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A Southern Buddhist Reads the “Yankee Yogi”

“*Walden*,” said critic E.B. White in 1954, “is an oddity in American letters. It may very well be the oddest of our distinguished oddities .... It contains religious feeling without religious images” (White 789-90). With characteristic precision White zeros in on some of the key critical issues in reading *Walden* and Thoreau in general: to what extent is Thoreau religious (and what religion is he, exactly)? Does *Walden* have spiritual aims, and what are they? How should those aims affect our understanding of the work and of the author?

I believe that Thoreau’s spirituality is more specifically Buddhist than Hindu, although it combines elements of both (as well as Confucianism). I also argue that his writing—not only *Walden* but his journals as well—is not only spiritual, but *primarily* spiritual in nature, and that critics have failed to see this because of the Eastern-influenced style in which Thoreau thought, wrote, and lived. His style is not religious language, but ordinary language given a religious valence. Moreover, his thinking remains spiritual after his writing ceases to be; because the writing changes, virtually all critics have assumed that his thinking changed as

well. Only a few, very recent critics are arriving at the realization that this assumption is wrong. Finally, no critics have considered the effect of Thoreau's fragile health on his thinking. I believe his battle with tuberculosis shaped Thoreau and *Walden* more than has been recognized. Ultimately, one may profitably read Thoreau through the lenses of eco-criticism, Transcendentalism, American literature, or one of many other critical lenses. However, at least for me, reading him as an early (semi-)Buddhist working out what it means to live a contemplative life in the face of death offers the most profound reading of all.

### Buddhist, or Everything But?

Critics have traditionally described Thoreau's spirituality in two major ways: one, that while he was a cheerful mishmash of Eastern religions, his main sympathy was with Hinduism; and two, that his Orientalism was a youthful flirtation of which he quickly tired. Their evidence is in many ways perfectly sound, and yet their conclusions wrong, on both counts, because they have theorized and contextualized Thoreau in ways that he himself did not.

Thoreau is often credited with being, if not one of the first professed American Buddhists, then an early pioneer of Buddhism in America.<sup>1</sup> In *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Rick Fields writes, "He was certainly not the only one of his generation to live a contemplative life, but he was, it seems, one of the few to

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, a typically Western formulation that ignores the presence of Buddhist Chinese and Japanese immigrants in California. Buddhist scholar/practitioners are careful to make distinctions between immigrant-community Buddhism in America and Caucasian convert Buddhism in America, but popular histories tend not to be as careful with such matters.

live it in a Buddhist way. That is to say, he was perhaps the first American to explore the nontheistic mode of contemplation which is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism” (62-3). [The nontheistic mode is an important point to which we will return, because it contributes to identifying Thoreau more as Buddhist than as Hindu.] Fields goes on, “How deeply he had gone, and how closely his friends identified him with the Orientals, is apparent in the description John Weiss gave in 1865...’He went about like a priest of Buddha who expects to arrive soon at the summit of a life of contemplation” (64). Thomas Tweed concurs that “Abundant evidence of his personal engagement with Buddhism...assures Thoreau a place of prominence” in the history of American Buddhism (Tweed xvii).

Many critics, though, have held that to call Thoreau Buddhist is either ahistorical or reading too much Buddhism into a man whose writing alludes far more often to Hindu and Confucian belief. In fact, Thoreau’s own contemporaries saw him as primarily Buddhist, something David Scott acknowledges while he argues otherwise. Scott writes, “As early as 1890, Caldwell talked about how in Thoreau’s ‘profession and practice of Buddhism...it is possible to trace a vein of Buddhism all through his life and writings...[H]is Buddhism is plainly visible” (14). Actually, as Fields shows, references to Thoreau’s Buddhism date even further back, to 1865, and it was observed not only by critics like Caldwell, but by his personal circle of friends.

Nevertheless, there is considerable resistance to calling Thoreau Buddhist, and it largely stems from an apparent lack of Buddhist references in his writings.

Of all critics, Scott argues this point most emphatically, saying, “Thoreau’s references to Buddhism were sparse and tangential. A passing remark comes in *Walden*...no further references to Buddhism and the Buddha appear in *A Week* and *Walden*” (16).<sup>2</sup> Arthur Christy, writing in 1932, notes Thoreau’s borrowing from “Hindus, Chinese, and Persians”—but not Buddhists (199). Both Scott and Alan Hodder (who specializes in transcendentalism’s debt to the east) single out the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a primary text for Thoreau (Scott 18; Hodder “Asian Influences” 33). Hodder elsewhere notes that “despite the vast differences among cultures of South, East, and Western Asia, for him, as for many Orientalists of his day, India came to epitomize the Orient generally” (Hodder, “Ex Orient Lux” 411) and that Buddhism and Hinduism were confused (at best) in Western thought.

[In a related vein, Hongbo Tan argues that Thoreau’s debt to Chinese thinking in particular has been obscured, writing, “Anxious to defend Thoreau’s originality, or rather his Occidentality, critics...have tended to minimize Thoreau’s debt to the Orient” (276). Tan points to 1916 as the beginning of this trend. The historical trend, then, is that while Thoreau’s friends commented frequently on his Asian practice, and more than one called it specifically Buddhist, critics writing after his death began an attempt to “re-Americanize” him—and it continues today: although I cite several scholars on Thoreau and Asian practice, it is in fact a very small portion of Thoreau criticism generally.]

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<sup>2</sup> The “passing remark” is that Thoreau had “effected [the] transmigration” of a woodchuck that was digging up his bean garden at Walden, according to Scott. In fact, while reincarnation occurs in both Hinduism and Buddhism, it is far more emphasized in the former, so it is somewhat strange that Scott considers this comment more specifically Buddhist than Hindu.

If there are few references in Thoreau's writing to Buddhism, and many to Hinduism (with a lesser number of references to Confucianism and Persian mysticism), then the logical conclusion is that Thoreau must have been Hindu in his sympathies. I do not think this is correct, but to understand why requires a careful look at Thoreau's practice and language.

David Scott refers to Thoreau's frustrating "readiness to use Hindu materials out of their immediate context for his own purposes" (17). Thoreau uses *all* materials this way. Malcolm Clemens Young writes, "Thoreau hid many of his intellectual debts. The originality, spontaneity, and individuality that he valued most made him less likely to describe his faith explicitly in terms set out by people who came before him" (11). This is a key point—this hiding of sources is transcendentalist in its nature because it emphasizes individuality and spontaneous insight. It is also Eastern, and specifically Buddhist, in its nature. The Buddha told his followers to be "lamps unto themselves" (Kornfield 125). They were not to take even his teachings as true simply because he taught them; rather, they were to establish through direct personal insight whether or not the teachings were accurate and useful. Thoreau hides his intellectual debts, not out of dishonesty, but because both transcendentalism and Buddhism teach that all insights, all wisdom must ultimately be one's own, or they are neither insight nor wisdom. Unfortunately for later scholars, this tendency only contributes to the confusion over his allegiance.

Thoreau's language clarifies much of this confusion and marks him as far more Buddhist than Hindu, but because it is based in metaphor and allusion, only a reader who recognizes Buddhist tropes will realize this. Fields, a longtime Buddhist, is one such reader. "As early as 1841," Fields says, "Thoreau had written in his journal that 'I want to go soon & live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds. It will be a success if I leave myself behind.'" (62). Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism, and as such absorbed many of its terms. *Atman* is Sanskrit for "self" and *anatman* for non-self. Both Hinduism and Buddhism use the same terms, but the doctrine of self and no-self is only one element of Hinduism, which focuses more heavily on the life cycle, caste, karma, reincarnation, yogic practices, etc. It was Buddhism that made self and no-self its central focus, aiming at the achievement of enlightenment via realization of no-self. In a nutshell, that doctrine is *everything* Buddhism is about, and only one small part of Hinduism. Virtually any scholar could read Thoreau's "leave myself behind" as a spiritual metaphor, but only one who understands the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism can correctly locate the source of that metaphor.

Hodder cites another metaphor, also from language shared by both Hinduism and Buddhism but more foundational in Buddhism [the quote from Thoreau is from the "Solitude" section of *Walden*]:

"There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still." The obvious point here is the importance of retaining the senses, but as with so many of Thoreau's

formulations, it invites an alternative construction: he should keep his senses into adulthood but he should also keep them “still.” According to this second reading, to “still” the senses, as in the case of the Hindu or Buddhist meditator, is the best way to keep them. (“Ex Orient Lux” 416)

Another Buddhist concept Thoreau uses is “attention”: “My thoughts are concentrated; I am all compact...My power of observation and contemplation is much increased. My attention does not wander. The world and my life are simplified. What now of Europe [and America] and Asia?” (Shepard 222) In fact, this quote gathers up a few Buddhist keywords, “attention” along with “contemplation,” “simplified,” and “observation,” and throws in a comment that collapses the distinctions between one faith—or continent—and another. The “power of observation” phrase will have lifelong importance for Thoreau, and the collapsing of distinction is both Buddhist and transcendentalist.

One of the most important metaphors Thoreau uses is that of being awake. He opens *Walden* with it; in “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” he writes memorably, “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” (*Walden* 85)? E.B. White catches the import of and expands on this quote: “It is an account of a man’s journey into the mind...Thoreau was well aware that no one can alert his neighbors who is not wide awake himself, and he went to the woods (among other reasons) to make sure that he would stay awake during his broadcast” (792-3). Again, anyone can

understand that “I have never yet met a man who was quite awake” is a spiritual metaphor, as is one of Thoreau’s most famous lines, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake” (*Walden* 312). But the Eastern parallel for “awake” is not found in Hinduism. “Buddha” is a Sanskrit name that literally means “the awakened one.” As the story goes:

Immediately after his enlightenment, a man came by and, struck by the Buddha’s shining countenance, asked, “Are you a god?”

“No.”

“Are you a magical being?”

“No.”

“A wizard or a saint?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?” the man finally asked.

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.” (Boyer 19)

Writing to a friend, Thoreau cries, “Blake! Blake! Are you awake? Are you aware what an ever-glorious morning this is? What long expected never to be repeated opportunity is now offered to get life & knowledge? For my part I am trying to wake up” (*Letters* 141).

Arthur Versluis notes the connection between another Thoreauvian concept and Buddhism, and also how such connections can be obscured by language that is not on the surface spiritual:

Thoreau's debt to Asian religions in *Walden* is evident not only in obvious ways, as in the vegetarianism, but even in subtle places, as in the passage when stating his aims, Thoreau exhorts us to “simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary, eat but one”...Is it only coincidence that in the Buddhist tradition the monks (according to the earliest *vinaya*)<sup>3</sup> eat only one meal a day and that Thoreau read about just this tradition in his copy of Hardy’s *Manual of Buddhism*? Such subtle references or echoes recur throughout Thoreau’s writing, suggesting the degree to which he had assimilated his reading. (90)

It is, of course, not “only coincidence.” I noted above Fields’ description of Thoreau’s “nontheistic mode” of practice. Fields raises a key, subtle point about the distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism grows out of Hinduism; much vocabulary and many practices carry over. But even more practices do not. The Hindu idea of caste (which Thoreau explicitly rejects) does not extend into Buddhism. Neither does the Hindu cycle of life, which outlines four stages: student, householder, elder, and renunciate (*sannyasin*). Renunciates are those near death, who give up home, possessions (including, often, all clothing) and retreat from the

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<sup>3</sup> *Vinaya*—monastic rules of living

community, living in the forest and practicing *bhakti* yoga, which consists of devotional practices centered on one god to whom one feels drawn (Smith 50-55). First, Westerners of Thoreau's generation seem not to understand the difference between *sannyasin* and ascetics: all castes are expected to pass through the *sannyasin* stage at the end of life, but only certain castes may become ascetics. One reason that Buddhism represents a break from Hinduism is that the Buddha became an ascetic out of the Brahmin caste, to whom the role was forbidden. Second, Thoreau himself neither practices nor refers to these cycles. Nor does his practice resemble *bhakti* yoga in any way. Rather, as Fields says, Thoreau's practice is the nontheistic practice that is inaugurated specifically by Buddhism after its break from Hinduism.

David Scott concedes this point. He cites Thoreau's "selectivity," saying that Thoreau favored "Gita strands on selfless detached action (karma yoga) and yogic training of the mind and body (dhyana yoga) rather than its strong devotional (bhakti) material on Krishna" (18). This, though, is highly unlikely to be "selective" borrowing directly from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: the relatively minor strands that Thoreau emphasizes are exactly those that are more unchanged from Hinduism to Buddhism; Buddhism discards bhakti yoga, the caste system, and the life cycle—to echo Versluis' question, is it supposed to be mere coincidence that Thoreau makes the same changes, in addition to making recommendations that come straight from the Buddhist *vinaya*? We know that Thoreau read both Hardy's *Manual of Buddhism*, mentioned above, and portions of the Lotus Sutra. I believe it is quite

likely that he either read more Buddhism than modern reconstructors of his reading habits have been able to identify, or he read Buddhist teachings that were (due to poor understanding in the West of the intricacies of Eastern thought, or possibly poor translations) misidentified as Hindu.

Of course, in some ways it doesn't really matter. In his journal, Thoreau writes cheerfully, "The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot" (Shepard 163). In another journal entry, he claims, "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" (Versluis 82). Thoreau never divided his life or his practice into specific strands: "this is Buddhist, that is Hindu." Why should we? His work is an attempt to merge them—and a successful attempt, in that he is credited as a pioneer of American Buddhism as well as having his debt to Hindu thought acknowledged.

There may be a final reason why Thoreau's practice is Buddhist, but called Hindu, and it is a reason I have not seen any critic suggest before now. It may be that Thoreau calls his practice "Hindu" not only because India came to stand for the East generally and not only because his first readings were in Hinduism, but also because a stated aim of transcendentalism was to look for the "sources" of a "universal" religion. Thoreau lived in the birthplace of Unitarian Universalism and

was an enthusiastic supporter (if not a practitioner). He writes, in a passage from “Civil Disobedience”:

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountainhead. (Thoreau 692)

Since Buddhism had been an offshoot of Hinduism, and since transcendentalism sought original sources, perhaps Thoreau was favoring the older faith by name—not through misunderstanding, but through a consciously transcendentalist decision to seek the “fountainhead.”

### Thoreau’s Spiritual Aim

Even if we grant that Thoreau was probably more Buddhist than Hindu, it does not answer the question of exactly what he intended *Walden* to accomplish (either the experience itself, or the book he wrote about it). Once again, the answer has been subtly present in Thoreau all along. In “Economy,” the very first section of *Walden*, he writes, “To be a philosopher...is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (14). Hodder (“Ex Orient Lux” 409) demonstrates via journal entries that Thoreau’s most intense engagement with Eastern books came just before he moved to Walden Pond. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Thoreau read,

“The wise see knowledge and action as one” (quoted in MacShane, 327), and he immediately put what he read into practice. If he was reading about contemplation, he had to experience it as well. I observe in my book, “It is easy while reading about Buddhism to say, ‘yes, yes, I get it.’ But you cannot merely think your way to enlightenment...you must *do* it. One Buddhist wisely observes, ‘Like with everything else in the Buddhist tradition, this notion [of enlightenment] is useful as a verb and harmful as a noun’” (Boyer 30-31). Thoreau grasps that contemplation reaches its greatest usefulness as a verb, that action and understanding are one; after all his reading, he cannot but go to Walden.

Critics who focus on Thoreau’s spirituality are unanimous in understanding this. As early as 1932, Arthur Christy states categorically, “The first step in understanding *Walden* is to see Thoreau’s religious philosophy as its main emphasis” (199). He cites Thoreau’s friend Moncure Conway, who rhapsodizes about Thoreau at Walden, “Like the pious yogi...this poet and naturalist, by equal consecration, became a part of the field and the forest” (202). Versluis (79) concurs: “Without question more than anyone else in mid-nineteenth-century New England, Thoreau tried to live by what he had read and recognized as perennial truth,” and “*Walden* is shown to be a religious experiment, an attempt to live life consciously and reverently, seeing every aspect as it is, not out of a sense of external obligation, but because in such an ethical life one can realize truth” (85). Versluis further accepts Thoreau as what the writer no doubt imagined himself to be, saying that “the initiate always lives for a time at least away from society, in order to discipline

himself and to realize for himself the essence at the heart of man and Nature both” (88).

E.B. White, too, caught the spiritual aim at the heart of *Walden*, which was that “Steadiness is at the heart of *Walden*...the discipline of looking always at what was to be seen” (792). Seeing clearly, without adding our own emotional and reactionary narratives, is another foundational trope in Buddhism, and as Thoreau’s health fails, it becomes fundamental to his journals as well. Leslie Perrin Wilson, writing about Walden as a location, says that Thoreau showed readers that it was possible to attain clear sight anywhere, not only at Walden, and that one’s own home country could just as easily be the ground of enlightenment (Perrin 663). When people asked me why on earth I had written a book about, of all things, the intersections between NASCAR and Buddhism, I always explained that I was a Southerner and a Buddhist and then offered them a quote from the 13<sup>th</sup>-Century Zen master Dogen: “If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?”

Thoreau’s genius lies in wisdom that ranges more widely and fearlessly than most Americans of his day and yet remains as close as the pond just outside the village. Emerson reads about Asian faiths, and his reading grows more enthusiastic over time, but only Thoreau actually *embodies* the teachings, abandoning village life to practice contemplation. He turns contemplation from a noun into a verb and blends it with a love of physical immediacy (i.e., America) and nature that are hallmarks of his transcendentalism.

The aim of his sojourn at Walden Pond, and arguably of his journals as well, is to be a lamp unto himself. It is to put into practice the philosophies he loved and to realize for himself the wisdom that earlier seekers had discovered. He had to discover the real, lived effect of these teachings, but once he had done so, it was paradoxical to think that writing *Walden* could serve to teach others. Either he had to use *Walden* to exhort and inspire others to do as he did and “live deliberately,” (and he has succeeded wildly in inspiring exactly the type of young seeker that he once was) or he could use it in another way altogether. Malcolm Clemens Young, who has extensively studied Thoreau’s journals, argues that, “In many regards, Thoreau’s writing has been misinterpreted...Interpreters have treated his writings as if they were systematic statements of his beliefs rather than as expressions of a practical effort over time to transform himself” (27). Having written about Buddhist practice, this, I think, is exactly the right answer. Not to be too mystical about it, but practice becomes writing becomes practice. Thoreau records his experience at Walden partly out of transcendentalism’s exuberant optimism. Like his fellows, he hopes that he can encourage the world into perfection. But a writer’s first and most important audience is always that writer—and this seems even truer when writing about religious belief and practice. Obliquely, Thoreau confirms this—writing to his friend Blake, he says, “Whether a man sleeps or wakes...whether he uses a microscope, or a telescope, or his naked eye, a man never discovers anything...but himself. Whatever he says or does he merely reports himself...[T]he only thing a

man makes is his condition, or fate... 'My own destiny made & mended here' (*Letters* 182).

Thoreau conducts his own lifelong experiment in living deliberately. He is his own subject and, like any good scientist, he records his observations. *Walden* is not the final summation of his well-considered beliefs—it is released too immediately after his time at the pond and too early in his life to be. It is instead a life, a belief system, and an experience, captured as he braves it through.

“The Best You Can Write Will Be the Best You Are”

Thoreau kept a journal that eventually totaled over two million words (Young 8). Young argues that like *Walden* the journals are a record and an act of self-transformation—the line above was recorded there (58). Thoreau’s aim—in living at Walden, in writing *Walden*, in writing his journals—was to put his practice *into* practice, and to become in the process one who lived as he believed.

Critical opinion has not been kind to the journals. They begin by reflecting Thoreau’s ecstatic reaction to discovering the Eastern religions and mapping out his beliefs, go on to provide commentary on the Walden experience, writing, publishing, politics, and so on. Yet they end not with a bang but a whimper—the final few hundred pages are merely records of tree growth, weather, and other local nature phenomena. Reflecting an earlier era’s boldly opinionated editors, Odell Shepard (editing the journals in 1927) pronounced, “The last volumes of the 'Journals'... seem to show an almost complete triumph of the observer in Thoreau over the thinker

and poet...He fills hundreds of pages with minute records of things seen and heard...No attempt has been made to represent these great deserts of writing. One prefers to remember only the oases" (292). Later editors and critics agreed; Versluis writes, "By 1855 Thoreau's interest in the East was waning...he had grown more and more interested in the wild and in the natural, and his journals reflect this change" (95). Ultimately, he says it is "impossible" to consider Thoreau a serious believer in Eastern religion because of this apparent falling-off in enthusiasm (98). Young argues, and I agree, that failure to reiterate does not necessarily equal loss of interest. Rather, Thoreau has *internalized* his reading and is living it out in practice. Perhaps contradictorily, Versluis (83) suggests as much himself—"Thoreau had no need to copy passages into his journals, for his embodiment of Oriental teachings was in his daily life and in his published works"—before concluding that a paucity of passages was problematical.

Whether Versluis agrees, disagrees, or both, Thoreau's shift away from writing about spiritual matters and toward observation seems to me to confirm rather than deny his distinctly Buddhist understanding. First, I believe it does reflect an internalization and embodiment of teachings, which goes far deeper than merely reiterating them could go. Second, this pattern echoes the simplicity reached by many old Buddhist masters toward the end of their lives. They absorb themselves fully in the wonder of each new day, and no lecture could be a better teaching than that. "Many [critics]," Young says, "assume that perhaps the most famous of the transcendentalists simply lost faith in the transcendental and in

'Romantic nature,' that he stopped seeking Spirit" (8). Rather, he argues, "Thoreau did not lose a particular system of beliefs so much as he found a new form for expressing what his faith already implied. He merely deepened his commitment" (10). He writes

The specific references to God become less frequent over the course of the *Journal*, and this leads interpreters to suggest that Thoreau lost his transcendentalist faith....Perhaps most conspicuously, he gives his reader far less advice on how to live. In many respects, he seems to have already come to his final conclusions on these questions, and during the last years of his life, he is putting into practice ideas that he had already conceived (25-26).

This is a more astute and empathetic reading than previous critics, and it neatly echoes Buddhist teachings: if your faith tells you that "just seeing" (also known as "bare awareness") is important, then you try to "just see," that is, to record nature and let the deep philosophical questions take care of themselves. There are many common Buddhist anecdotes, little nuggets of wisdom, centering on *satori*, or the instantaneous dissolving of the veil between oneself and enlightenment. One is as simple as the oft-quoted haiku by Masahide: "Barn's burnt down / Now / I can see the moon"—in which the barn is the self. Another tells of a junior monk who approaches a senior monk to ask for teaching about the nature of Buddhahood. "Have you eaten?" asked the old man. On the young man's assent, the old monk replied, "Then wash your bowl." And with that, the story goes, the junior monk was

enlightened. No preaching, just full absorption in present living—enlightenment is nothing other than the embodiment of complete presence, but it usually takes a very full lifetime, and a lot of study, to grasp this simple truth. For Thoreau, simply being alive, in Concord, and paying enough attention to record the first birds of spring was a profound practice.

Again, Thoreau quietly confirms such a hypothesis. He writes in his journal, “The highest condition of art is artlessness. Truth is always paradoxical. He will get to the goal first who stands still” (Young 109fn). This quote goes directly to everything already discussed: the ‘artlessness’ of his nature observations that led earlier editors to dismiss their subtle artfulness; his absorption of the Eastern fondness for paradox; and the way scholars sometimes miss spiritual elements of his work because they are hidden under seemingly secular words like “still.” He also confirms more explicitly that he has not given up on his spiritual beliefs. In a letter to his friend Blake, Thoreau says, “It is a great satisfaction to find that your oldest convictions are permanent. With regard to essentials I have never had occasion to change my mind. The aspect of the world varies from year to year, as the landscape is differently clothed, but I find that the *truth* is still *true*” (italics his) (Thoreau *Letters* 154).

*Walden* revolves around practice—the putting into motion of beliefs—and it burns with urgency. Twenty years later, quiet observation becomes essential at the end of the journals—indeed, it becomes the essence of the journals themselves. Other than speculating about Thoreau’s spirituality, no critics have considered

reasons for either condition. Young captures what I believe is the reason, although he seems unaware of the implications of his facts. Young (47) records that Thoreau had tuberculosis attacks in 1836, 1841, 1843, 1855, and 1860 (he would finally die of the disease in 1862). The timing of the attacks seems significant to me in light of his writing. 1841 and 1843 would have been at the height of his voracious spate of Eastern reading—which as Hodder shows (“Ex Orient Lux” 409) came all in a rush just prior to his retreat to Walden. Between two serious illnesses back-to-back, and the Hindu/Buddhist focus on death and annihilation of the self, Thoreau must have had a heightened sense of mortality—and thus urgency—as he devised his Walden scheme. Upon returning from Walden, he would enjoy his longest period of health—twelve years—during which he traveled to the American West and became interested in Native American matters. His final, fatal bout with tuberculosis begins in 1860, just around the time that critics begin complaining about the purely observational nature of his journals. [One suspects that the critics did not stop to think about the arduousness of writing hundreds of pages by hand while dying, and might have cut Thoreau a little slack on his choice of topics.]

One piece of evidence for a sense of urgency in *Walden* may be Thoreau’s insistence on the importance of the present moment. Here again transcendentalism dovetails with Buddhist teachings—focus on the present moment stretches from the words of the Buddha himself to modern Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh’s 2006 book *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment* and exist parallel with transcendentalism’s emphasis on immediacy. In “Sounds,” Thoreau speaks of “the

bloom of the present moment” (*Walden* 105) and in his journal he writes, “Now or never! You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in the present moment...There is no other land; there is no other life but this...There is no world for the penitent and regretful” (Young 36).

The end of *Walden* does not correspond with a period of illness. However, many readers have been startled by the abruptness just before the conclusion: “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1847” (*Walden* 299). It reveals to me the same sense of hurry, the sense of time being short, as this: “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one” (*Walden* 303). Thoreau alludes to reincarnation, but that this may be bravado is betrayed by his uncharacteristically tentative “perhaps.” Perhaps it also seemed to him that, having survived two recent tuberculosis attacks, he was living on borrowed time.

Young, by way of rehabilitating the reputation of the later journals, stresses the centrality for Thoreau of seeing. According to Young, “Perhaps the most oft-repeated phrase in Thoreau’s journal is ‘I see.’ He writes, ‘I observe,’ ‘it appears,’ ‘I hear,’ ‘I notice,’ and ‘I perceive’ over and over” (124), and “Although Thoreau loses interest in many topics he addresses in the early journal, such as heroism, poetry, art, and music, he never stops asking himself how he can see the world more carefully” (130). Arthur Christy makes explicit the connection, writing, “Thoreau seems never to have divorced his interest in nature from his reading of any

scripture” (Christy 195-6). Both are right; I believe further that this is Thoreau’s final accommodation with the failure of his health and the disease that would kill him. Action was no longer an option; like an old Zen master, he could only express his understanding by embodying bare awareness and complete absorption in the present, wonderful moment. Perhaps he realized (in the profound religious sense of “realized”) that in the end the measure of a man may be his ability to remain still and witness the universe. Shepard (336) records lines that Thoreau wrote a few months before his death, lines that might serve him well as an epitaph—“Wherever men have lived there is a story to be told...you are simply a witness.”

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