WALDEN AND YOGA
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Most readers of Thoreau's Walden have been aware of its Orientalism, but few have regarded it as more than a kind of Eastern icing on an essentially Western cake. One result of this failure to consider the Oriental themes as organically connected with the book has been a tendency to assess the book as a whole as a somewhat disjointed account of individuality: a splendidly iconoclastic attack on accepted mores and an attempt, as Thoreau himself put it, "to wake my neighbors up." Readers who view Walden in this way really consider it as a kind of Transcendental Poor Richard's Almanack. They pause on the wisdom of remarks like "beware of all enterprises that require new clothes,"1 "The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another,"2 and "my greatest skill has been to want but little."3 For such readers, chapters like "The Ponds," "Winter Animals" and "The Pond in Winter" can only be lapses of interest, or at best, interludes in nature observing. For them Walden as a whole cannot have a structural unity or overall purpose.

Certainly there is no doubt that the book is permeated with a vaguely Hindu atmosphere. There are many overt references to the sacred texts of India, as in "How much more admirable the Bhagvat-Geeta than all the ruins of the East!"4 And Thoreau himself follows certain Hindu customs: "It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India."5 There are also many less obvious references, as for example to the language of silence which is so common in India and which is invoked in Thoreau's silent communion with the old fisherman who joined him at the

1 Henry David Thoreau, Walden (Boston, 1906), 26.
2 Walden, 38.
3 Walden, 77.
4 Walden, 63.
5 Walden, 67.
pond.\(^6\) Flute playing, his own and that of John Farmer, is also mentioned and is reminiscent of the god Krishna's favorite musical pastime.\(^7\) Most significant of all are the many references to the river and the definite equation of Walden Pond with the sacred Ganges.\(^8\) To dismiss all of these references as simply part of Thoreau's temperamental affinity for India is to underestimate the extraordinary influence of the Orient on his own thinking and to misunderstand the purpose of *Walden*.

That Thoreau himself was strongly impressed by Hindu religious philosophy is frequently revealed in his own writings, and his Journal contains many comments on his wide reading of Hindu texts from 1841 onwards. In 1850, for example, he wrote:

> The Hinduos are more serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews. They have perhaps a purer, more independent and impersonal knowledge of God. . . .

> What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum,—free from particulars, simple, universal. It rises on me like the full moon after the stars have come out, wading through some far summer stratum of the sky. . . .

> One wise sentence is worth the state of Massachusetts many times over.

> The Vedas contain a sensible account of God.\(^9\)

When, as a member of a Christian community, Thoreau moved to Walden Pond in 1845, he went there partly because of his disgust with the ordinary life men were leading. "The mass of men," he noted, "lead lives of quiet desperation."\(^10\) This desperation arose because of an inability to reconcile the ordinary activities of daily life with ultimate ends. Most men seemed divided between earthly occupations and a realization

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\(^6\) *Walden*, 192-193.

\(^7\) *Walden*, 193, 245.

\(^8\) *Walden*, 98-99, 109, 213, 329, 366.


\(^10\) *Walden*, 8.
that death would make these very occupations seem futile and empty. Thoreau’s own purpose in going to the pond was simply, as he stated, “to transact some private business,”\textsuperscript{11} that is to confront this particular problem of human existence “with the fewest obstacles. . . .”\textsuperscript{12} His fullest statement of motive is this:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary.\textsuperscript{13}

The reference to resignation is of the utmost importance, since it represents the Judeo-Christian point of view with which Thoreau as a citizen of Massachusetts was most familiar. The Protestant tradition of New England had stressed that life on this planet was as nothing compared to heavenly bliss. This dualism had created the problem of reconciling earthly actions with divine purpose, and from the days of the Puritans’ “warrantable calling” through the period of Franklin’s enlightened self-interest, this had been the principal concern of serious New Englanders. Since it was often impossible to distinguish between the realms of God and mammon, the psychological strain was considerable, with the result that hypocrisy became increasingly prevalent. Fortunately, Christian doctrine provided an escape clause through repentance, but here too, it was possible to be hypocritical. Indeed, the choice was either hypocrisy or complete resignation. In his Journal, Thoreau rejected this idea of repentance with its accompanying resignation from life. “Repentance,” he said, “is not a free and fair highway to God. A wise man will dispense with repentance. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent, though you are the chief of sinners. It is only by for-

\textsuperscript{11} Walden, 21.
\textsuperscript{12} Walden, 21.
\textsuperscript{13} Walden, 100-101.
getting yourself that you draw near to him. . . . With the Hindoos virtue is an intellectual exercise, not a social and practical one. It is a knowing, not a doing.”

Thus Thoreau in going to Walden Pond rejected the usual Christian manner of dealing with earthly existence. In Walden he is very specific about this: “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life . . . [so as to] . . . be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it be of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever.’”

Thoreau thus wished to release himself from petty daily affairs and to consider his own personal nature as free as possible from incumbrances. What he did is precisely depicted in the sixth book of the Bhagavad-Gita: “The yogi should retire into a solitary place, and live alone. He must exercise control over his mind and body. He must free himself from the hopes and possessions of this world. He should meditate on the Atman unceasingly. The place where he sits should be firm, neither too high nor too low, and situated in a clean spot.”

That Thoreau was a yogi may at first seem surprising, despite his own avowal that “rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully.” The surprise a Western reader may feel is largely due to a common misconception of Yoga. The ordinary Westerner looks upon Yoga as an exercise in asceticism, involving dietary rules, postures, controlled breathing, concentration, and meditation. He pictures the yogi as a man who contorts his own body and who exists in a trancelike condition.* Actually, however, there are four dif-

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14 Thoreau, Writings, viii, 3-4.
15 Walden, 101.
17 Thoreau, Writings, vi, 175.
* Note: This idea of Yoga is furthered by such articles as Arthur Koestler’s “Yoga Unexpurgated” in Encounter, August 1960. Koestler is dealing only with
ferent types of Yoga, of which the one described above is merely the most famous. In general, the purpose of Yoga is to attain Union with Brahman. The primary meaning of the word Yoga is *Union*, and Brahman may be taken to mean God or the primary source of energy that exists beyond time and incorporates all aspects of the universe. It is an attempt to unify the individual self or Atman with the universal self or Brahman. The other, secondary, meaning of the word Yoga is simply *path*, and the idea is that as there are many individuals, so there are many paths to this ultimate unity. The particular Yoga or combination of Yogas an individual may follow is entirely dependent on the individual’s nature. Yoga is thus a liberating *method*. Thoreau’s own remark in *Walden* illustrates it perfectly: “Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then.”*18* It need hardly be added that Yoga cannot be institutionalized in the manner of a church.

The attraction Thoreau felt to Yoga may be easily explained for Thoreau was very much aware of the dualism of modern life. Yoga alone offered the possibility of overcoming that feeling of quiet desperation and futility suffered by men divided between the here and now and the ultimate, and it also provided a means of overcoming time and the fear of death which, of course, is the primary psychological motive for feeling desperate.

Moreover, Yoga in particular and Indian philosophy in general is concerned with the dignity of the individual self and with living now. The whole emphasis of the Upanishads, for example, is on Life and on the Self. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad describes the creation in these words: “In the beginning all things were Self, in the shape of personality. He looked round, saw nothing but Himself.”*19* The Chandogya

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*Rajyoga*, but in his title he erroneously applies the generic term to this particular type.

*18* *Walden*, 131.

*19* *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, translation by Shree Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats (London, 1937), 119.
Upanishad provides an hierarchy of values with Life at the top: "Life is above hope.... Life lives by life; life gives life; life gives for life. Life gives power. Life is father, mother, sister, brother, tutor and guide. . . . Life is all."20 Here is the real reason for Thoreau's interest in Hindu philosophy: it is not dualist but monist and in Yoga provides man with the possibility of following his own inclinations with dignity.

The four principal types of Yoga are these: Karmayoga, or the Yoga of action; Jnanayoga or the path of Knowledge; Bhaktiyoga or the path of devotion; and Rajyoga or the royal path, which is the more familiar type requiring physical control, and meditation. Each one of these types has the same ultimate end, namely that of unifying the individual self with the universal self.

As an intellectual, Thoreau was naturally most attracted to Jnanayoga, or the path of knowledge. Nevertheless, at least in its early stages, this type of Yoga is very similar to that of Karmayoga or the path of action for, as the Bhagavad-Gita puts it:

The wise see knowledge and action as one:
They see truly.
Take either path
And tread it to the end:
The end is the same.
There the followers of action
Meet the seekers after knowledge
In equal freedom.

It is hard to renounce action
Without following the yoga of action.21

Thus both start from roughly the same point. They both involve discrimination and renunciation. The principal point of Karmayoga is that one must distinguish between action and the fruit of one's actions. The whole of the Bhagavad-Gita is based on this idea, since it takes the form of a sermon delivered

20 The Ten Principal Upanishads, 103-104.
21 Bhagavad-Gita, 57.
by Krishna to Arjuna at the beginning of a great battle. Seeing many of his relations in the opposing army, Arjuna told Krishna that he did not want to fight because even if he won the battle, the death of his relatives would be too high a price to pay. Krishna urged Arjuna to follow his duty and explained that in fact he would not be killing the Atman. Thus, as he observed, “The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead.”22 The Atman, or Self, being indestructible, will return again: “Rebirth is certain for the dead.”23 This idea is put even more forcefully in the Katha Upanishad: “The Self knows all, is not born, does not die, is not the effect of any cause; is eternal, self-existent, imperishable, ancient. How can the killing of a body kill Him? He who thinks that He kills, he who thinks that He is killed, is ignorant. He does not kill nor is he killed.”24 Thus he urged Arjuna to act, and turned his injunction into a discussion of ends, urging Arjuna not to concern himself with the fruits of his actions. “You have no right to the fruits of your work,” he said.25 “Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working.”26 “Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord. Renounce attachment to the fruits. Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is this evenness of temper which is meant by yoga.”27

The discrimination here required by Karmayoga releases the yogi from anxiety and gives him peace. Therefore Thoreau attacked his fellow countrymen’s attachment to the results of their actions. Luxuries and possessions all interfere with proper understanding. “Of a life of luxury the fruit is luxury,”28 he noted, and in “Civil Disobedience” he wrote: “Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue. . . .”29 The

22 Bhagavad-Gita, 36.
23 Bhagavad-Gita, 38.
24 Upanishads, 30-31.
25 Bhagavad-Gita, 40.
26 Bhagavad-Gita, 40.
27 Bhagavad-Gita, 40.
28 Walden, 16.
29 Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” Writings, x, 15.
Bhagavad-Gita makes the point in these lines:

Thinking about sense-objects  
Will attach you to sense-objects;  
Grow attached, and you become addicted;  
Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger;  
Be angry and you confuse your mind;  
Confuse your mind, you forget the lesson of experience;  
Forget experience, you lose discrimination;  
Lose discrimination, and you miss life's only purpose.30

Thus Thoreau's complete simplicity of living was simply a means of allowing him to gain an understanding of higher ends. *Walden* is full of instances in which Thoreau sees the connection between lower and higher purposes. "One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool."31

As a man who built his own house and grew his own food, Thoreau obviously to that extent had to follow a life of action, but he was careful never to grow attached to the fruit of his actions. That he in fact practiced Karmayoga is especially clear in his chapter, "The Bean Field." First Thoreau simply worked his beans as beans, but as he became intimate with them, he realized that these beans symbolized higher ends. "I was determined to know beans," he said,32 and by that he meant that he was determined to know the nature of existence. Freed of growing beans simply for their own ends as nourishment, he realized that "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans; and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios."33 In that sentence, Thoreau demonstrated the highest point of his own Karmayoga, and

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30 Bhagavad-Gita, 42.
31 Walden, 97.
32 Walden, 178.
33 Walden, 175.
the way in which Karmayoga overlaps with Bhaktiyoga, or the yoga of worship.

Perhaps the best demonstration of what Karmayoga meant to Thoreau is to be seen in his account of the French-Canadian wood-chopper. Thoreau, indeed, uses him to show the difference between natural simplicity and intelligent simplicity. Presented as an attractively forthright individual, this northern woodman was especially remarkable to Thoreau for his animal nature. He was in some ways a natural aristocrat, and he had a refreshingly practical element in his nature. But in the end, he was a complete materialist: “I never,” observed Thoreau, “by any manoeuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate...” And this, added Thoreau significantly, “is true of most men.”

The French-Canadian was a good worker and a simple, agreeable individual, but for Thoreau he was an example of the limiting effects of an occupation. In some ways, he appeared to be similar to a follower of Karmayoga, but in essence he was quite unaware of what he was doing. “The world,” says the Bhagavad-Gita, “is imprisoned in its own activity, except when actions are performed as worship of God. Therefore you must perform every action sacramentally...”

That Thoreau’s whole experiment of living by the pond was a sacramental action is fully illustrated in *Walden*. Every morning, he would go down to the pond, for all the world like a Hindu in Banaras, for his morning ablutions. This bathing in the lake he characterized as “a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.” The nature of the religious exercise was not, however, to give himself a feeling of duality, a comparison say, of his own personal insignificance to the grandeur of nature, that being the usual Christian interpretation; rather, said Thoreau, “There was something cosmical

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84 *Walden*, 166.
85 *Bhagavad-Gita*, 45.
86 *Walden*, 98.
about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour."\(^{37}\) As the Prashna Upanishad puts it: "Rising sun is the symbol of life."\(^{38}\) In short, this experience was one of the preliminary elements of Jnanayoga, and it gave Thoreau a sense of his own union with the cosmos. This was his religious exercise.

The principal task of Jnanayoga is to discriminate between appearance and reality. The Bhagavad-Gita observes: "That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be. Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of is and is not."\(^{39}\) For his part, Thoreau noted: "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."\(^{40}\) In the same chapter, Thoreau also wrote: "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."\(^{41}\)

The usual ways of obtaining knowledge are dealt with in Walden. In his chapter "Reading," Thoreau turns his attention to what may be learned from great men of the past. He pronounces his scorn for romances and novels as petty things, thus perhaps unconsciously echoing an Indian predilection, since there is very little Indian literature dealing with man and his particular adventures and problems. Literature for Thoreau is thus not an entertainment, but a way of living, and thus worthy of having the morning hours consecrated to it.\(^{42}\) It encourages real thought, if it is properly understood, and it is properly understood only by a few: "The works of the great

\(^{37}\) Walden, 99.
\(^{38}\) Upanishads, 43.
\(^{39}\) Bhagavad-Gita, 36.
\(^{40}\) Walden, 107.
\(^{41}\) Walden, 106.
\(^{42}\) Walden, 111.
poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them."43 Knowledge derived from reading thus comes intuitively and only with great effort, and the time spent in reading properly has this final result: "That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future."44

Yet at heart, Thoreau was distrustful of a reliance on past beliefs. "Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new," he observed.45 Thoreau's preferred approach to Jnanayoga was the path of experience: "Let us spend one day," he observed, "as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. . . . Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake. . . ."46

In his two years at the pond, Thoreau tried to push aside what he called "prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion,"47 in order not to play at life, "but earnestly live it from beginning to end."48 Life itself was his real source of knowledge. The Bhagavad-Gita observes: "Some withdrew all their senses from contact with exterior sense-objects. . . . Others allow their minds and senses to wander unchecked, and try to see Brahman within all exterior sense-objects. For these, sound and the other sense-objects are the offering, and sense-enjoyment the sacrificial fire."49 Thoreau's long and exhaustive study of nature was clearly designed with this end in mind.

43 Walden, 115.
44 Walden, 110.
45 Walden, 9.
46 Walden, 108.
47 Walden, 108.
48 Walden, 56.
49 Bhagavad-Gita, 53.
Symbolically Thoreau’s attainment of Jnanayoga is best put in the river image which is so familiar in both *Walden* and the sacred texts of India. Thoreau observed at the end of his chapter on “What I Lived For” that “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.”50 For its part, the Gita says:

Water flows continually into the ocean  
But the ocean is never disturbed.51

The Royal Path, or Rajyoga, was not a path much followed by Thoreau, at least in its final stages, which involve postures, controlled breathing and the rest. And certainly he had little interest in experiments in stopping the heart or in releasing the vital force known as the Kundalini Serpent. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Rajyoga were followed by Thoreau, most noticeably, dietary control, solitude, and chastity. That these were consciously followed for Yoga purposes is revealed in his curt reply to those who ask him whether he could survive on vegetable food alone. “I am accustomed to answer such,” he said, “that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say.”52

Since meditation is the real core of Rajyoga, ultimately leading, so it is hoped, to *Samadhi* or a complete absorption of the mind in Atman, it obviously had a considerable importance for Thoreau as a transcendentalist. It involves an overcoming of active mental activity and depends entirely on extrasensory or intuitive knowledge. This is indeed the real knowledge involved in all types of Yoga, although it is especially the province of Rajyoga. At any rate, Thoreau practiced it in his own way when he sat in his sunny doorway by the pond for a whole morning quite unconscious of the passing of time. He is unpretentious in describing this activity merely as revery, but he at least glimpsed its more serious implications: “I realised

51 *Bhagavad-Gita*, 43.  
52 *Walden*, 72.
what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works,” he wrote.53

Bhaktiyoga, or the path of worship and of love, was not one especially designed for a man like Thoreau. In many ways, Thoreau was temperamentally attached to its practices, but he was too much a social critic to be able to accept the benign view of the world that is preached by Krishna in his outline of this path. For Krishna observed that the yogi of devotion had to be a man unconcerned with the activity of others. “He neither molests his fellow men, nor allows himself to become disturbed by the world.”54 In a deeper sense, Thoreau did follow this precept, for as he observed in connection with his tax troubles, it was society which ran “amok” against him, not the other way around.55 Nevertheless, the amount of social commentary and public exhortation is so considerable in both Walden and “Civil Disobedience” that it cannot be said that Thoreau was a Bhaktiyogi in the literal sense.

There is another quality of Bhaktiyoga, and particularly of the Bhakti movement which has been dominant in India for some decades, which would not have appealed to Thoreau, and that is simply the ease with which it can be degraded into a worship of particular gods, or at least of a god outside of the individual. In its pure form, the love which exists in Bhaktiyoga is not in the least altruistic or extraverted. On the contrary, like everything else in Yoga, it is concerned with the Self. This is made especially clear in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

The husband does not love his wife for herself, but loves her for himself only.
The father does not love his sons for themselves, but loves them for himself only . . .
A man does not love the rulers for themselves, but loves them for himself only.

53 Walden, 124.
54 Bhagavad-Gita, 99.
55 Walden, 190.
A man does not love the community for itself, but loves it for himself only. A man does not love the gods for themselves, but loves them for himself only.56

This ruthless love was much softened by the Bhakti movement: it became devotional, and in so doing removed from the individual his responsibility for his own Self. Moreover, it led to just the sort of dualism Thoreau was trying to overcome, for worship and devotion are usually given to external powers and not to an aspect of oneself. Thus the Bhakti movement implies, insofar as it is a corruption of Bhaktiyoga, that there are two worlds, the world of the gods which is superior and overwhelming, and the world of men who have little choice but to bow down before this superior force.

Yet having said that, one must also say that the Yoga of Devotion as it is taught by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita most nearly represents Thoreau's general world view as it is expressed in Walden. This is most evident not in the passages which deal with Thoreau's opinion of the lives of his fellow-citizens, but in those sections of the book which deal with nature. For throughout those sections devoted to the pond itself, the animals, fish and even the earth, there is a constant note of praise, and indeed of worship. Thoreau looks upon nature as essentially benign, and this very attitude is an act of praise or devotion. Indeed this idea motivates the whole book and is responsible for its structure.

After the early chapters of the book, in which he gives an account of his own settlement by the pond, Thoreau turns first of all to sounds, as if purposefully choosing the least noticeable aspect of nature to demonstrate its tremendous vitality. It is a first step in awareness, and in his catalogue of the various bird sounds, some pleasant, some disturbing, he begins to see in sounds themselves a kind of blueprint or theme for the cosmos, for he does not neglect the unpleasant sound of owls: "I rejoice that there are owls," he wrote. "Let them do the

56 *Upanishads*, 130-131.
idiotic and maniacal hooting for men. . . . They represent the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have.”

In the following chapter, Thoreau continues to stress what might be considered disagreeable aspects of nature, but finds them all part of a general goodness: “The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house to-day is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too.” Finally, he concludes the section with an exclamation of his feelings: “The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature. . . .”

This attitude has sometimes been described as mere wishful thinking on Thoreau’s part, and some critics of Thoreau have observed that like Emerson, he is dealing with a very special sort of nature, ignoring the more cruel aspects which are found in areas less benign than Concord, as for example in the jungles or in the Arctic wastes. But Thoreau is quite clear as to what nature here means for him. “I am no worshipper of Hygeia, who was the daughter of that old herb-doctor Æsculapius, . . . but rather of Hebe, cup-bearer to Jupiter, who was the daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the power of restoring gods and men to the vigor of youth.” In short, Thoreau did not turn to nature for reasons of health, but to gain a perpetual youth. He was not concerned with survival in this world, but with the problem of time and death.

Thus he saturated himself in every aspect of nature, studying it in hopes of discovering its secret and its relevance to human life. He examined it in hopes of discovering what the Eesha Upanishad calls the “seed” as against the “shapes” of nature; that is he was in search of its timeless energy. Very soon he found the pond itself to be a microcosm of all of life. It was both “earth’s eye” and “sky water.” Moreover it was

57 Walden, 139.
58 Walden, 145.
59 Walden, 153.
60 Walden, 154.
61 Upanishads, 16.
62 Walden, 206.
63 Walden, 209.
a symbol of man's own geographical unity and of the balance of his ideas. After speaking of the ice cutters, Thoreau had observed:

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmo-gonal philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed. . . . I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.64

Even more important, Thoreau observed of Walden Pond that "It has not acquired one permanent wrinkle after all its ripples. It is perennially young. . . ."65 Thus it followed, as he noted in a somewhat unfortunate couplet:

I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven
Than I live to Walden even.66

Or, to use the phrase with which he concluded his chapter on the Ponds: "Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth!"67

Having discovered a direct connection between observable phenomena and ultimate reality, Thoreau still had the problem of dealing with death and with man's own connection with the universe. The problem of death occupies the whole latter part of the book, and in these last chapters, Thoreau examines nature during its own apparent death—winter. He observes winter animals and the ice that forms over the ponds, and he finds that despite its apparent deathliness, Nature is still alive. "Who would have suspected," he commented of the ice on the pond, "so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive?"68

64 Walden, 328-329.
65 Walden, 214.
66 Walden, 215.
67 Walden, 222.
68 Walden, 333.
And then comes the spring, which Thoreau first observes in the way it affects the most inert object near him, a bank of sand and clay alongside the railway tracks. This muddy and dirty bank is seen as a microcosm of universal life. The sand was “of every degree of fineness and of various rich colors,”69 and it burst “out through the snow”70 forming streams that remind him of vine leaves, coral, leopards’ paws, “brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.”71 In short it becomes all of life with its apparently unattractive excremental aspects as well as its joyful and beautiful aspects. It becomes a river like the Ganges which carries along the dead bodies of animals while at the same time providing life for those along its banks. “Thus,” observed Thoreau, “it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf.”72

Here, then, was Thoreau’s great law of nature—that of its boundless and endless vigor. Its great importance to Thoreau was its proof of the transience of death. Earlier in Walden he had described the bloody war between the ants, and the almost human murders that took place in that battle. At that point, he offered no explanation for this apparently evil element in his otherwise benign universe, but after his experience of the apparent death which winter brought to Concord, and of the spring that annually followed it, he found a solution to this problem of death in the very vitality of life. He had caught a mess of beautiful fish, and in the very fading of their bright colors he sensed the renewal of those colors in other fish. “O Death, where was thy sting?” he exulted, “O Grave, where was thy victory, then?”73

In short, Thoreau realized that the “inexhaustible vigor” of nature was the key to the problem: “We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and

69 Walden, 336.
70 Walden, 336.
71 Walden, 337.
72 Walden, 340.
73 Walden, 349.
disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the re-
past. . . . I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads 
can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one 
another. . . .”

Here then was the yogi’s final sense of complete union with 
Brahman. Here was the real proof of immortality. It was also, 
to Thoreau, a proof of “universal innocence. Poison is not 
poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal.” To those who 
might otherwise try to moralize, he then added the warning: 
“Compassion is a very untenable ground.”

Here too is that reaffirmation of reincarnation which 
Thoreau appropriately described in Indian terminology. “The 
life in us,” he said, in one of the last paragraphs of the book, 
“is like the water in the river.” It goes on inexhaustibly what-
ever happens to us in our individual karmas or incarnations. 
Thus the book ends with yet another Hindu image suggesting 
much the same idea: “The sun is but a morning star.”

The world view expressed in Walden is substantially that 
which appears in those portions of the Bhagavad-Gita which 
are concerned with Bhaktiyoga, or the path of devotion. The 
truth which Thoreau believed he had discovered, and which 
he celebrated in the “Conclusion” to Walden is simply, as has 
been shown, that glimpse of Reality which lies at the heart of 
Yoga. The Gita says: “He who is free from delusion, and knows 
me as the supreme Reality, knows all that can be known. 
Therefore he adores me with his whole heart. This is the most 
sacred of all the truths I have taught you. He who has realised 
it becomes truly wise. The purpose of his life is fulfilled.”

The truth which Thoreau proclaimed had come to him 
largely through his own experience and study, that is, through 
Jnanayoga and Karmayoga. The connection of Atman with 
Brahman, as achieved by Thoreau should now be clear. But

74 Walden, 350.
75 Walden, 351.
76 Walden, 366.
77 Walden, 367.
78 Bhagavad-Gita, 113.
there still remains the problem of one’s individual behavior for, as Thoreau observed earlier in *Walden*, “Our whole life is startlingly moral.”\textsuperscript{79} The caution against compassion has already been noted, and certainly one of Thoreau’s most famous diatribes is that directed against charity. The true path of Yoga is to follow one’s own path. The Gita states that a wise man “acts according to the tendencies of his own nature,”\textsuperscript{80} and the Chandogya Upanishad says that “truth and Self are one.”\textsuperscript{81}

Thoreau also echoed these sentiments when he urged his reader to “Grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and brakes which will never become English hay.”\textsuperscript{82} But he also realized that unlike the beasts, man had two natures, his animal nature and his spiritual nature. In “Higher Laws” which is one of the most important chapters of his book, he therefore urged men to discriminate between the two and to strive to overcome their animal natures. “He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day,” he said.\textsuperscript{83} This is the first step in each form of Yoga, and in his comments on chastity and sensuality, Thoreau echoes Krishna’s comments on Jnanayoga:

Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined.
The bonds of his flesh are broken.\textsuperscript{84}

Thus, like Thoreau, the yogi must follow not his lower but his higher nature. This is the nature that is referred to, for example, in this sentence from the Gita: “When a man acts according to the law of his nature, he cannot be sinning.”\textsuperscript{85} Thoreau’s point is that the following of one’s higher nature is an entirely natural act; indeed, to act otherwise is to violate

\textsuperscript{79} *Walden*, 241.
\textsuperscript{80} *Bhagavad-Gita*, 48.
\textsuperscript{81} *Upanishads*, 96.
\textsuperscript{82} *Walden*, 230.
\textsuperscript{83} *Walden*, 243.
\textsuperscript{84} *Bhagavad-Gita*, 42.
\textsuperscript{85} *Bhagavad-Gita*, 127.
one's human nature. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad makes the same point when it says, “Nothing but the Self matters.”

Thus Thoreau as a yogi presents not only a coherent world picture and a way of overcoming duality, but a concrete guide for behavior. The three are of course intimately connected, for the mere avoidance of the problem of how to live is no solution. As the Gita says,

Action rightly renounced brings freedom:
Action rightly performed brings freedom:
Both are better
Than mere shunning of action.

Hence in his final pages, Thoreau urges his reader to face facts: “However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names.”

Here is Thoreau’s solution to the dualism of modern life he observed in the early pages of Walden. His citing of the artist of Kouroo is his parable to illustrate this point. The artist of Kouroo strove after perfection in his fashioning of a staff. He was thus able to combine practical activity with spiritual activity, and this was the result: “His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. 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. . . . By the time he had smoothed and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoke and slumbered many times. . . . When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions. . . .”

He had followed his own path, gaining both fulfillment here

86 Upanishads, 138.
87 Bhagavad-Gita, 56.
88 Walden, 36.
89 Walden, 359-360.
and now, and ultimate immortality. He was one, in the words of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, "who lives on earth, apart from earth, whom earth does not know; whose body is earth; controlling earth from within; is your own Self, the immortal, the controller." 90

NOTE

The original idea for this essay came from one of my students in the University of California, Mr. Timothy Gaydos, to whom thanks are herewith tendered.

Little has been written on the general subject of Oriental influences on American writers during the nineteenth century. Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York, 1932), is the standard work. A pioneering effort to evaluate the influences of the East on writers like Thoreau and Emerson, it nevertheless suffers from some errors of fact, especially in connection with Yoga. A number of these errors were pointed out by Sreekrishna Sarma's article, "A Short Study of the Oriental Influence upon Henry David Thoreau with Special Reference to his Walden," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 1, 76-92 (Heidelberg, 1956). Sreekrishna Sarma's essay was of considerable help to me in preparation of this essay.

I have also consulted a number of other works in preparation for this essay, notably the appendices and notes for the edition of the *Bhagavad-Gita* which I have used, and Aldous Huxley's introduction to this volume. I have also used Surendranath Dasgupta's *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion* (London, 1924), and Swami Prabhavananda's *Vedic Religion and Philosophy* (Madras, 1950). Most useful of all, however, as general background material has been Miguel Serrano's *The Serpent of Paradise* (London, 1963).

90 *Upanishads*, 141.