

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

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ABSTRACT

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 and in his other writings. 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. He found much confirmation in ancient Indian works to favor ascetic rule and his defiant individualism over the mercantilism order of his day. He also agreed with the concept of creation as separation—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 through the sense of sound.

This predilection of his personality, the ability to notice the sonic 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 lead to the greater goal of personal freedom that, for Thoreau, could be attained via soundscape. 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.