

Henry David Thoreau as Over-Soul

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Abstract

Henry David Thoreau accepted himself a Yogi and the real follower of the Puranas and the Gita. After getting higher education from the Harvard University, he did not plan any career for himself. His family was not well-off these days and much was expected from him. These days the merchants of Concord were planning new factories, transport system and new staff-rooms for the economic development of the town. Unfortunately, he had no liking for all these plans as he decided to lead a contented life in the lap of nature

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Introduction

Henry David Thoreau accepted himself a Yogi and the real follower of the *Puranas* and the *Gita*. After getting higher education from the Harvard University, he did not plan any career for himself. His family was not well-off these days and much was expected from him. These days the merchants of Concord were planning new factories, transport system and new staff-rooms for the economic development of the town. Unfortunately, he had no liking for all these plans as he decided to lead a contented life in the lap of nature. When he left for Walden Pond, his friends were shocked due to this step. But R.W. Emerson knew his nature well. Like Rousseau, he really returned to nature to seek new knowledge, rather real knowledge of life which had nothing to do with trade and commerce. In moments of solitude, he analyzed the cause of human sufferings and reached the conclusion.

How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a farm seventy-five feet by forty, its Auglan stables never cleansed and one hundred acres of land, tillage, making, pasture, and wood lot ! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.¹

Due to his original approach of life, he wanted to lead life as he liked. Actually, he wanted to know the practical side of liberation and detachment. He had studied the *Puranas* with great delight. As he had controlled his Indriyas, he had the life of a Yogi. He never felt the need of any old man's advice as aged people have no wisdom to impart to the young. He remarked :

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures...they are only less young than they were.²

The various objects of nature gave him delight throughout his life. The sounds, he heard there, gave him immense joy as he was far away from the hustle and bustle of life. The sophisticated things, decent furniture and costly carpets had no charm for him. Nature attracted him as he said :

Only a Zephyr that may flow

*Among the reeds by the river low.
Give me they most privy place
Where to run my airy race.
In some withdrawn unpublic mead
Let me sigh upon a reed,
Or in the woods with leafy din
Whisper the still evening in,
For I had rather be thy child
And pupil in the forest wild
Then be the King of men elsewhere
And most sovereign slave of care....
Some still work give me to do
Only be it near to you.*

Nature

The basic things of life were enough for him and he cultivated a small farm for his survival. Like saints, he led a simple life. Solitude gave him a lot of mental strength after a few country farmers came to visit him and he felt delighted. However, very rare people had decent topic to discuss with him.

When a lot of people supported the liberty of blacks, he did not ignore the contemporary political issue and spoke in favour of John Brown. His principle of Civil Disobedience influenced Gandhi and other great thinkers of the world. Apart from simplicity, he supported peace, non-violence, truth and virtue. Simple clothes gave him the warmth he needed. He asserts ‘My purpose in going to Walden pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish.’³

He observed that the farmers of Concord toiled hard for more than thirty years to become the owners of farms. Sometimes they sought these farms with borrowed money. Quite often they failed to pay for these desired lands. Thoreau realized that this sense of possessiveness was the root cause of human suffering. The more man wants to possess, the more he suffers. Like Dr. Har Dayal, he was an advocate of intellectual culture he said :

....I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. With a little more wit we might use these materials

so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing....⁴

Actually, men close their eyes and are deceived by appearances. They accept the dull routine of life and build an illusory castle for themselves. But children discern the true laws of life.

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded...If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are hurried 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.⁵

Lord Krishna told Arjuna that all are strangers upon earth and nobody is really related to each other. However, everyone must work regularly with love and too with a feeling of detachment. There is no death for Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. One must accept the concept of eternal forces and the five elements. If Arjuna understands the nature and powers of Lord Krishna, he will understand many mysterious facts :

Having known Me, you will be always happy. Those who direct their mind with full faith forwards Me without any other preoccupation like the embryo in the womb, those to whom nothing is dearer in this world than Myself and who continue to exist for Myself, and those, who think of Me with the singleness of purpose and devote themselves to Me, are served by Me in the same manner.... I have to undertake the whole burden of their anxieties... Like the mother knowing the thirst and hunger of the child, devoting herself always to the task, I do everything for them, who have thrown themselves fully on me.⁶

Here be the seeds of sincerity, simplicity, truth, faith, innocence, friendliness etc. as highlighted in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Purana*, the *Gita*. These vital virtues were regarded necessary for the new generation of men and women.

He really regarded Walden as sacred as the Ganges and admired it for its serenity and purity and called it 'God's drop'. He wanted to live here forever. He called it 'Kohinoor' of earth.

Like Hindu saints, he reported greed, violence, pride, anger, possessiveness, lechery as sins and asked his readers to get rid of them. People must control sexual instincts if they want to lead a life of bliss. He said :

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possible we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature.... Yet the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion... Chastity is the flowering of man...⁷

Like mystics, he asked many questions from himself such as what is the nature of soul? How did the physical world take its origin? When did the stars and planet shine first? Where do the Gods live? What is the exact length of human life? Do all creatures live in Nature? How did the earth take its origin? But then, the different objects of Nature answered his questions and he felt satisfied :

I awake to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, "Forward" ! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution. "O Prince, our eyes contemplate with admiration and transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this universe. The night veils without doubt a part of this glorious creation ; but day comes to reveal to us this great work, which extends from earth even into the plains of the ether."⁸

Towards the end of *Walden*, he asks his readers to explore their inner-self and discover hidden constituents and new channels. Is every man not a lord of realm? Regarding his ethical approach, John Burroughs remarks.

He brings us a gospel more than he brings us a history. His science is only the handmaid of his ethics; his wood-lore is the foil of his moral and intellectual teachings... Moreover, he was contrary and disagreeable, which helps make us remember him. The herbs he preferred were bitter herbs; the woods he liked best were shrub of oak woods; the garden he prized most was a Sphagnum swamp; the road that best suited him was a cross-lots path, or a railway embankment where he was pretty sure to meet no traveller.⁹

He admired the works of Shaikh Saadi, Plato, Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and asked his readers to imitate them. Reading was his intellectual exercise. Often he wished to follow the foot-steps of Plato as he said :

Or shall I hear the name of Plato and never read his look? As it Plato were my townsmen and I never saw him, – my next neighbor and I never heard him speak or attended to the wisdom of his words. But how actually is it? His *Dialogues*, which contains what was immortal in him... We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate. We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by knowing how good they were.

Thus, Thoreau has got to be accepted as an American scholar and an over-soul in the real sense. His works have been translated in many languages due to loftiness of thought and simple language.

References

1. *Thoreau : Walden; New Delhi : S. Chand & Co., 1964, p. 5*
2. *Ibid. p. 8*
3. *Ibid. pp. 17-18*
4. *Ibid. p. 36*
5. *Ibid. p. 8*
6. *Gita The Mother' Ludhiana : Kalyani Publishers, 1972*
7. *Walden, p. 197*
8. *Ibid. p. 253*
9. *John Burroughs : A Critical Glance Into Thoreau : Atlantic Monthly, June, 1919, Vol. 129, p. 779.*