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ECOLOGICAL CONTEMPLATION AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: THE CASE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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Ecological Contemplation as Spiritual Practice: The Case of Henry David Thoreau

By Lawrence Buell

A paper on this topic may seem a strange addition to a conference on Buddhism and ecology. I am a specialist in American literature with scant knowledge of Buddhism, and the same was true of the person whose work and thought I shall discuss in most detail, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), a nineteenth-century American writer, intellectual radical, natural historian, as well as a forerunner and prophet of the environmental movement in the United States. Thoreau is best known in U. S. history as a member of the so-called Transcendentalist movement, a broadly eclectic intellectual movement drawing on (primarily) western sources that flourished in this very part of the country 150 years ago, under the intellectual leadership of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's mentor. What, then, might justify including such a paper in this gathering?

Two considerations especially. The first arises from the precise significance of the Transcendentalist movement for the history of American religious thought, in particular its role in calling American attention to the importance of Asian faith traditions, Hinduism in the first instance but afterwards Confucianism and Buddhism as well. The other justification is Thoreau's status and influence as a pioneer nature writer and proto-ecological thinker. Furthermore, these two considerations are likely interrelated. On the one hand, one of Thoreau's distinctive legacies to later environmental thinkers and writers has been a fusion of spiritual and ecological ways of conceiving the natural world that has roots in his Transcendentalist affiliations. On the other hand, Thoreau's Transcendentalist conception of both the proper nature of spirituality and his proto-ecological sense of the proper relation between humankind and the natural world was at least indirectly influenced by his enthusiasm for what he believed to be the distinctive spirit of

Asian religions, simplistic though that understanding was.

1

American Transcendentalism was the first intellectual movement in U. S. history to take the great religions of Asia seriously, including Buddhism; and Thoreau was one of the first of the group to do so. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that he had a profound understanding of these faith traditions.[1] He did not. To take something seriously does not necessarily mean that you understand it. On the contrary, enthusiasm often depends upon *lack* of detailed knowledge beyond one or two rudimentary ideas that excite you. Neither Emerson nor Thoreau nor any of the other Transcendentalists were able to free themselves from the crude binary thinking of their day about the supposed differences between western and eastern cultures, such as the supposition that westerners are active and aggressive whereas Asians are unassertive and contemplative, and so forth.[2] To that extent, both were "orientalists" in Edward Said's pejorative definition of the term–Eurocentric intellectuals who viewed the non-west as the west's mirror opposite–although unlike Said's paradigmatic orientalist Transcendentalists did not pretend to be experts but rather used their stereotypical vision of "Asian" thought and culture to critique their home culture more than to promote its superiority relative to the laggard orient.[3] Neither Emerson nor Thoreau were literate in any Asian language, ancient or modern. Neither ever met a practicing Buddhist, and indeed neither of them had a clear idea of the differences between Buddhism and Hinduism.

Indeed the Transcendentalists' intellectual agenda differed so sharply from what would seem to be the fundamental orientation of Buddhism (and virtually all other faith traditions as well) as to seem positively a betrayal of these, at least from the standpoint of a strict believer.

To begin with, the Transcendentalists who interested themselves in Buddhism and other nonwestern faiths were strongly anti-institutional. They were committed to a cosmopolitan view

of “spirituality” or “the religious” that made them skeptical, often hostile, toward specific institutional embodiments of it. They were seekers of spiritual Truth with a capital “T” chronically suspicious of all specific traditions’ claims to be the best or only true path. They turned to Asian religions in the first instance as a way of exposing what they took to be the narrow parochialism of the standard Protestant Christianity of their day, in order to promote a more inclusive vision of the religious. As one of them put it, it was the idea of a “sympathy of religions” that especially excited them, not particular creeds.[4] Altogether, then, the Transcendentalists’ view of the nature of the religious was decidedly post-sectarian and therefore at cross purposes with the mindset and politics of the vast majority of believers in the specific faith traditions that interested them.

Furthermore, to the extent that the movement rested upon a single core idea, that idea was the infinite potential of the transfigured individual self. Emerson once declared, with only slight exaggeration, that he had but “one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man.”[5] –By which he meant the potential for the elevation of the ordinary mundane self to the level of one’s ideal or best self (self with a capital S). The basis of this idea was the conviction, developed most fully in his essay “Self-Reliance,” that the human self is inherently divine, that God or divinity resides within each individual, even though in practice this inner divinity remains dormant or underactive most of the time.[6] Not all Transcendentalists wholly agreed with Emerson, but certainly Henry Thoreau did (for much of his life at any rate); and certainly the Self-Reliance idea functioned as the single most crucial point of departure for Transcendentalist thinking generally, even if not as a point of absolute consensus. Consequently, Transcendentalism as a religious persuasion differs sharply, perhaps irreconcilably, from the conceptions of the place of self espoused by the overwhelming majority of actual faith traditions. Therefore the most detailed study to date of the relation

between American Transcendentalism and Buddhism to date, Shôei Andô's *Zen and American Transcendentalism,* states emphatically that "the goal of Transcendentalism–namely, to be conscious of the One at the bottom of the heart–abuts on the invisible barrier which obstinately obstructs our advancing to the goal of Zen."[7]

Strictly speaking, Andô's statement misrepresents Transcendentalism's goal, which was not "consciousness" of the One at the bottom of the heart so much as *realization* of the One. This is a particularly crucial mistake with regard to Thoreau as we shall see later on. Still, it's quite understandable that this writer, looking at Transcendentalism from the standpoint of his particular faith tradition, should have been upset by the emphasis that Emerson and Thoreau and a number of their other colleagues placed on the God within the self, despite the fact that the Transcendentalists themselves looked to Buddhism as a spiritual resource and despite that fact that Emerson was one of the personal heroes of the Japanese intellectual who was most responsible for promoting Zen Buddhism in the U. S., namely D. T. Suzuki.[8]

Yet it remains that Emerson, Thoreau, and several other Transcendentalist colleagues played an important role as early American promoters of Asian religions, including Buddhism, as great thought traditions whose scriptures and other classic writings offered insights distinctive from those of Judaeo-Christianity yet no less profound. Emerson and Thoreau, for example, were chiefly responsible for publishing a series of what they called "Ethnical Scriptures" in Transcendentalism's leading periodical, *The Dial* (1840-44)–excerpts from Asian sacred texts and classic literature. These included the first American publication (translated from the French) of a portion of a Buddhist text, the *Lotus Sutra,* which teaches the principle of "dependent origination," which as I understand it posits the inherent interrelatedness of all things. Although it has recently been shown that Thoreau himself was not, as had long been supposed, the translator of this

anonymously-printed excerpt, the mistake is understandable given his role as co-editor of this series and the resemblances between the text and his own emerging theory of nature.[9] Transcendentalism later helped supply a vocabulary and impetus for some of the first American converts to Buddhism.[10]

Thoreau was the first and most lastingly influential figure among the dozen or so leading Transcendentalists to have been influenced by Asian thought in a formative way, whatever the limits of his knowledge. From youth he was strongly attracted to the image of the Hindu or Confucian or Buddhist sage who withdraws from secular affairs to a place of hermitage in a more natural setting for the sake of leading a more rigorously pure and contemplative life.

Thoreau's literary masterpiece, *Walden* (1854), a record of his two-year experiment in voluntary simplicity while living in a small cabin he built himself on the shore of rustic Walden Pond at the edge of his native village of Concord, Massachusetts, again and again pictures his sojourn in such terms. Here for example is how Thoreau describes passing the time on a summer day.[11]

> There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or of the hands. . . . Sometimes, in a summer morning . . . I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness . . . 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 time 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. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of

> singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest. . . . This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting. . . . The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence.

This passage corroborates that Thoreau's conception of "the oriental" mode of being was both highly stereotypical and personally crucial. It was crucial as a way of marking off the general difference he wanted to establish between his own Walden lifestyle and that of his fellow-citizens, as well as his more particular conception of the intimacy thereby made possible between one who followed this lifestyle and the rhythms of the natural world.

At first sight, to be sure, Thoreau's appeal to the "oriental" might seem nothing more than a way of giving a tinge of provocative exoticism to his dissent from the prevailing occidental and particularly Puritan legacy of the work ethic, which (as *Walden* elsewhere makes clear) was intensifying even as he wrote owing to the onset of the industrial revolution in the American northeast and the transformation of Thoreau's home village into a Boston suburb.[12] On the other hand, the author himself at least partway acknowledges the limits of his knowledge of Asian wisdom by the care with which he positions himself in relation to the model he invokes ("I realized what the Orientals mean"), a statement that studiously refrains from claiming either that he was either a true "oriental" or a scholarly expert. This is not to say that the oriental analogy was unimportant to him. On the contrary, it was highly significant that, contrary to the way some of Thoreau's closest friends described him, and contrary to the practice of some later nature writers influenced by him, Thoreau typically refused to claim for himself the tradition of spiritual reclusiveness that was available to him as part of the legacy of western culture: namely, the

tradition of Christian monasticism.[13] Yet what counts above all for Thoreau in this passage is to establish the virtues and attractions of cultivating a certain sort of contemplative disposition: the suspension of all active striving in order to achieve and sustain a prolonged state of "revery," during which one's mind/body becomes as unselfconscious as the surrounding natural world and in that sense at one with it. To this end, his invocation of the oriental analogy is not meant as definitive so much as preliminary or transitional. It is a means of bringing into focus his vision and his articulation of the ethic of overcoming the separation of self from nature and the ontological sense of harmonious bodily and spiritual being that follows from that overcoming.[14] This brings me to this paper's other major concern, the spiritual dimension of Thoreauvian ecological contemplation and–to a lesser extent–that of other, more recent nature writers as well.

2

Here I want to concentrate especially on a paradox that follows from the importance Thoreau and other western nature writers typically attach to the idea of instilling awareness of the natural world and humankind's relation to it. One of American nature writing's most pervasive goals is to instil this greater sense of awareness.[15] From Thoreau to the present, the commonest rhetorical means of accomplishing this is a sequence of observations and/or experiences seen through the eyes of an autobiographical experiencer. Here arises the paradox that nature writing–as well as nature poetry that pursues the same end of instilling awakened consciousness–is in principle both intractably I-centered and intractably dedicated to the overcoming of an I-centered mentality, and beyond this to the overcoming of an anthropocentric view of the natural world. As such it is committed to pursue what I elsewhere call an "aesthetics of relinquishment"–*i.e.* relinquishment that is of the position of the centrality of the human within the larger ecological web of life–although this quest is also fated to fall short because

anthropocentrism in these genres can never be reduced to the zero degree.[16]

Throughout the literature of American nature writing and nature poetry one finds descriptions of the desired state of enlightened experience, when subjective striving and individual identity give way to the interpenetration of ego by the natural world. The passage from Thoreau's *Walden* that I quoted a moment ago is one such example. Here are two other, more modern ones. The first is from Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which imitates *Walden* in describing the author's experiences living in and around a rustic cabin during the cycle of a year. In this particular passage, the author describes first the experience and then the overall effect of long, concentrated, absolutely quiet and still observation of the behavior of a muskrat, a large but shy rodent that makes its nest in the banks of streams and rivers. Here is part of her reflection on the experience.[17]

> In the forty minutes I watched him, he never saw me, smelled me, or heard me at all. When he was in full view of course I never moved except to breathe. My eyes would move too, following his, but he never noticed. . . . he never knew I was there.
>
> I never knew I was there, either. For that forty minutes last night I was as purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate; I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared . . . . I have done this sort of thing so often that I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now. And I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. . . . Martin Buber [an eminent modern Jewish thinker] quotes an old Hasid master who said, "When you walk across the fields with your mind pure and holy, then from all the stones, and all growing things, and all animals, the sparks of their soul come out and cling to you, and then are purified and become a holy fire in you." This is one way of describing the energy that comes, using the specialized Kabbalistic vocabulary of Hasidim.

Next to this passage and the one from Thoreau, I want to set still another one before pausing to comment. It comes from Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard*, the record of a long trip on foot through the Nepalese Himalayas nominally in the hope of seeing a snow leopard, but more importantly (for the author) a quest for spiritual healing and comfort after the trauma of his wife's death. This particular passage, toward the end of the book, describes the author's growing sense of at-homeness within the initially strange and disorienting landscape.[18]

> I grow into these mountains like a moss. I am bewitched. The blinding snow peaks and the clarion air, the sound of earth and heaven in the silence, the requiem birds, the mythic beasts, the flags, the great horns, and old carved stones, the rough-hewn Tartars in their braids and homespun boots, the silver ice in the black river, the Kang, the Crystal Mountain. Also, I love the common miracles–the murmur of my friends at evening, the clay fires of smudgy juniper, the coarse dull food, the hardship and simplicity, the contentment of doing one thing at a time: when I take my blue tin cup into my hand, that is all I do. We have had no news of modern times since last September . . . and gradually my mind has cleared itself, and wind and sun pour through my head, as through a bell. Though we talk little here, I am never lonely; I am returned to myself.
>
> . . . . In another life–this isn't what I know, but how I feel–these mountains were my home; there is a rising of forgotten knowledge, like a spring from hidden aquifers under the earth.

Here the sense of at-oneness with the environment includes not only the "natural" landscape but the "cultural" landscape too. The author's environmental imagination is quickened not only by a general sense of relief and release at "getting away from it all" but also by a more specific sense of respect and affinity for Tibetan Buddhist culture–its disciplines of simplicity, the wisdom and serenity (as the author sees it) of some of the lamas and laypeople he has encountered--toward all

of which the author had already been drawn before his arrival as the result of previous travels and spiritual seeking, including instruction in Zen meditation. The three passages diverge in other ways as well. Thoreau and Dillard stress erasure of self-consciousness, Matthiessen the heightening of mindful self-consciousness. The mental experiences reported by Dillard and Matthiessen are intense, whereas Thoreau's is tranquil. But the three reported experiences all share in common a sense of the permeation of one's sense of identity by one's surroundings such that the boundaries of the normally isolated self become redefined in terms of those surroundings.

In each of these three cases and others like them, the writer's good faith can be challenged. Viewed skeptically, Matthiessen might seem little more than a sort of ecotourist, more humble and respectful than most to be sure, but nonetheless availing himself of the cheap pleasures of vicarious excitement through whose romantic gaze native inhabitants become indistinguishable from the exotic landscape. Dillard and Thoreau also reveal themselves to be dreamy escapees from "normal" life. They too, one (rightly) suspects, must have been subsidized in some fashion in order to be able to engage in such leisured contemplation. One might plausibly argue, moreover, that all three passages should be read not merely or even mainly as records of the experience of the independent self submitting to the web of ecological connectedness but rather as cases of self-absorption: as momentoes of *my* peak experience. Indeed, one of the marks of Thoreau's superior literary genius is its playful anticipation that his passage might be read this way ("This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt"), followed by a clever turning back of this charge against the hostile reader. (Because "the natural day" itself "is very calm," why should one reprove *my* "indolence"?)

Even though I myself share some of the suspicion Thoreau tries to deflect, in this paper I want to take his part, because whatever can be said against it the kinds of ecological contemplation

these passages express are by no means frivolous or trivial but, on the contrary, the fruit of a disciplined spiritual practice taken quite seriously by the authors themselves, whatever an unsympathetic reader might argue to the contrary. This practice has at least three components. First, the discipline, as another modern nature writer puts it, of conforming the "interior" landscape to the "exterior one": disciplining the rhythms and rituals of the individual thinker to the rhythms and rituals of one's environment.[19] Second, the disciplining of autonomous personal desire. Or rather "disciplines," since they are not quite identical from writer to writer. (For Dillard, it is especially the discipline of attentive observation; for Thoreau, it is the discipline of reducing one's wants and needs to the most basic level, so that labor in the conventional sense becomes almost unnecessary; for Matthiessen, it is the discipline of sublimating emotional turbulence to the point where he can accept, for example, the loss of his wife and the disappointment of not ever catching sight of a snow leopard.) Although this second kind of discipline is related to the first and indeed might seem to follow from it, it is also partially at cross-purposes, because of the measure of active striving involved in the first.

Third, most challenging of all, and not fully achieved in any of the reported experiences above, is the subjugation of the "egocentric" to the "ecocentric." As I hinted before, this is the hardest challenge of all for nature writing–and nature poetry as well–partly for human reasons and partly for reasons of genre. It is extremely hard to become *wholly* unconcerned with self, and perhaps impossible to expunge a flavor of idiosyncratic first personness from forms of writing based on personal experience.

In American literature about the experience of nature,[20] one of the writers who has come as close as anyone to the asymptotic limit of self-transcendence and in the process has conceptualized the challenge of this quest with unusual elegance is the most serious student of Buddhism among

our major creative writers, the poet-critic Gary Snyder. Before turning back to Thoreau, I want to illustrate my general point about the challenge of subjugating egocentric interests to ecocentric interests by glancing at a short Snyder poem called "For All." The poem ends with an ecological manifesto that playfully appropriates the language of the American Declaration of Independence: "I pledge allegiance to the soil/ of Turtle Island,/and to the beings who thereon dwell/ one ecosystem/ in diversity/ under the sun/ With joyful interpenetration of all." But the poem isn't merely a manifesto and nothing more. Before announcing its idea, the poem tries to perform it by evoking the sense of a chilly mid-September morning so as both to transmit the sense of personal experience and to dramatize the submersion of the individual person in to the ecosystem of which he is a part.[21]

> Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
> stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes
>   cold nose dripping
> singing inside
> creek music, heart music,
> smell of sun on gravel.

Following as he often does the precedents of classical Chinese and Japanese poetics, Snyder omits the personal pronoun and deflects attention away from the merely personal, from the image of a separate human person, by blurring the boundary between toes and stones, dripping nose and running water, the singing of the heart and the music of the creek. In other words, this part of the poem goes about as far in the direction of imagining the persona as integral with his natural surroundings, rather than a detached observer, as a lyric poem could possibly do without ceasing to be a lyric. But still a residue of irrepressible subjectivity clings to the poem. Indeed, it's clear from start to finish that the poem is less a representation of landscape than a representation of a

person's joyful subjective experience of landscape. And so it's fitting that the pledge of allegiance with which the poem ends is an expression of a commitment or desire rather than an insistence that a self-transcendent state of being has been achieved.

Perhaps it is at points like this when the relationship between the meditations of the western nature writer and Buddhist thought and practice about the relation between self and natural world is most provocative. I say this cautiously and hesitantly for several reasons: because of the limits of my knowledge of Buddhism, because Buddhism's various different strands and substrands no not seem equally concerned with ecological matters, because there seems to be a question of the extent to which modern green Buddhism is faithful to traditional Buddhism, and finally–and most importantly–because almost never can one establish *conclusively* a direct causal link between the evolution of nature writing and Buddhist influence, or any other Asian thought tradition for that matter.[22] With rare exceptions like Snyder, such points of affinity or resemblance as exist seem more analogic than causal.[23] Nevertheless, it seems potentially instructive that for Henry Thoreau, the father of American environmental imagination, engagement with Asian religions helped prepare the way even if not directly shape a crucial reconception of the cultivation of self that underlay his development from minor lyric poet to major nature writer.

Judging from Thoreau's early creative writing and his systematic attempt as a young man to master the classical and especially the English poetic canon, it would seem that his first literary ambition was to become a lyric poet. During this part of his career, as is clear not only from his formal writing but from the voluminous *Journal* that he kept life-long from the age of 20, Thoreau was also a strongly I-centered writer. At the beginning of *Walden* he famously stresses the point that all writing is inherently and uniquely autobiographical and that therefore he will conscientiously retain the first person mode of writing despite the convention of omitting it for

politeness' sake. Moreover, he goes on to insist that "I . . . require of every writer, first or last, a simple account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives."[24] *Walden* is, indeed, a strongly autobiographical book, intensely focused on the writer's experiment in voluntary simplicity. Yet the declaration I have just quoted is also somewhat misleading, for *Walden*'s rhetorical register changes as it goes along. The incidence of the first person singular diminishes as the actor-narrator takes an increasingly detailed interest in his surroundings and as the device of organizing chapters in topical pairs gives way, during the second half of the book, to the device of charting the progression of the seasons. These shifts reflect Thoreau's change of allegiances during the decade-long process of composing *Walden* from a romanticist I-focused approach to imagining nature to the more scientific and proto-ecological approach that marks his later thought and writing. Although *Walden* is therefore best understood as a work that moves in the direction of rather than fully instantiates the later, more "ecological" Thoreau, nonetheless, beginning with the book's central chapter, "The Ponds," two of the three interests that entitle Thoreau to be remembered as a forerunner of modern ecological science–limnology and phenology–are on display here.[25]

The shift in attitude toward nature that I have just sketched is commonly described as a shift from a romantic-Transcendental orientation toward nature toward a more systematic, "scientific" commitment to nature observation. This is true enough as far as it goes. Undoubtedly Emerson's romanticization in his first book, *Nature* (1836), of the Christian "natural theology" tradition–the tradition of "proving" the existence of divinity by examination of the design of the natural creation–was more influential for Thoreau than any other single precursive work.[26] Undoubtedly, Thoreau *did* shift from a comparatively post-Emersonian mystical view of nature toward a more empirical and systematic approach.[27] Neither of these frameworks fully satisfied

him, however. The former was too residually theocentric and too dominationist. Despite a number of gestures to the contrary, Emerson takes the position in *Nature*, (which he later qualified,) that nature exists for human edification and use, prophesying at the end of the book the advent of "the kingdom of man over nature."[28] The scientific view, on the other hand, despite being arguably less hierarchical than the theocentric on account of its commitment to understanding nature's material properties, had the disadvantages of being no less dualistic and much more starkly cognitive. Although Thoreau was attracted to the discipline of a regular regime of observation of nature in context and no less strongly to the daily physical exercise this required, he was repelled by the prospect of having to prioritize analytical classification to the detriment or exclusion of the sense of initimacy with and belonging to the natural world.

A few years after completing *Walden,* Thoreau wrote this revealing reflection in his journal about his evolving interest in the natural world that makes clear how the "method" he most prized differed from the scientific.[29]

> About half a dozen years ago I found myself . . . attending to plants with more method. . . . I remember gazing about with interest at the swamps about those days and wondering if I could ever attain to such familiarity with plants that I should know the species of every twig and leaf in them, that I should be acquainted with every plant (except grasses and cryptogamous ones), summer and winter, that I saw. . . . Still, I never studied botany, and do not to-day systematically, the most natural system is still so artificial. I wanted to know my neighbors, if possible,–to get a little nearer to them. . . . I often visited a particular plant four or five miles distant, half a dozen times within a fortnight, that I might know exactly when it opened, beside attending to a great many others in different directions and some of them equally distant at the same time. At the same time I had an eye for birds and whatever else might offer.

As this statement and others like it attest, at the center of Thoreau's mature interest in the natural

world was not so much the desire to understand it analytically as the desire to relate to it, as its neighbor and acquaintance, so as to achieve a state of intimate familiarity with as many of its life forms as possible and with the ensemble of tangled relations between each life form and every other. Although the rhetoric of this passage remains dualistic, with the speaker picturing himself as a solitary separate figure roaming around the local environment, his emphasis on acquaintance and neighborliness shows the desire to break down the sense of isolated consciousness for the sake of a phenomenology of participation and belonging. Elsewhere he makes this goal quite explicit.[30]

> A man can hardly be said to be *there* if he *knows* that he is there–or to go there, if he knows Where he is going. . . . You must be conversant with things for a long time to know much about them–like the moss which has hung from the spruce–and as the partridge & the rabbit are acquainted with the thickets & at length have acquired the color of the places they frequent.

Here the criterion for a person's being truly "acquainted" or "conversant" with one's environment is a particular kind of long immersion deeper than rigorous study or reflection, an immersion that hinges on an unconscious process of growing affinity and adaptation. Although this insight has its roots in Emerson's early playful-serious observation that "the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable,"[31] Thoreau takes the principle of biotic merger and biotic equalitarianism much further, and much more seriously.

What enabled him to do this? If only for dramatic effect in present context, I wish I could assure you that Thoreau's interest in Buddhism was what made the difference, that it was crucially significant to his intellectual and spiritual development that the passage from the *Lotus Sutra* printed in the Transcendentalists' magazine under the title of "The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs"–a passage whose editing Thoreau probably oversaw even though he was not the actual

translator–should have been a passage that Buddhologists have also sometimes claimed as the original source of the doctrine of biotic egalitarianism within certain strains of Buddhism.[32] Unfortunately, I can make no such claim. To my knowledge, the biotic egalitarian side of Thoreau's later thinking cannot be neatly ascribed to his interest in Buddhism or any other Asian religious tradition. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that Thoreau saw "oriental religion" as teaching on the whole a disposition more of detachment from the world, including the natural world, than a mode of imbrication in it or belonging to it. On the other hand, the evidence also suggests that Thoreau's understanding of Oriental religion, including Buddhism (to the very limited extent that he understood it), did help to liberate him from the conventional individualistic Protestant work ethic and, beyond that, from the value that his culture placed–and still places–on the conception of the individual as primarily a social being accountable to society, rather than primarily a citizen of the cosmos or the ecosystem, accountable first and foremost to them. In that sense, what Thoreau learned from the classics of Asian wisdom *did* help to shape his proto-ecological philosophy of nature.

Notes

1. The best previous study of the influence of Asian religions on Thoreau's thinking generally and his religious thought and attitudes toward nature specifically is Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), especially 174-218. Hodder rightly stresses both Thoreau's shallow knowledge of Asian faiths and their long-term significance for his thinking, placing special emphasis on Thoreau's interest in Hinduism. Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), is a useful survey of the significance of Asian thought for the movement as a whole, though I disagree (as does Hodder) with its contention that Asian spirituality ceased to influence Thoreau's thinking in his later years, after his writing turned strongly in the direction of empirical observation of nature. For a concise although sketchy comparative discussion of Transcendentalist and (Zen) Buddhist theories of self, see Shôei Andô, *Zen and American Transcendentalism: An Investigation of One's Self* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1970). For a recent discussion of Thoreau's mentor Emerson's interest in Asian religions (and reciprocal interest in Emerson's thought by Asian intellectuals), see Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 169-198. The present paper, however, is especially indebted to Hodder's book as well as to Malcolm Young's unpublished 2004 Harvard Th. D. dissertation, *One World at a Time: Henry Thoreau's Religious Practices*.

2. For example: "Behold the difference between the oriental and the occidental," Thoreau writes of the contrast between Hinduism and Christianity in his first book. "The former has nothing to do in this world; the latter is full of activity" (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde *et al.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 141.

3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978). For an argument that the Saidian model applies more fully to Transcendentalism than I indicate here, see Malini Johar Schueller's chapter on Emerson in her *U. S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

4. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Sympathy of Religions," *The Radical*, 8 (1871).

5. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks and Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961-86): 7, 342.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays: First Series*, ed. Joseph Slater *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 25-51.

7. Andô, *Zen and American Transcendentalism,* 161.

8. Buell, *Emerson,* 196-197, which notes that Suzuki in fact claimed that he thought of Emerson as an alter ego.

9. Andy Nagashima, "The American Renaissance and the Lotus Sutra: A Perspective on Dependent Origination," *Living Buddhism,* 8, x (October 2004): 20-25, corrects the error of attribution (the actual translator was Elizabeth Peabody) and characterizes the significance of the

text in relation to Transcendentalist thought.

10. See for example Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 130-132 and *passim.*

11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 111-112.

12. This is not to say that Thoreau was immune from such pressures. See for example Leonard Neufeldt, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau and Enterprise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), which argues, especially with reference to *Walden*'s first and longest chapter on "Economy" that Thoreau did not so much flatly oppose the standard thinking about the ethic of enterprise as to adapt and redirect it.

13. Emerson, for example, marveled after Thoreau's death "how near [he was] to the old monks in their ascetic religion!" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 15: 261). Two modern nature writers strongly influenced by Thoreau who often invoke the western monastic tradition with regard to themselves are Annie Dillard, *e.g.* in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) and (more ambivalently) Edward Abbey, in *Desert Solitaire* (1968). I put "his own" in quotation marks advisedly, however, because Thoreau–strong critic of conventional Protestant Christianity that he was–lived in a climate of much greater anti-Catholic prejudice than the late twentieth century and would consequently have been much less likely to claim solidarity with Christian monasticism in any case. Note that Emerson invokes the monastic analogy more to express wonder at Thoreau's strangeness than admiration for it, (although elsewhere in the same passage his admiration for Thoreau comes out poignantly).

14. On this basis, the divergence between the claims of Hodder and Versluis (note 1) as to the significance of Thoreau's Asian reading for his philosophy of nature can perhaps be reconciled.

15. Many "ecocritics" (literary critics of environmental writing) have pressed this point in one form or another, but it is most directly the subject of Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992).

16. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 143-179.

17. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 1974), 197-198.

18. Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (New York: Viking, 1978), 238-239.

19. My interior/exterior distinction is taken from nature writer Barry Lopez's "Landscape and Narrative," *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Scribner, 1988), 71-72.

20. Here and elsewhere I refer specifically to literature by Euro-Americans and other non-indigenes. Native American verbal imagination of human connectedness with the nonhuman

world, especially traditional forms of orature, is much less tied to the autobiographical mode and to subjective human experience in general.

21. Gary Snyder, "For All," *No Nature" New and Selected Poems* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 308.

22. For insight into the problems of defining the ecological implications of Buddhism, I rely especially on Malcolm David Eckel, "Is There a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature," *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997), 327-349, and Ian Harris, "Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern: Some Methodological Problems Considered," *ibid.,* 377-402.

23. For Snyder, see for example David Landis Barnhill, "Great Earth *Sangha:* Gary Snyder's View of Nature as Community," *ibid.,* 187-217. For a more typical case--Aldo Leopold, a professional forester and nature writer often thought of as "the father of American environmental ethics"–see Steve Odin, "The Japanese Concept of Nature in Relation to the Environmental Ethics and Conservation Aesthetics of Aldo Leopold," *ibid.*, 89-109.

24. Thoreau, *Walden,* 3-4.

25. Thoreau's third and most important ecological interest, which did not crystallize until some years after *Walden*, was plant succession. For more detail on these and other matters just mentioned, see Buell, *The Environmental Imagination,* chapters 4 and 7, including the notes to chapter 4, as well as Robert Kuhn McGregor, *A Wider View of the Universe: Henry Thoreau's Study of Nature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), and (both the primary sources and the editorial commentary) Henry Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed: "The Dispersion of Seeds" and Other Late Natural History Writings,* ed. Bradley P. Dean (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1993).

26. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836)*, The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 3-45. For discussion of the significance of the natural theology tradition for the religious culture out of which Emerson's thought evolved, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 70-74, 94-96, and *passim.*

27. In addition to sources named in note 23, see Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), which especially stresses the importance of Alexander von Humboldt for early Euro-American natural historians; and the latter chapters of the best biography of Thoreau, Robert D. Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

28. Emerson, *Nature,* 45.

29. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau,* ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis Allen (Boston: Houghton

Mifflin, 1906), 9: 157-158.

30. *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal, Volume 4: 1851-1852,* ed Robert Sattelmeyer *et al.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 192-193. This edition, still in progress, will supersede the Torrey-Allen edition. The Princeton edition observes the non-standard punctuation and grammar of Thoreau's manuscript.

31. Emerson, *Nature,* 10.

32. Ian Harris, "Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern," 390.