness to sounds of all kinds: noises made by ice, church bells, crickets, and more. Thoreau’s words become most interesting when he uses a visual scene to convey his awareness of an energy that animates the world. Here, while writing of the Rigveda and the works of scholarly commentators in his Journal, Thoreau writes:

I doubt if learned Germans might not thus edit pebbles from the seashore into hymns of the Rig Veda, and translators translate then accordingly, extracting the meaning which the sea has imparted to them in very primitive times. While the commentators and translators are disputing about the meaning of this word or that, I hear only the resounding of the ancient sea and put into it all the meaning I am possessed of, the deepest murmurs I can recall, for I do not the least care where I get my ideas, or what suggests them.⁸⁰

That sound was the vehicle with which Thoreau sensed the energy behind nature itself is apparent in his Journal writings. Here, in his Journal, August 22, 1938, Thoreau writes,

How thrilling a noble sentiment in the oldest books,--in Homer, the Zendavesta, or Confucius! It is a strain of music wafted down to us on the breeze of time, through the aisles of innumerable ages. By its very nobleness it is made near and audible to us.⁸¹

This pulse audible to Thoreau is apparent to him in Hindu texts. On August 6, 1841, he writes of the Dherma Sastra: “I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated as upon the table-land of the Ghauts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, seems as superior to criticism as the

⁸⁰ Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism (New York: Octagon Books, 1978) 6.

⁸¹ Christy 188.

Himmaleh Mounts.”⁸² In Om, the sacred syllable in Indic theology that reunites man with ātman, the Hindus find manifest the awareness Thoreau articulates.

For the purpose of this paper, a definition of Om, or A-U-M follows: *Om* is a sacred syllable, an intonation rather than a word, of paramount importance in Hinduism. It is primordial sound, the vibration that ensures existence. It signifies God, Creation, and the one-ness of all creation. It signifies past, present and future. It is Brahman, the impersonal Absolute, the source of all manifest existence. Since Brahman itself is incomprehensible, a symbol becomes necessary to help man realize the Unknowable.

Campbell explains in “The Power of Myth:”

AUM represents to our ears the sound of the energy of the universe of which all things are manifestations. All vowels are in AUM if it is pronounced correctly. Consonants are regarded as interruptions of AUM. All words are regarded as fragments of AUM, as all images are fragments of the form of forms of which all things are just reflections. The four elements are A—the birth, U—the coming into being, M—the desolution. The cycle of this is called the four element syllable.⁸³

The fourth element of AUM, Campbell continues, is: “The silence out of which it comes and back into which it goes and which underlies it. My life is the A-U-M, but there is the silence that underlies it and that is called the immortal.” Om, therefore, represents both the unmanifest and manifest aspects of God. It is called *Pranava*, to mean that it pervades life and runs through our *prana* or breath. It is believed that if Om is repeated with the correct intonation, it can resonate throughout the body so that the sound penetrates to the center of one’s being, the ātman or the soul. Harmony, peace, bliss vibrate in Om and man can reach “stateless” eternity by its repetition, or to use Thoreau’s word, man can reveal his true “unboundedness.” This ability to be attuned to the cosmic

⁸² Thoreau, *Journal* I:266.

⁸³ Campbell, “Power of Myth.”

vibration within oneself directs man to begin thinking universally. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the mind moves between the opposites of sound and silence until it ceases the sound, even of Om, and in the silence is no thought. Mind and intellect are then transcended and the individual self merges with the Infinite. Sound, to which Thoreau was ever attentive, is the avenue of the Hindus to God, more so than any other sense.

Thoreau began to encounter scripture that bolstered his intuitive leanings about sonic vibration and the summer of 1840 marks Thoreau's first serious engagement in Eastern thought and writing. According to Robert D. Richardson in Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind, Thoreau read Hugh Murray's History and Descriptive Account of British India, Ockley's History of the Saracens and Camoen's Lusiads (the Portuguese epic about Vasco da Gama's discovery of India). Then in August, Thoreau began one of India's own great works, The Laws of Menu with the gloss of Colucca, translated by Sir William Jones. Richardson says:

From this volume Thoreau got firsthand (or as close to firsthand as anyone could then get in an America that did not teach Sanscrit in any of its universities) his earliest convincing demonstration that there had existed in ancient India a philosophical and religious culture as high and worthy as the Judeo-Christian, a culture of which the West had been almost completely unaware until the closing decades of the eighteenth century. By now Thoreau had also become aware of the claim—articulated by Fredrich Schlegel, and very much in the air at the time...-- that the human race and all human culture had originated in the Orient.”⁸⁴

Thoreau's 1840 summer reading explored and mapped a new world, one that did not accept that the Judeo-Christian view was necessarily the best or only account of things. Richardson says, “As he found the ethical idealism of Greek philosophy still as applicable as Christian ethics, so he found the laws of Menu fully comparable with the

⁸⁴ Richardson 82.

laws of Moses as a culture-founding document.”⁸⁵ These ideas shifted and opened a way to articulate the connection between the inner and outer world for Thoreau. Again, he senses the underlying energy of the world through vibration and sound. He says in his journal:

That title –The Laws of Menu—with the Gloss of Culluca—comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindotsan, 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.⁸⁶

The visual world, once again, comes alive for Thoreau with its underlying ground of energy.

Several theological Indic texts address mystic sound. The Hamsa-Upanisad contains a sequence of ten mystical sounds, the Siva-Samhita five. Other Indic references site six, or eleven, but all follow a similar pattern: from subtle to gross:

The first [sound] is of the character of the “*cini*” sound. The second is of the character of the “*cini-cini*” sound. The third is like the sound of a bell. The fourth is distinctly like the blast of a conch [shell]. The fifth is like the note produced by the wire of a harp. The sixth is like the sweet note of the flute. The eighth is like the sound of a kettle-drum. The next is like the sound of a tabor [drum]. The tenth is like the sound of a thunder-cloud.⁸⁷

Thoreau, who heard in church bells through the woods “certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept,”⁸⁸ was already part way through this continuum. In a sense, Thoreau’s forays into nature were a form of eastern walking meditation.

⁸⁵ Richardson 82.

⁸⁶ Thoreau, Journal 1:311, 324.

⁸⁷ Beck 94.

⁸⁸ Thoreau, Walden 80.

Ecstatic Vision

Thoreau's ecstatic vision predates his reading of Eastern religious texts and mimics how many seers in the East began their spiritual journeys. Alan Hodder in Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness says, "(His) earliest episodes of ecstatic experience arose spontaneously, it seems in the gratuitous style characteristic of youth, but their impact and significance for him was such that the rest of his spiritual and imaginative life soon began to coordinate itself around them."⁸⁹ Early in his life, he had various "ecstatic" experiences and "...the most important consequence of these ecstatic episodes was a deepening interest in meditative experience and the kind of personal discipline and daily regimen that would best support it."⁹⁰ These experiences were gradually less spontaneous, and Thoreau developed an intense interest in cultivating a living practice to attain them once again. "As late as 1837, it was enough for Thoreau merely to 'consult' consciousness in order to precipitate an experience of unboundedness; by 1841 he had begun actively shaping and directing his outer life in order to better enable such experiences."⁹¹

Whatever the origins of Thoreau's early experiences of ecstasy, they are facts to be reckoned with in any complete study of Thoreau's life and writing. They are central to his life and are key to his Walden experiment. For Thoreau, these experiences were put into context by Indian religious philosophy. Hodder again:

⁸⁹ Alan D. Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2001) 67.

⁹⁰ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness 68.

⁹¹ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness 69.

Walden, although more nimble in its weaving of exotic materials (than the Dial articles or A Week), nevertheless repeatedly offers a showcase for Thoreau's Oriental research and affiliations. It does so at several critical junctures, from the prolonged and unflattering comparison of the daily life of Concord townspeople with the penance "of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires" at the start of "Economy," to the suggestive depiction of the author sitting yoga like in his doorway "from sunrise till noon, rapt in revery" and the Hindu-inspired fable of the artist of Kouroo at the book's conclusion.⁹²

In fact, self-discipline in order to realize self-transcendence without Judeo-Christian repentance or guilt is the heart of Thoreau's foray into Eastern philosophy. In his journals he says,

The Hindoos are more serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews. They have perhaps a purer, more independent and impersonal knowledge of God. Their religious books describe the first inquisitive and contemplative access to God; the Hebrews' bible a conscientious return, a grosser and more personal repentance. Repentance is not a free and fair highway to God. A wise man will dispense with repentance. It is shocking and passionate. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent, though you are the chief of sinners. It is only by forgetting yourself that you draw near to him. The calmness and gentleness with which the Hindoo philosophers approach and discourse on forbidden themes is admirable.⁹³

It is this approach to God that Thoreau appropriates and uses as a roadmap to his inner journey, of which Walden is an expression. Even the title of one of Walden's chapters for instance, "Higher Laws," is a direct reference to the Laws of Manu.⁹⁴ Though this has also been linked to a long Christian tradition, several factors point to the influence of the Laws of Manu in the text of Walden: Laws of Manu was read often and deeply by both Emerson and Thoreau; it enjoins self-transcendence attained only by a discipline of "forgetting yourself;" it commands purification in all aspects of life; and counsels against eating animal flesh (a theme that recurs throughout Walden), among other tenets.

⁹² Hodder, "Ex Oriente Lux" 408.

⁹³ Quoted in Versluis 88.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Versluis 88.

Thoreau failed to transfer complete authority to the Hindu texts on the issues of ecstasy and contemplation, however, holding that contemplation was as much his field of expertise as it was the Brahmin's. This perspective, however, according to these self same Hindu texts, is as it should be. Hindu scriptures and belief system is eternal, the system holds, not because it is based on words by any one man or woman, but on the laws of nature, and that if mankind itself is wiped out, if a millennia creeps by before another system of knowledge emerges, the same precepts and understandings would emerge. Key to this understanding is that it only unfolds individually through experience open to anyone, a viewpoint compatible with Thoreau's Yankee independence. This personal discovery (i.e.: know thy Self, inquire and be free) is a basic precept of Hindu thought.

Thoreau took this to heart with his experiment at Walden. He enacted theories gleaned from Eastern texts in order to delve more deeply into his own belief. In so doing, Thoreau was following path similar to other seers in history. Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was described thus: "He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself, and that is why we give him our love."⁹⁵ "Life itself," in Hindu enlightenment, encompasses the ascetic as well as the rich elements of the senses.

It was the sensuality of sound, texture, color and air itself that Thoreau found in nature that precipitated his ecstatic experiences. This communion with nature led him later in life to conduct detailed observations of flora and fauna. Rather than seeing this as a leaving behind of spiritual growth, a putting aside of Eastern doctrine, as many critics

⁹⁵ W.B. Yeats, Introduction, Gitanjali: A Collection of Indian Poems, Rabindranath Tagore, (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997) 8.

have held, this attention to how things are made, how they work, what form they take, can also be seen as a form of yoga of the present moment or meditation. Hindu sages have been about this sort of business for centuries and have been described as scientists of the spirit. They looked to nature itself as their teacher to conduct investigations into the nature of reality. As such, all of nature is a teacher. Ananada K. Coomaraswamy, in The Dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture, describes it thus:

There is no negation. All is harmonized. All the forces of life are grouped like a forest, whose thousand waving arms are led by Nataraja, the master of the Dance. Everything has its place, every being has its function, and all take part in the divine concert, their different voices, and their very dissonances, creating, in the phrase of Heraclitus, a most beautiful harmony. Whereas in the West, cold, hard logic isolates the unusual, shutting it off from the rest of life into a definite and distinct compartment of the spirit, India, ever mindful of the natural differences in souls and in philosophies, endeavors to blend them into each other, so as to re-create in its fullest perfection the complete unity. The matching of opposites produces the true rhythm of life. Spiritual purity may not shrink from allying itself with sensual joy, and to the most licensed sexualism may be joined the highest wisdom.⁹⁶

Thus, the senses were a natural conduit for Thoreau and acceptable in Hindu theism as carriers of knowledge.

Though Thoreau was using Hindu and Buddhist texts as guideposts, he had no actual teacher of method from which to draw. This, it has been said by Hindu and Buddhist practitioners, can feel as a sort of abandonment to those in the midst of the experience. By mid century, his ecstatic experiences were dwindling, and he yearned to be a youth when, “My life was extacy. In youth before I lost any of my senses—I can remember that I was all alive—and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction, both its weariness and it refreshment were sweet to me.”⁹⁷ Critics have noted that

⁹⁶ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, The Dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture (New York: Dover, 1985) xiii.

⁹⁷ Thoreau, Journal 4.51-52.

Thoreau pursues a darkening way sporadically through the forties and especially after 1850, that he is dispirited and resigned. His journal writings of that time do, however, express episodes of rapture, but rarely without some tinge of regret. On July 16, 1851, he writes, “Ah that life that I have known! How hard it is to remember what is not memorable! We remember how we itched not how our hearts beat. I sometimes recall to mind the quality the immortality of my youthful life—but in memory is the only relation to it.”⁹⁸

These reactions have been attributed to a loss of Thoreau’s prophet-like spirituality, of a profound change in his demeanor that accompanied his turning to primarily nature writing. Hodder explains:

Indeed, the fact that some of Thoreau’s most passionate expressions of loss occurred during just this season of apparently extraordinary consolations makes no sense to us, until we realize that during this midpoint in his life, such delights ultimately impressed him as mere shadows or echoes of some pristine prior experience, or in his most hopeful moments, as promissory notes of a beatific future to come.⁹⁹

Unlike Arthur Versluis’ view that “Later in life, Thoreau grew indifferent to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, focusing more and more on natural history,”¹⁰⁰ it was, in many ways, a natural progression that, without outside guidance, Thoreau methodically attended to nature for clues to transcendence. As Hindu teachings on transcendence are garnered directly from teacher to student, Thoreau had no other avenue from which to progress. Unfortunately, in his grasping “desire” for Nature to unlock the secrets of transcendence, he lost his way. “Attachment” is ever a dead end in Hindu orientation and so it seemed for Thoreau. His death in 1862 at forty-four cut short his quest to regain

⁹⁸ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 35.

⁹⁹ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 35.

¹⁰⁰ Versluis 79.

“unboundedness” through sensory perceptions. Though, at his death it seems obvious his mind was still grappling with those connections, saying the autumn leaves, “teach us how to die.”¹⁰¹ In answer to Parker Pillsbury, an abolitionist, who gently queried, “You seem so near the brink of the dark river that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you,” Thoreau said, “One world at a time.”¹⁰² This attention to his present sums up Thoreau’s life.

Even during his mid-life and in later years, the sense of sound was ever the trigger to awareness for Thoreau. In his *Journal* of September 22, 1851, Thoreau not only hears the “stronger winds of autumn, and the telegraph harp” sounding loudly in the Deep Cut, but its tone varies with the tension of different parts of the wire. He continues:

I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music, labored with the strain,—as if every fibre was affected and being seasoned or timed, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law. Every swell and change or inflection of tone pervaded and seemed to proceed from the wood, the divine tree or wood, as if its very substance was transmuted. What a recipe for preserving wood, perchance, —to keep it from rotting, —to fill its pores with music!...When no music proceeds from the wire, on applying my ear I hear the hum within the entrails of the wood, —the oracular tree acquiring, accumulating, the prophetic fury.¹⁰³

The vision of Thoreau pressing his ear to a wooden post, shows his contemplative seeking of something he has heard before. In his *Journal* of December 30, 1853, he says:

The strains of the Aeolian harp and of the wood thrush are the truest and loftiest preachers that I know now left on this earth. I know of no missionaries to us heathen comparable to them. They, as it were, lift us up in spite of ourselves. They intoxicate, they charm us. Where was that strain mixed into which this world was dropped but as a lump of sugar to sweeten the draught? I would be drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk to this world with it forever. He that hath ears, let him hear. The contact of sound with a human ear whose hearing is pure and unimpaired is coincident with an ecstasy.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Richardson 388.

¹⁰² Quoted in Richardson 389.

¹⁰³ Henry David Thoreau, Robert Bly, ed., *The Winged Life* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986) 86.

¹⁰⁴ Thoreau, *Journal* 6:39.

The senses serve as conduits to nature's wider community of being for Thoreau. Illumination, however, is elusive and, according to Hindu texts, only reveals itself with non-attachment. The image of Thoreau with his ear against a telegraph post—waiting for every swell and inflection of tone, hearing transmutation, feeling the “divine tree” until “every fibre was affected and being seasoned or timed, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law,”—is an amazing testament to Thoreau's continual, solid presence in the moment and in nature.

Indic Touchstones in Walden

Sound was Thoreau's touchstone, an avenue for him to test genuineness, and importantly an avenue for him to reach goals (both Hindu and Thoreauvian) of present moment awareness, of simplicity as a philosophical ideal, of refining man's relationship with nature, and of performing work as yoga, among others. All of these are addressed in Walden and all are integral to Indic texts such as the Laws of Manu and the Bhagavad Gita. His affinity for sounds opened his awareness of these and other Eastern ideas and he set up Walden as a way to explore them further.

A key component of existence for Thoreau was to experience the present with the focus of a yogi. In order to accomplish this, Thoreau felt (with the added impetus of mandates in Hindu scripture) that people must live their lives in such a way to allow it to unfold. In Walden, Thoreau sets up just such a situation. "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."¹⁰⁵ Present moment awareness—the domain of the yogi—in both the Hindu religious texts and in Walden, accomplishes this connection to life itself. Thoreau's "...interest not merely begins with but stays with the particular, the minute, the unseen or unnoticed resemblances or differences among concrete objects. He is a veritable seeker of

¹⁰⁵ Thoreau, Walden, 59.

thisness...”¹⁰⁶ In the book, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, one reviewer claimed its content of Thoreau’s fifty letters to his friend Harrison Blake, could be named “fifty ways to pay attention.” In his letter of November 20, 1849, Thoreau writes Blake, “Depend upon it that rude and careless as I am, I would fain practise the yoga faithfully,” and then, “To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogin.”¹⁰⁷ In this sentiment, Thoreau is expressing affinity for the yoga of mind-body union, of meditation, of awareness for the minutest detail of life around him.

Indian yoga, a 5000-year old physical and philosophical discipline that joins the mind and body together through breath work and postures, includes as components diet, ethics, concentration and meditation. Its goal is a mystical connection with, or realization of, a Supreme Being. The Sanskrit root word, *yuj*, meaning to bind or yoke (unify), is mentioned throughout Sanskrit literature from pre-Vedic times in the form of archaeological evidence, to the Rg Veda, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad-Gita and Upanishads. Buddha, by the 6th century B.C.E., was himself a yogi committed to meditation with its goals of transcendence and emancipation. Thoreau by the time of Walden had read several of these key texts, as per Sattelmeyer’s listing in Thoreau’s Reading.

In fact, only in the present moment, according to Thoreau, can man live at all and yet few do. “To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?”¹⁰⁸ His experiment at Walden was an exploration of awakening, of exhorting readers to “learn to reawaken and keep ourselves

¹⁰⁶ Laurene Stapleton, Introduction, Thoreau, A collection of Critical Essays, Sherman Paul, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962) 167.

¹⁰⁷ Henry David Thoreau, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, Bradley P. Dean, ed. (New York: Norton, 2004)50.

¹⁰⁸ Thoreau, Walden 59.

awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn...I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, individually wrought and sustained experience was his goal.

Thoreau’s “vibration of the universal lyre” that reflected “the voice of the wood,” could be heard internally as well with individually wrought concentration. According to the Siva-Samhita, there is no absorption like that of *nada* (mystic sound) which can be accessed through deep meditation and concentration on the present moment. Thoreau’s concentration on the present moment allows sound to draw him in even while walking. His days at Walden, however active with walking and hoeing, also mimic the pose of a mediator quite strongly:

“I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this... 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 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, or the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, 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. They were not times subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works.”¹¹⁰

Thoreau found that days were not to be “days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity [i.e. Saturday—Saturn-day], nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock,”¹¹¹ but time to “find occasions in himself,” so that he could write

¹⁰⁹ Thoreau, Walden 59.

¹¹⁰ Thoreau, Walden 73.

¹¹¹ Thoreau, Walden 73.

in Walden, "...my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel."¹¹²

To sustain present moment awareness, Thoreau believed in simplicity. He measured men and economies by the gauge of the simple life which aims at the most complete realization of the perfectibility innate in every person. Leo Stoller in "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," says:

In his youth, Thoreau sought the conditions for such a life in an idealized distortion of the economic order then being displaced by the industrial revolution. After his experiment at Walden Pond, he moved toward reconciliation between simplicity and an economy of machines and profit. This goal he never reached. But he left behind elements of a critique of our society and intimations of an undiminishable ideal to be fought for.¹¹³

In Walden, Thoreau contends that the monomaniacal pursuit of success and wealth paradoxically cheapens the lives those in engaged in it and, in fact, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."¹¹⁴ His choice of the word "desperation" reflects his feeling of the grimness of American mainstream lifestyle. Like Ananda K.

Coomaraswamy in Dance of Siva, Thoreau joined the ranks of those stating, "We are not all deceived by the illusion of progress, but, ...desire 'the coming of better conditions of life, when the whole world will again learn that the object of human life is not to waste it in a feverish anxiety and race after physical objects and comforts, but to use it in developing the mental, moral, and spiritual powers, latent in man.'"¹¹⁵ The end of Thoreau's economy was enrichment not denial.

¹¹² Thoreau, Walden 73.

¹¹³ Leo Stoller, "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," Thoreau, A Collection of Critical Essays, Sherman Paul, ed., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962) 37.

¹¹⁴ Thoreau, Walden 4.

¹¹⁵ Coomaraswamy 17.

Living in a culture fascinated by the idea of progress represented by technological, economic, and territorial advances, Thoreau (like a yogi) was stubbornly skeptical of the idea that any outward improvement of life could bring the inner peace and contentment he craved. In an era of enormous capitalist expansion, Thoreau was doggedly anti-consumption, and in a time of pioneer migrations he lauded the pleasures of staying put. In a century notorious for its smugness toward all that preceded it, Thoreau pointed out the stifling conventionality and constraining labor conditions that made nineteenth century progress possible. He scorned an America obsessed with accumulation of luxuries but incapable of individual moral effort. In “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” Thoreau says, America

with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is...an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense...and the only cure for it...is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.

For Thoreau, the new state of American progress must be one of individual (yogic) transmutation, not of societal transfiguration.

One clear illustration of Thoreau’s resistance to progress in the name of simplicity was his criticism of the train, which throughout Europe and America was a symbol of the wonders and advantages of technological progress. Though he appreciates certain aspects of the train, Thoreau saw this innovation in transportation as a false idol of social progress. It moved people from one point to another faster, but Thoreau had little use for travel anyway, asking the reason for going off “to count the cats in Zanzibar.”¹¹⁶ It was far better for him to go to the woods than to commute from place to place unreflectively.

¹¹⁶ Thoreau, Walden 208.

He asked with irony, “Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented?”¹¹⁷ and, queried, do people “talk and think faster in the depot”¹¹⁸ than in earlier stagecoach offices? Trains like all technological improvements gave people an illusion of heightened freedom but in fact represented a new servitude, per Thoreau, since people must always be subservient to fixed train schedules and routes. The train, Thoreau contended, gave Americans a new illusion of controlling destiny—the train chugs along on its fixed path and makes people believe that their lives must too. With his “Keep on your own track, then,”¹¹⁹ Thoreau implies that complicating life with trains, and movement without reflection, stifles minds and traps people into a linear track rather than nature’s seasonal cycle that seems to ever spiral back to where it starts.

The illusion of progress, of amassing material wealth, is similarly addressed in Hindu philosophy and cultural thought. Reflecting this, in Gitanjali, Tagore writes,

Prisoner, tell me, who was it that bound you?

“It was my master,” said the prisoner. “I thought I could outdo everybody in the world in wealth and power, and I amassed in my own treasure-house the money due to my king. When sleep overcame me I lay upon the bed that was for my lord, and on waking up I found I was a prisoner in my treasure-house.”

Prisoner, tell me who was it that wrought this unbreakable chain?

“It was I,” said the prisoner, “who forged this chain very carefully. I thought my invincible power would hold the world captive leaving me in a freedom undisturbed. Thus night and day I worked at the chain with huge fires and cruel hard strokes. When at last the work was done and the links were complete and unbreakable, I found that it held me in its grip.”¹²⁰

Tagore’s approach and moral stems from societal agreement to readings of the

Vedas, Puranas, and epics such as Mahabharata.

¹¹⁷ Thoreau, Walden 77.

¹¹⁸ Thoreau, Walden 77.

¹¹⁹ Thoreau, Walden 77.

¹²⁰ Tagore 47.

Thoreau posits simplicity as way to avoid the trap of Tagore's prisoner. In his "Economy" chapter, Thoreau asserts that a feeling of dissatisfaction with one's possessions can be resolved in two ways: acquire more, or reduce desires. He looks around at his fellow Concord residents and finds them taking the first path, devoting their energies to making mortgage payments and buying the latest fashions. He prefers to take the second path of radically minimizing his consumer activity. For Thoreau and for yogis before him, anything more than what is useful is not just an extravagance, but a real impediment and disadvantage. He enjoys leisure time he can afford by renouncing larger expenditures. He points out that those who pursue more impressive possessions actually have fewer possessions than he does, since he owns his self-built house outright, while theirs are technically held by mortgage companies. He argues that simplification of lifestyle does not hinder such pleasures as owning one's home, but facilitates them.

With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward.¹²¹

Thoreau enacted in Walden the call to find what inner riches there were to mine. He said, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."¹²² The Laws of Manu is a text designed to map out in minutest detail the functioning of a practical life. It was the first of the translations

¹²¹ Thoreau, Walden 9.

¹²² Thoreau, Walden 9.

available to Thoreau, and though is not a grand philosophical text it does focus deeply on the present moment and what can be done to facilitate Thoreau's coveted "unboundedness".

In Walden, Thoreau also comments on the stages of human development. In "Visitors," Thoreau describes the Canadian wood chopper:

In him the animal man chiefly was developed. I asked him once if he was not sometimes tired at night, after working all day; and he answered, with a sincere and serious look, "Gorrappit, I never was tired in my life." But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant. He had been instructed only in the innocent and ineffectual way in which the Catholic priests teach the aborigines, by which the pupil is never educated to the degree of consciousness, but only to the degree of trust and reverence, and a child is not made a man, but kept a child.¹²³

So, too, the Indic texts support the idea that all humans are on a continuum of development. In India, the five *chakras* symbolize this transformation. The chakra or bodily center of experience has as its base the animal—hunger, greed, the zeal of reproduction, physical mastery. When the chakra for the center of the heart opens, however, a whole new stage of life opens up. Campbell says of our animal nature, "We are all born as animals and live the life that animals live: We sleep, eat, reproduce, and fight. There is, however, another order of living, which the animals do not know, that of awe before the mystery of being. . . . That is the birth—the Virgin birth—in the heart of a properly human, spiritual life."¹²⁴ The Virgin birth is a symbol, as chakras are, Campbell says, of a birth into the spiritual life.

Another idea in Walden—that man is part of nature and not dominant to it—Thoreau recognized through his prodigious sensory capacities. For Thoreau, heightened sensory experience itself served as the usual gateway to moments of spiritual euphoria

¹²³ Thoreau, Walden 95.

¹²⁴ Campbell, Thou Art That 29.

and was its catalyst, especially in his youth. “The senses were as much organs of speculative wisdom as channels of perception...”¹²⁵ and in all such treatments, senses serve as the conduits to nature’s wider community. In the meditation on solitude in Walden, for example, it is the senses that rescue the narrator from a momentary “insanity” of separation: “there can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still.”¹²⁶ Alan Hodder furthers this with the following:

The obvious point here is the importance of retaining the senses in good order, but as with similar formulations, it invites an alternative construction: one should of course keep one’s senses but one should also keep them “still.” According to this second reading, to “still” the senses—as in the case of the proficient meditator perhaps—is the best way to keep them. Thoreau of course enjoys this sort of wordplay, but as is often the case with his puns, we find something important at stake in the implied distinction between a merely ‘common’ sense and this stilled sense...¹²⁷

Meditation, whether while sitting in his Walden doorway or when walking in the wood, ensured Thoreau’s avenue to stillness.

Like many Hindu mystics, the sense of hearing was the most expeditious messenger from regions beyond the ordinary for Thoreau. He, “...was endowed with an almost preternaturally acute sense of hearing. Long passages in the journal testify to a kind of acoustic delight he experienced on his daily walks as he listened attentively to various natural sounds.”¹²⁸ Sound could throw Thoreau into rapture. “And now I see the beauty and full meaning of that word sound. Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects—the booming of ice—the crowing of cocks in the morning and the barking of dogs in the night—which indicates her sound state. God’s

¹²⁵ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 74.

¹²⁶ Thoreau, Walden.

¹²⁷ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 75.

¹²⁸ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 76.

voice is but a clear bell sound.”¹²⁹ Most of us experience only a finite range of sound.

But,

For Thoreau, by contrast, natural sounds were the harbingers of physical and psychic wholeness. They were advertisements of wider health, nature’s “sound state.” The sounds he heard in nature were never isolated noises but rather local perturbations of an omnipresent silent field. In the chambers of clarified sense, he claimed to hear nature’s omnipresent silence amplified. Sounds alerted Thoreau to the silence underlying them.¹³⁰

This orientation reflects the sense of doubleness that is found throughout the Indian texts Thoreau read and it characterizes his mature vision. In the Veda, sound is elemental. In fact, the Veda itself is said to be preexistent, not of human origin, “not composed but heard, or overheard, by seers endowed with supersensible hearing.”¹³¹ Though Thoreau did not have access to Vedic hymns themselves until his later readings of the Sama-Veda, The Laws of Manu, does explain how Indian tradition understood “the Veda”.

He found that the Veda was understood to be not only the charter of all human laws and traditions, but also the matrix of nature itself. Transcendental in nature, it yet manifested itself in the form of speech....Veda is even personified as *Vak*, or procreative ‘speech.’ Silent in its depths but manifest in sound, the Veda thus provided an exact analogue for Thoreau’s developing philosophy of natural sound...Like the Vedic hymns he was reading about, the sounds of nature arose, at first inaudibly, out of the wellspring of cosmic silence.¹³²

In “Solitude” again, in a melancholic mood raised by his senses, Thoreau relates this idea:

“In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, 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, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of

¹²⁹ Thoreau, Journal 1:277.

¹³⁰ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 77.

¹³¹ Hodder, “Ex Orient Lux” 418

¹³² Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 186.

something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary...”¹³³

Nature, though labeled “wild and dreary” or isolating by others (“Men frequently say ‘I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially.’”¹³⁴) connected Thoreau to the wider universe.

Through Thoreau’s awareness of the senses as a portal to the essence of nature, he began to sense the cyclical nature of time. Seasonal depictions in Walden are central to this idea which mirrors that of Hindus who experience time as cyclical, not progressing forward toward a final point as do followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This, of course, leads to a completely different understanding of human history and man’s role in the divine plan. Hindu scriptures mention the cycles of mountains, which they describe as growing incrementally over the millennia and then sinking back into the ground. The texts mention the changing course of rivers and how lush and fertile land slowly turns to sand. They describe cities, like ancient Dvaraka, disappearing into the sea, and whole branches of advanced technology that were lost long, long ago. The Puranas say that in the end (and many modern astrophysicists agree) the very atoms that form the universe will dissolve away. And then, slowly, incredibly slowly, the universe will reform. *Everything*, in effect, is recycled—even the universe. From the Indian perspective, universes come and go and their birth, death and regeneration are reflected in nature, specifically in the cycle of the seasons and in the life of man.

Thoreau’s realization of this cyclical nature of the world as depicted in Walden, led to his consciously organizing the book to mirror the cycle of the seasons. Joan Burbick in Thoreau’s Alternative History says:

¹³³ Thoreau, Walden, 86.

¹³⁴ Thoreau, Walden 86.

In his Journal in the spring of 1852, a period from which the journal writing was heavily incorporated into Walden, Thoreau asserts that for “the first time I perceive this spring that the year is a circle” (3:438). The succession of time, if properly recorded displayed a continual return to promise. History charted this magical movement: “I would fain explore the mysterious relation between myself and these things. I would at least know what these things unavoidably are, make a chart of our life, know how its shores trend, that butterflies reappear and when, know why just this circle of creatures completes the world” (3:438). The circle of time and creation was, however, unknowable without the ‘chart’ and the record of duration. Walden was built from a base of countless observations, not miniatures of discrete nature phenomena but repetitive walks over intimately familiar ground, describing the laws of succession and cracking the code of time.¹³⁵

The compression of his two actual years (1845-1847) into one narrative year, too, shows Thoreau’s emphasis on the spiritual resonance as dominant over real calendar time. The cycle of seasons, for Thoreau, is a cycle of moral and spiritual regeneration made possible by a communion with nature and with self. In “What I Lived For,” Thoreau says, “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 eternity remains.” The “ground” of eternity is the locus of Thoreau’s vision and one which he sees as clearly separate from the ordinarily perceived material world.

This watchful quality of the self, and especially non-attachment to its actions, Thoreau shares with the Hindu mystics. Krishna as the charioteer of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita counsels non-attachment of actions. Compare Krishna’s, “Do your duty, always; but without attachment. That is how a man reaches the ultimate truth; by working without anxiety about results,”¹³⁶ and,

The seers say truly
That he is wise
Who acts without lust or scheming
For the fruit of the act:
His act falls from him,

¹³⁵ Joan Burbick, Thoreau’s Alternative History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) 13.

¹³⁶ Bhagavad Gita 20.

Its chain is broken,
Melted in the flame of my knowledge.
Turning his face from the fruit,
He needs nothing:
The Atman is enough.
He acts, and is beyond action;¹³⁷

to Thoreau in “Solitude”: “

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.¹³⁸

Thoreau’s affinity to non-attachment is apparent. Plus, here he shows his love of word play: as Thoreau would have known, Indra, figures early in Hindu mythology as the bearer of Vedic sound/speech, or Vāk, and as such is critical to Thoreau as the marker for separation of human versus natural sound.

The idea of the world as illusion and separation from God is also revealed. Thoreau goes on to say, “When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.”¹³⁹ This perspective is supported in Indian texts. Alan Hodder in Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness says:

Typically, Indian philosophers depict the world as a kind of dance or play, of which the transcendent soul is the silent witness and impersonal spectator. It is

¹³⁷ Bhagavad Gita 26.

¹³⁸ Thoreau, Walden 87, 88.

¹³⁹ Thoreau, Walden 88.

evident from Thoreau's treatment of the theater imagery in 'Solitude' and elsewhere that its primary significance for him lay in the idea of the self as "spectator."¹⁴⁰

According to Hodder, Thoreau conflated two sutras from *Samkhya-karika* while drafting the "Solitude" passage into his journal.

In the *Samkhya-karika*, in particular, he found a thoroughly elaborated philosophical basis for the odd experience of doubleness he describes in "Solitude." This philosophy is based on foundational dualism of spirit (*purusa*), on one hand, and nature or matter (*prakrti*) on the other. Life and evolution result, it is thought, from the mingling and confusion of these two principles, while liberation (*moksa*) results from fully and finally distinguishing between them. In the Samkhya and Yoga systems of Indian philosophy, the ideas of "spectator" (*drastr*) or "witness" (*saksin*), thus have a technical significance: they describe the eternal status of the soul (*purusa*) as separate from nature (*prakrti*) and the phenomenal levels of life. While the soul appears at times to be entangled in nature, its essential character is pure, eternal, and unchanging. Liberation results when this reality—the absolute and eternal separation of *purusa* and *prakrti*—is perfectly and finally recognized. Once this recognition occurs, the soul is never again deceived by the dramatic actions of nature. . . . When the author of "Solitude" speaks of a "certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another," these precedents were still fresh in his mind.¹⁴¹

Through observation of nature, through the sense of hearing as well as sight, Thoreau gained insight into the Vedic idea of creation as separation and began to see ways of reuniting heaven and earth.

The fact that this union is cloaked but constantly available marks the feeling of "doubleness" for Hindus as well as for Thoreau. The material, tangible world, or the Indic concept of *maya*, is described as a kind of "veil" over what is real and eternal. In "Reading," Thoreau shows this understanding of how man curtains the world:

in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as

¹⁴⁰ Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 200.

¹⁴¹ Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* 201.

fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.¹⁴²

Thoreau's belief in the permanence of nature and of human nature, and the equivalence of all eras led to his reaction after reading Virgil in 1837 ("it is the same world") to accounts of the buds swelling on the vines and the fruit scattered about under the trees in Georgics. "His second observation followed naturally enough. If Virgil's was the same world as ours, then, 'the same men inhabited it.'"¹⁴³ Nature and human nature had not changed in all the intervening years since Virgil. "In early March [1838], Thoreau wrote in his journal, "Three thousand years and the world so little changed!—The *Illiad* seems like a natural sound which has reverberated to our days."¹⁴⁴ Since men of the day were equivalent to the men of the classic era, Thoreau wrote in his Journal of February 1938, that if each of the sons of Greece "created a new heaven and a new earth for Greece,"¹⁴⁵ the people of Concord could do the same.

Thoreau saw, as did the Hindu mystics, that an avenue to create a new heaven for man is simply through the present moment. Another way to gain this awareness and its accompanying ecstatic vision was through the act of work. He held it is the process of work and not its result that makes work an avenue for transcendence. This idea, of work as yoga or disinterested action, dovetails with the Hindus and Buddhists. The Bhagavata Purana says, "I have learned concentration from the maker of arrows."¹⁴⁶ This present moment awareness transforms work into a form of art because of the single-minded

¹⁴² Thoreau, Walden 64.

¹⁴³ Richardson 25.

¹⁴⁴ Thoreau, Journal 1:14, 26, 31.

¹⁴⁵ Thoreau, Journal 29.

¹⁴⁶ Coomaraswamy 21.

attention given it until it is “true that the arrow-maker perceives nothing beyond his work when he is buried in it.”¹⁴⁷

The artist of Kouroo story in Walden depicts the transformative powers of devotion to work. In a letter dated December 1853 to his friend Harrison Blake, Thoreau gives an indication of the ostensible moral of the Kouroo story¹⁴⁸: “how admirably the artist is made to accomplish his self-culture by devotion to his art! The wood-sawyer through his effort to do his work well, becomes not merely a better wood-sawyer, but measurably a better *man*.”¹⁴⁹ The story of the artist of Kouroo’s endless efforts to make the perfect staff and the amazing transformation that results when after many eons it is finally complete has its main significance in the fact that the artist’s work was disinterested—“caring nothing for consequences, for costs, for self. The work is significant for its own sake and the discipline it requires and occasions... Like much of Walden in general, it is a meditation on time, self-determination, transcendence, and artistic creation.”¹⁵⁰

The artist story strongly incorporates the Orientalist view of time and space: “Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life.”¹⁵¹ And, “As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a distance because he could not overcome him.” When Thoreau’s artist, eons later, was finally finished with his staff, the staff “...suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all

¹⁴⁷ Coomaraswamy 21.

¹⁴⁸ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 206.

¹⁴⁹ Thoreau, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker 85.

¹⁵⁰ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 206.

¹⁵¹ Thoreau, Walden 211.

creations of Brahma.” The passing of time had been an illusion, and “no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain.” The artist, through disinterested action and present moment awareness, had transcended temporal time and space and reached eternal *Brahme*.

The source of the name Kouroo itself is a tip off to the story’s philosophical affiliations. The name Kouroo (or ‘kuru,’ as it would be transliterated today) occurs frequently in the Bhagavad Gita, a text Thoreau knew well. It also appeared in other sections of the Mahabharata, the great epic of India, of which the Gita is an episode. According to Alan Hodder, Kuru is an ancestor of the story’s heroes. The Gita is essentially a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer and guru, Krishna, considered an avatar of the god Vishnu, just moments before the onset of a catastrophic fratricidal war between the two sides of India’s great dynastic family. Significantly, the field upon which their armies meet to fight is designated as the ‘field of the Kurus.’ Arjuna, seeing that the impending battle spells destruction for his entire family, resolves not to fight and appeals to Krishna for counsel. Arjuna’s horrific dilemma serves as a pretext for revelation of Krishna’s wisdom. Hodder says:

The ensuing teachings constitute the bulk of the Gita’s narrative, and over the centuries they have attracted a large body of commentary...Some commentators interpret Krishna as counseling primarily devotion to God (*bhakti*) as the best path to emancipation, others philosophical discernment (*jnana*), and still others practical service (*karman*). Thoreau offers his own fairly lengthy commentary on the Gita, both in his journals and in A Week, and it is interesting to see ... not so much what he selects for comment but how much he altogether ignores.¹⁵²

Hodder goes on to say that Thoreau focuses his readings of the Gita almost entirely upon passages concerned with the analysis of right action (*karman*), particularly as they relate

¹⁵² Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness 207.

to the Gita's influential doctrine of disinterested action of Karma yoga. Thoreau, then, assimilated the idea of action focused entirely on the work at hand with no consideration for its worldly results or rewards in his writings. Hodder says:

This is, to be sure, one of the central tenets of the Bhagavad Gita. For Thoreau, however, it was apparently the only one of real significance. Not only was it the focus of his explicit Gita citations and commentaries, it was also the focus of his more oblique Hindu-inspired narratives, the story of the artist of Kouroo above all.¹⁵³

Hence, according to Hodder, the story of the artist of Kouroo is less fanciful, more philosophically invested, than we normally take it to be.

Kouroo's artist labors through countless eons of time only to find in the moment of awakening that all was a necessary illusion. ... Why (Thoreau) should lean so heavily upon this particular paradox between action and inaction at such a strategic point in Walden seems puzzling until we recognize how deeply founded it was in Thoreau's own life experience. It is but one more manifestation of the curiously bifurcated vision or double consciousness—as between understanding and reason, time and eternity, appearance and reality—that we have already seen dramatized in the chapter on 'Solitude' and elsewhere in his work.¹⁵⁴

The artist of Kouroo represents Thoreau's own awakening position. From his youthful experiences of sensory ecstasy to his gradual realization of non attachment even to those joyful episodes, Thoreau reveals in Kouroo the equilibrium needed to view good and bad, joy and sorrow, as but ideas on a continuum of thoughts. Judgment is revealed as illusion. Kouroo's artist also reveals the equilibrium needed to view the work at hand and not its reward as his only focus. The ability to not be attached to judgment or reward can be accomplished for Thoreau, as they can for Indian yogis, through intense focus on the present moment.

¹⁵³ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness 209.

¹⁵⁴ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness 211.

In his Walden experiment, Thoreau grappled with staying in the present moment and he found in the Hindu texts translated in his time an avenue to do so. He was not a loner, nor did he seek isolation in his retreat in the woods. He did, however, wish to touch the present moment in any endeavor—walking in nature, meditating, working, talking with neighbors—and chose to simplify his life, heed his senses as avenues to nature, and perform disinterested action to reach this goal. Reality, the Gita says, only exists in the present moment—and that moment *is* Atman. This must be acknowledged to achieve enlightenment: “Be absorbed in me / Lodge your mind in me / Thus you shall dwell in me [in eternal Atman].”¹⁵⁵ Thoreau says in “Economy,”

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.¹⁵⁶

The precise moment is Thoreau’s only reality. In “What I Lived For,” Thoreau says, “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 the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us.”¹⁵⁷

Drenching himself in the surrounding reality—Thoreau’s yoga of awareness—was crucial to his personal reflections in Walden. His journal entries reflect his sense of the loss of transcendence of his youth when the earth was a “most glorious musical instrument, when his “life was extacy,” before he lost his senses. He makes the following query, at length from February 14, 1852:

¹⁵⁵ Bhagavad Gita 79.

¹⁵⁶ Thoreau, Walden 10.

¹⁵⁷ Thoreau, Walden 63.

Formerly methought nature developed as I developed and grew up with me... To have such sweet impressions made on us—such extacies begotten of the breezes. I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself—I said to others—There comes into my mind or soul an indescribable infinite all-absorbing divine heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion—and have had nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself—I speak as a witness on the stand and tell what I have perceived. The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I lead a life aloof from society of men. I wondered if a mortal had ever known what I knew. I looked in books for some recognition of a kindred experience—but strange to say, I found none. Indeed, I was slow to discover that other men had had this experience—for it had been possible to read books and to associate with men on other grounds.

The maker of me was improving me. When I detected this interference I was profoundly moved. For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science can you tell how it is—and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?”¹⁵⁸

He feels, like Wordsworth, “Our life is a forgetting,” and thinks back to youth when he “was all alive—and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction.” He found initial support in Indic texts in his search for books with “some recognition of a kindred experience,” and the centrality of these experiences orients Thoreau’s life. However, as he starts to grasp for repetitions of his unbounded, youthful state, Thoreau begins to lose way.

The experience of being “all alive” was difficult to resist. Walden was Thoreau’s experiment with the path of religious men of the East to get back to that reality. For the remainder of his life Thoreau strove earnestly to “enjoy an original relation to the universe.” The point of contact between spirit and matter was, to him, the fundamental mystery.¹⁵⁹ Joan Burbick in Thoreau’s Alternative History says:

After 1850, describing the landscape became a way of life for Thoreau. The task led to an endlessly renewable form of natural history. Each person in the new democratic nation had the power to apprehend the story of America: “How novel

¹⁵⁸ Thoreau, Journal 3.305-06.

¹⁵⁹ Thoreau, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker 20.

and original must be each new man's view of the universe? For though the world is so old, and so many books have been written, each object appears wholly undescribed to our experience, each field of thought wholly unexplored. The whole world is an America, a *New World*" (3:384)... Thoreau committed himself to understanding not only what the eye sees, but how it sees. Only thus could he perceive paradise on earth and leave a record behind.¹⁶⁰

Though he felt a loss over the sensory delight of his youthful ecstatic experiences, Thoreau was perhaps on the road mapped out by Gita itself. Attachment is left behind and enlightenment looms, "when the mind and the heart are freed from delusion, united with Brahman, when steady will has subdued the senses, when sight and taste and sound are abandoned without regretting, without aversion..."¹⁶¹ Sonic perception, Thoreau's key avenue to the present moment was difficult to release. Non-attachment to even this was critical, however. "When a man can still the senses / I call him illumined."¹⁶² The Gita says:

When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future. At present, your intellect is bewildered by conflicting interpretations of the scriptures. When it can rest, steady and undistracted in contemplation of the Atman, then you will reach union with the Atman.¹⁶³

It is the peak experience of Hinduism to break past sounds, language or natural sounds now and again. The ability to sustain this perspective, however, is difficult. In the path of Raja Yoga there are eight steps (much like the Buddhist Eight Fold Path), of which the fifth is the withdrawal of the mind from senses. The Gita says:

The illumined soul
Whose heart is Brahman's heart
Thinks always: "I am doing nothing."
No matter whether he is moving,

¹⁶⁰ Joan Burbick Thoreau's Alternative History, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987)13, 14.

¹⁶¹ Bhagavad Gita 111.

¹⁶² Bhagavad Gita 15.

¹⁶³ Bhagavad Gita 13.

Sleeping, breathing, speaking,
Excreting, or grasping something with his hand,
Or opening his eyes,
Or closing his eyes:
This he knows always:
“I am not seeing, I am not hearing:
It is the senses that see and hear
And touch the things of the senses.”¹⁶⁴

Thoreau fell short of this level of sustained consciousness in constructing his map to enlightenment.

He never stopped reaching for it, however. Richardson says of Thoreau, “The center of Walden is the desire to be free. The center of the late work is the desire to connect. The movement is from economy to ecology.”¹⁶⁵ Connecting to the senses and to natural process *was* Thoreau’s trail back to ecstasy, however, his trail back to know himself and be free, as the Hindu texts assert. He clearly saw the distinction between perception of the world and its underlying truth. In 1855, he says, “Human life may be transitory and full of trouble, but the perennial mind, whose survey extends from that spring to this, from Columella to Hosmer, is superior to change. I will identify myself with that which did not die with Columella and will not die with Hosmer.”¹⁶⁶

What Thoreau was reaching toward was the underlying principal of sonic theology which has silence as its essence. His self-stated goal was to create new Vedas and sonic realms opened this idea for him. In his Journal, December 15, 1838, Thoreau says, “Silence is the communing of conscious soul with itself. If the soul attend for a moment to its own infinity, then and there is silence. She is audible to all men, at all times, in all places, and if we will we may always hearken to her admonitions.” And

¹⁶⁴ Bhagavad Gita 33.

¹⁶⁵ Richardson 384.

¹⁶⁶ Richardson 343.

then, “Those divine sounds which are uttered to our inward ear—which are breathed in with the zephyr or reflected from the lake—come to us noiselessly, bathing the temples of the soul, as we stand motionless amid the rocks.” Sound bears the solemn stillness

Thoreau attends to. He continues:

All sound is nearly akin to Silence; it is a bubble on her surface which straightway bursts, an emblem of the strength and prolificness of the undercurrent. It is a faint utterance of Silence, and then only agreeable to our auditory nerves when it contrasts itself with the former. In proportion as it does this, and is a heightener and intensifier of the Silence, it is harmony and purest melody.¹⁶⁷

The Upanishads agree: “Non-sound is revealed only by sound. Now, in this case the Sound-Brahman is Om. Ascending by it, one comes to an end in the non-sound... This is immortality...”¹⁶⁸ Sound Brahman is the syllable Om. Beck says, “In this case sacred sound (Om) becomes both an effective hermeneutic for understanding, or ‘knowing,’ Ultimate Reality and a vehicle for the salvific quest.”¹⁶⁹ It is nonlinguistic “auditory phenomena,” heard during meditation, yoga, and which Thoreau articulates throughout his writings, that held the secret so that “both the universal and the individual Brahman are to be found in the body...”¹⁷⁰ In A Week, Thoreau says:

As the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into Silence. Silence is audible to all men, at all times, in all places. She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly. Creation has not displaced her, but is her visible framework and foil. All sounds are her servants, and purveyors, proclaiming not only that their mistress is, but is a rare mistress, and earnestly to be sought after.¹⁷¹

Thoreau never had complete success in holding this vision. Yet, he enacted in Walden the call to find what inner riches there were with constant application of abstract theory to

¹⁶⁷ Thoreau, Journal 1:64, A Week 331.

¹⁶⁸ Beck 45.

¹⁶⁹ Beck 45.

¹⁷⁰ Beck 46.

¹⁷¹ Thoreau, A Week 330.

practical life. He carried on with this focus until the end despite less frequent contact with avenues to enlightenment and his inquiry through fits of despair left Westerners with a roadmap of his spiritual journey.

Postscript

On the whole, critics have failed to provide an adequate assessment of Thoreau's indebtedness to Hindu thought and the role it played, especially as it relates to the sonic, in his interior life. As stated before, his "ecstasies" predated his interest in Hindu thought, but Hinduism eventually became his primary vehicle for his comprehension and representation of them. Hinduism and its accompanying emphasis on sonic theology was a magnetic draw for Thoreau primarily because of his natural affinity to its tenets of transcendence. He saw nature as performing infinite variations on certain underlying laws. His perpetual attention to the present moment, as reflected in his knowledge of nature and its cycles, his ability to see higher laws that persist outside of time and nature itself, and, importantly, his ability to know unbounded self through sensory perceptions, ensured his journey would be charged with ecstatic experiences. Attachment even to these, however, according to Hindu percepts, must be given up. Without personal teachers, this lesson Thoreau was slow to learn. Unlike previous criticism that likens Thoreau's attention to Nature, especially in his later years, as proof of his declining spiritualism, focus on present time, attention to detail, and knowledge of the pulse and cyclic nature of the universe was Thoreau's way of reaching for transcendence, just as Hindu scripture prescribes.

Though Thoreau stated in his journals that he did not prefer one religion or philosophy over another, he might have agreed with the religious tenet of the East that

says self reliance applies to matters of religion as well as to those of the material world. “‘What is religion?’ asked Thoreau in his journal on August 18, 1858, and then emphatically scrawled his answer, ‘That which is never spoken.’”¹⁷² That moment of transcendence was the elusive moment he searched to return to and felt, according to Bradley P. Dean in Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, “Religion is never spoken because the deepest truths of human experience cannot be communicated directly from person to person. Some fatal loss occurs.”

¹⁷² Thoreau, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker 16.

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