

SAUNTERING TOWARDS AWAKENING IN THOREAU'S WALDEN "ECONOMY": THROUGH THE LENS OF THE BUDDHA AND THE DHAMMAPADA

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Abstract: This article is a comparative study of the two schools of philosophy, Buddhism and American Transcendentalism, as it attempts to conduct a Buddhist reading of the introductory chapter "Economy" from Henry David Thoreau's seminal work Walden (1854) through the prism of the Dhammapada. It explores the similitude of thought and sentiment between the two socio-religious reformers, Thoreau and Shakyamuni Buddha. It demonstrates how the central motif and object underpinning their counsel and injunctions is the supreme goal of spiritual awakening. Deploying verses from the Dhammapada, as well as Buddhist concepts from the Theravadian and Mahayana traditions, this paper illustrates how the themes of self-knowledge, self-care, self-reliance, materialism, ignorance, laziness, and inner potential, emphatically articulated by Thoreau in his chapter, both directly and indirectly, re-echo the fundamental principles of Buddhist belief and spiritual practice. The study has been conducted on the assumptions of intellectual and doctrinal correspondence rather than on the grounds of historical evidence. Through brief expositions of the need to overcome the ills of ignorance and attachment and foster self-care and self-reliance, this article illustrates how both Thoreau and the Buddha marshal us to actualize our infinite potential and subsequently attain spiritual awakening or enlightenment.

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau, who, in his letter to H.G.O. Blake, dated November 20, 1849, professed himself to be a "yogin," has often been analogized to the 'eastern' mystic (Thoreau, 1958, 251). Perhaps his two-year forest hermitage in the woods of Walden away from the debilitating fetters of institutions and conventionalities, his unflinching self-disciplined way of life, or his general demeanor of composure, equanimity, and poise have elicited the appellations of "Pratyeka Buddha" (quoted in Rampell, 2011, 644), "Americanized Buddha." (Rampell, 2011, 642), "Spartan-Buddhist Henry" (Emerson, 1939, 455) upon Thoreau. Rick Fields, one of the seminal historians of Buddhism in the West, lauded Thoreau as one of the "restless pioneers" of Buddhism in America for being "perhaps the first American to explore the non-theistic mode of contemplation which is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism" (Fields, 1981, 63-63). Thoreau was one of the torchbearers of the American Transcendentalist movement—a school of intellectuals, philosophers, and social reformers who envisioned a universal

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religion of humanity essentially derived from an intuitive and insightful understanding of our relationship with the Divine, embalmed with a conviction of the boundless potential and innate virtue of man, as opposed to the image of the inherently depraved sinner of institutionalized Protestant Christianity. For the fabrication of their philosophy, they drew upon the illumination of the ‘East’, what Thoreau dubbed as “Ex Oriente lux” (Thoreau, 1995, 21). Drawing on the light of the Indian, Chinese, and Persian theologies and philosophies like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Persian poetry, Thoreau and his companions aspired to formulate their Western fruit, “ex Occidente FRUX (Ibid.)”

Although a protean personality, a litterateur, a surveyor, and a naturalist, essentially Thoreau was a philosopher. His domain was the self, was life. In 1847, when Thoreau retreated into the woods at Walden, almost Shakyamuni Buddha-like, his motivation behind the decision was to conduct a radical re-examination and re-evaluation of life and its priorities, as he strove to find answers to the most profound metaphysical queries relating to “the chief end of man,” “the true necessities and means of life” (Thoreau, 1985, 329). Living in a society torn apart by divisive forces during an era of socio-cultural upheaval and general moral decrepitude, what drove him to attempt the ascetic experiment was the Buddhist notion of *samvega*—the realization of a pressing sense of unease and dismay at the futility and purposelessness of conventional regular life, accompanied with an urgency to search for a remedy for liberation. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 20). E.B White’s inference partly continues a similar line of thought, “Henry went to forth to battle when he took to the woods, and *Walden* is the report of a man torn by two powerful and opposing drives—the drive to enjoy the world and the urge to set the world straight.” (White 2008, 446). For both Thoreau and Shakyamuni Buddha, the starting point was the given human condition: life, the complexities, yearnings, and sufferings that hold people down, and a quest for a solution that would expedite their endeavors to transcend their mental, economic, cultural and socio-religious fetters. Thoreau may not have become a saint or an ascetic like the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. However, emancipated and empowered, with a heightened understanding and insight, he became a more humanistic and egalitarian social reformer from his sojourn. Through the portrayal of his personal voyage and spiritual growth in *Walden*, Thoreau invokes the attention of his fellow compatriots to awaken their unconscious instincts of longing for a higher life.

This article undertakes a Buddhist reading of the introductory chapter entitled “Economy” from Thoreau’s 1854 classic *Walden*, using verses from the *Dhammapada* as its particular frame of reference, besides drawing on elaborations of Buddhist doctrines from the Theravadian tradition, as well as Zen and Tibetan Buddhist purviews of the Mahayana school. The author chooses the chapter “Economy” for my analysis to demonstrate how Thoreau has accentuated his more profound message of self-knowledge, self-reliance, and spiritual awakening under the guise of such an ironic title couched in mercantile overtones. Thoreau, in his how-to, or as we commonly call DIY (Do It Yourself) manual, has very ingeniously attenuated the sagacity and profundities of graver metaphysical questions in between his meticulous accounts of physical and fiscal life. This article does not delve into any

form of historiographical exploration but conducts a critical and comparative analysis of the two schools of thought and philosophy, American Transcendentalism and Buddhism, under the assumptions of "purely intellectual or experiential" and doctrinal similarity (Detweiler, 1962, 423; my emphasis). It does not claim to investigate on the grounds of historical linkages between Buddhism in nineteenth-century America and Thoreau's exposure to it, nor does it endeavor to posit any evidence in this regard. This paper attempts to portray brief expositions on the doctrinal parallels between Thoreau's writings and the Buddha's teachings. As for the method of reading and interpretation, the author has conducted both close reading and critical reading of the two schools of thought. However, the author has used the former method more extensively for Thoreau's *Walden* and the Dhammapada. The Dhammapada has been translated by various "Western" interpreters and "Eastern" writers, theologians, and Buddhist monks. Moreover, the edition the author shall follow is the one translated by Venerable Thissaro Bhikkhu.

The Dhammapada, translated as "way of truth" or "parts or aspects of the Buddha's teachings," is the most condensed, laicized form of the Buddha's pedagogical exhortations, compiled in verse paragraphs. Like Thoreau's *Walden*, ridden with anecdotes and parables that serve as exemplifications of a practical life of simplicity and awakening, the verses of the Dhammapada, full of reversals and diversions through an assortment of illustrations, similes, and rhetorical questions, periphrastically entreat people to choose the path of the wise, the path leading to *budh* or awakening. The Dhammapada symbolizes the path of deliverance: the path that liberates suffering sentient beings trapped in the ceaseless cycle of *samsara* (cycle of life, birth, and rebirth) and *bhava* (becoming), finally leading to *prajna* or *Panna* (wisdom) and *Buddh* (awakening). The paper has been divided into different subsections, each focusing on a doctrine exhibiting the similitude of thought and understanding between the two spiritual and social reformers, Henry David Thoreau and Shakyamuni Buddha, hailing from the West and the East, who, despite being set apart by centuries of time and space, echo each other in their clarion call for spiritual awakening.

I. Self-knowledge and Self-care

In most books, the *I*, or the first person, is omitted; in this, it will be retained; that, concerning egotism, is the main difference. (Thoreau 1985, 325) While going through *Walden*, two paragraphs into the text, an almost hackneyed presence of the first-person pronoun "I" strikes the reader. If counted, the pronoun "I" appears nineteen times in the first two paragraphs. What is so bewildering about this reiterative usage of the most 'egoistic' pronoun of the English language is that it appears in the seminal work of one of the greatest Transcendentalist philosophers of America. What distinguished the Transcendentalists from their predecessors was their exposure to the philosophy of Asian religions, the defining character of which was a fervent conviction of a "Unity" underlying all things disparate. Such solipsistic self-fixation for a person who belonged to a coterie of enlightened intellectuals who stressed the uniformity and equality of all people is surprising, especially given that

Thoreau had been an immaculate defender of the Abolitionist cause, besides nurturing a commendable degree of reverence and sympathy for the American Indians and their way of life. Without allowing his readers much deliberation, Thoreau answers their diffident perplexities with a justification, which is not a distant corollary of Buddhism.

The egotism referred to here is not one of man's baser instincts, preoccupied with a self-exalted predilection perpetuated at a materialist and psychological level, in complete insouciance, bereft of any strain of concern for one's fellow beings. It is not the "mean egotism" (Emerson, 2007, 18) that Emerson mentions in his *Nature* (1836). From the country's inception, individualism has occupied a central position in American ideology and discourse. The individualism referred to by Thoreau is not the Hooverian "rugged individualism" of a laissez-faire economy, and human actions are fixated on the private pursuit of self-interest with minimal external assistance. The Transcendentalists were hankering for a new form of egotism, a new form of ontological individualism that promoted a healthy, practical level of individuality—a form of self-trust and self-reliance, coalesced with the nobler aspirations of spiritual upliftment and elevated morality. Thoreau's version was reminiscent of the Asian renditions, especially that of Buddhist ontology and hermeneutics.

Buddhism is fundamentally a science of the mind; its cardinal object is self-knowledge, and its application aims to overcome suffering, the most pervasive feature of human existence. Lama Yeshe explains, "When we study Buddhism, we are studying ourselves, the nature of our own minds" (Yeshe, 1998, 7). Knowledge is imbued with salvific power; being "spiritually and philosophically central," (Holder, 2913, 223), it lies at the crux of Buddhism. A significant section of mainstream readership with a tangential acquaintance with Buddhism assumes Buddhist knowledge as some form of astral insight into a grand metaphysical reality, in tandem with their Orientalist misconceptions of Eastern theology. However, the knowledge advocated by Buddha was self-awareness, or, in modern psychotherapy's rhetoric, psychological knowledge. The foremost step in the path to *budh* or awakening is self-cognition—the need and process of knowing and understanding the self. The meta-cognitive awareness of one's mental processes, thoughts, and self is the most defining trait of Buddhism: a trait that accentuates its psychoanalytic undercurrent.

Your own self is your own mainstay, for who else could your mainstay be?
(Bhikkhu, 1998, 66)

I should not talk so much about myself if there was anybody else whom I knew as well. (Thoreau, 1985, 325)

Thoreau's above statement is identical in form (diction) and content (message and motif) to the verse of the Dhammapada just preceding it. Both address the same necessity, the necessity of self-cognition and self-examination. The "self" should be a person's first "mainstay"; unless and until one undergoes a process of self-assessment and self-introspection, one cannot undertake the path of awakening. Just as Buddhists believe *prajna* (wisdom) cannot be achieved without harnessing the liberating powers of self-knowledge, Thoreau also asserts the same when he acknowledges his decision

to devote a whole book to account for his 'self' and its growth. Thoreau's *Walden* is not merely a practical manual of a simple, ascetic life in the woods but also a disquisition of the human mind and spirit. It is a step-by-step description of Thoreau's spiritual journey, where he invites the readers to wake up and carve their own personal, subjective path. The fact that Thoreau deliberately begins his introductory chapter by over-filling the first few paragraphs with a gamut of the personal pronoun "I" is Thoreau's somewhat circumlocutory way of intimating the reader with the primacy of subjectivity.

Walden is rooted in a specific historical and cultural point of time and place; the context from which it arises (nineteenth-century American life and society) must be factored in to understand its concerns and injunctions. The foundation of America was premised on the bedrock of freedom, democracy, and autonomy: all these principles revealed a grandiose, one may say, an almost brazen sense of American selfhood and supremacy. However, throughout the cataclysmic first five decades of the nineteenth century, the American people were rattled by an endless stream of economic booms-busts and multifarious socio-cultural crises. We may find that the consecutive stream of deflations, particularly the Great Panic of 1837, which continued up to the mid-1840s, the expanding socio-cultural and economic rifts between the swiftly developing industrialized north and the underdeveloped agrarian south, aggravated class polarization and economic misery. The extermination and oppression of Native Americans, the indiscriminate exploitation of children and women for labor, and the menace of slavery were all further aggravated by inhuman discriminatory legislations like the Indian Removal Act (1830), the Fugitive Slave Law Act (1850) among several others; and a hypocritical justice system had plunged the minds of the American citizens into a cesspool of unease, perplexity, and despair. By the end of the 1840s and the start of the 1850s, when the Walden experiment was undertaken and after that written by Thoreau, the American people were desperately seeking a new identity and purpose. Thoreau, in his text, is outlining an antidote that would reinstate in his countrymen their lost ideals—the urge for "Life", "Liberty," and the "pursuit of Happiness" and thereby enable them to rediscover their inherent worth and aptitude and climb out of the trough of faltering self-worth.

The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved by the most delicate handling. (Thoreau, 1985, 327)

Buddhist *dharma* and its founder are often encapsulated in Buddhist lexis in a physics metaphor. The Buddha is epitomized as a spiritual physician; the *Dhamma*, his physic, to root out man's *kleshas* (afflictions) and the suffering that ensues. According to Peter Harvey, the four-fold Noble Truth structure envisaged by the Buddha "may also have been influenced by, or itself influenced, the practice of early Indian doctors" (Harvey, 2013, 29). Within any realm of possibility, the Buddha never advocated or supported extreme austerities to be practiced in complete abnegation of the welfare of the body and the self. In Buddhism, the first cure for the afflicted was not ridden with self-flagellatory overtures but one of self-care and self-concern. Buddhists believe that love, care, and compassion must first be offered to oneself before being provided

to others. In a metaphorical field similar to the Buddhist physic, Thoreau urges his fellow Americans to discover within themselves the “finest qualities” of their “nature” and to nurture themselves “delicately” to let them bloom. The monk-like disciplinarian and didactic in Thoreau gives way to a more benevolent, Buddha-like physician, beseeching people to look after themselves with tender loving care because “...we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly” (Thoreau, 1985, 327). The preceding sentence captures the essence of what the Buddha prescribes in the Dhammapada: The wise person should stay awake nursing himself (Bhikkhu, 1998, 65)

II. Self-reliance-RELIANCE

Buddhism, an atheistic denomination bereft of theistic moorings, harbors no aperture or possibility for the prospect of external intervention or divine deliverance in its cosmological structure. Professor S.K Saksena, in “The Individual in Social Thought and Practice in India,” expounds, “Everyone is exclusively and completely responsible for his or her actions and their consequences. No individual is saved or condemned by any force outside himself . . . not even by God.” (Quoted in Theo, 1973, 364-65). The Buddha in Buddhist cosmology, especially of the Theravadian tradition, is not a God-like overseer; neither is he a Messiah or prophet carrying some message of divine revelation, nor a reincarnation of some divine being. He is merely a symbolic paragon of man’s inner potential for attaining *prajnaparamita* or perfect wisdom; his footprints are the path to the highest attainment, the attainment of spiritual awakening. The Buddha’s role is that of a guide to humanity—a human being who, having attained *budh* by dint of his initiative and effort, symbolizes the inborn, quintessential aptitude in all of us to attain the same. In the words of the Dhammapada: You must strive ardently. Tathagatas points out the way. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 95) Another verse, a minor variation from the verse earlier cited in the paper, goes:

Your own self is your own mainstay.
 Your own self your own guide.
 You should watch over yourself—
 As a trader, a fine steed. (Ibid., 123)

When Emerson coined the term “self-reliance” in his eponymous essay “Self-Reliance,” he was replicating what the Buddha had preached centuries ago, albeit in a more westernized, crystallized form—each individual himself bears the burden of salvation. If the Buddhists place the onus of liberation on the practitioner and his efforts, Thoreau, too, posits the locus of responsibility and spiritual awakening on people themselves. *Walden* is a tirade against the spiritual stupor of his fellow Americans, who had become voluntary “slave-driver[s]”—slaves under the tyranny of their own “private opinion” (Thoreau, 1985, 328); and an admonition to nurture the kernel of self-trust and autonomy. One of the cardinal characteristics of the Transcendentalists’ was their emphatic stress on the substantial sway and power of an

individual's conceptions and opinions over their own lives and destinies, "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (Ibid., 329). What needs to be noted here is that Thoreau locates "thought," and by extension, the mind, and not the "action" or body, as the site where circumstances and fate are erected. This same phenomenological narrative is peddled in Buddhism. The Buddhists fundamentally view the mind as the forerunner of all actions and conditions: the external world and our experience are created and conditioned by our mind, thoughts, and mental perceptions. Wesley K. H. Theo illustrates the preceding Thoreauvian quote with an explanation and a verse from the Dhammapadas:

In Buddhism, the comparable mechanism is moral volition or will (*cetana*). All consequential actions, be they in the forms of word, deed, or thought, are wilful actions. A passage in the Dhammapada sums up the point in this way: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him." (Theo, 1973, 84)

III. Materialism, Ignorance, and Attachment

However, Men's Labor is under a Mistake. (Thoreau, 1985, 327)

Amid burgeoning industrialization, trade, and commerce expanding at an unprecedented rate in the history of the American nation, a tide of acquisitive materialism swept through American society in the nineteenth century. The additional factor of being raised in a Western ideological tradition that laid undue stress on a materialist mode of thinking, further exacerbated by the ideology of Benthamian utilitarianism (prevalent in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe), found its way to the New World. Immersed in a compulsion to accumulate dross materialistic accomplishments, which are ephemeral by their very nature, multitudes of Americans had forgone their higher purpose. To Thoreau, the inheritance of a heritage of pecuniary privileges and objects was solely a hindrance to life's greater aspirations. Man's increasing propensities to accumulate "trumpery" (Thoreau, 1985, 377), as Thoreau labeled them, was, in his eyes, nothing short of a burden that "crushed and smothered" (Ibid., 326) its carriers, who in different circumstances might have scaled greater spiritual heights, had they have been unperturbed by the stimulus of worldliness. The path toward enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition is ideally entrenched in complete liberation from *karmic* bondage and *samsaric* pleasures along the objective plane of material existence and the subjective realm of mental bondage. Through meditation and penetrative insight, the Buddha discovered that all *samsaric* bonds are empty, transient, and insubstantial. Inevitably, subject to the vagaries of time, they are susceptible to change, decay, and dissolution. It is unsurprising, especially in light of the view that Buddhists hold all objects and phenomena empty of essence or substantiality. Herein emerges the need to forsake attachment to material objects and mental misconceptions because these serve as obstacles to the Buddhist practice and the spiritual path. A verse in the Dhammapada outlines the same:

Come, look at this world all decked out like a royal chariot, where fools plunge in, while those who know don't cling. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 69)

[Men] laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life they find when they get to the end of it. (Thoreau, 1985, 327)

Through the reversals in its verses, the Dhammapada postulates two ways of relating to the Dhamma: the path of the wise and the path of the fool. The fool conducts one's life heedless to, and oblivious of, not only the wisdom of the Dhamma but also the need-to-know things as they "really" are. In his text in the preceding passage from *Walden*, Au courant, with this stark truth, Thoreau echoes the same train of thought. In a world adorned with pecuniary temptations, like an embellished chariot, the fool goes about accumulating fleeting treasures under a misguided idea of leading what he (or she) presumes as "a man's life." (Thoreau, 1985, 326). Such fools propelled by the forces of a presumed "Necessity" lunge forward in ignorance and delusion, racking up worldly possessions and temporal achievements that shall bite the dust in time.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluous coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. (Thoreau, 1985, 327)

More impure. is the ultimate impurity: ignorance, (Bhikkhu, 1998, 88)

To describe the blundering factor that drives the fool headlong in this misdirected way of life, Thoreau uses a term fundamental to Buddhists: "ignorance" (1985, 327). In Buddhist thought, ignorance or *avidya* is the fundamental misperception—the cognizance that all things and phenomena have a concrete, permanent, substantial self. In the words of the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, "fundamental ignorance...[is] the erroneous belief in an enduring self-existence of things" (Gyatso, 2005, 94). Ignorance for both Thoreau and the Buddha was not an intellectual lack of knowledge but a far more profound, graver form of spiritual ignorance embedded in one's faulty perception of reality; in the words of Peter Harvey, "...not a lack of information, but a more deep-seated misperception of reality." (Harvey, 2013, 51) Similar to the Buddhist identification of ignorance as the cause behind man's perpetuation of his misguided, unenlightened way of life, fettered by *karma* and *samsara*, Thoreau, too, deems people's "ignorance and mistake" (Thoreau, 1985, 327) as the germ of materialism and perpetuation of "their own golden or silver fetters," (Ibid., 335) — which by a natural concurrence, culminates in a comatose disposition—what Buddhists call laziness or *kausidya* (which has been taken up later in the paper).

In Buddhism, ignorance begets the three poisons of the mind: anger, attachment, and delusion. The delusion of believing in an essential "self" leads to the mistaken notion of possession, thereby generating the appetite for objects or sensations to be pursued and brought within one's grasp. This possessive "mine," in turn, engenders craving, grasping, and attachment. The trappings of *samsaric* attachments enclose people within a smaller mindscape, limiting their mental and spiritual horizons. The

twelve links of dependent origination (Pali: *paticca samupadda*; Sanskrit: *pratitya samutpada*) illustrated the factors leading to rebirth. Moreover, in the chain of interdependence, the Buddha explained how craving (Pali: *tanha*; Sanskrit: *trishna*) gives rise to clinging (*upadana*), which in turn leads to becoming (*bhava*), finally culminating in rebirth (*jati*) (Soeng, 2010, 71).

It is the same as if all these traps were buckled to a man's belt, and he could not move over the rough country...without dragging them—dragging his trap.

My gay butterfly is tangled in a spider's web, then.

Those smitten with passion fall back into a self-made stream like a spider snared in its web. But, having cut it, the enlightened set forth, Free of longing, abandoning All suffering & and stress

The first two from Thoreau's *Walden* (1985, 374, 375) and the second, a verse from the *Dhammapada* (1998, 114), are strikingly similar in their respective imagery and signification. Examples from the animal world are drawn in both texts to exemplify the intendment as to how human beings are responsible for forging and nurturing the manacles of the attachments that fetter them. In Thoreau's first metaphor, the person trapped by attachments is compared to a fox and a muskrat stuck in a trap. The Buddhist verse draws an analogy between people entangled in their self-made snare: their passions and attachments and a spider trapped in its web—an analogy is an almost direct iteration of the second metaphor of Thoreau's illustration of the butterfly trapped in a spider's web. Thoreau advises Americans to discern and replicate their wiser animal counterparts' actions and maneuvers to save themselves. The fox and the muskrat sacrifice their precious body parts, the tail in the case of the former and the third leg for the latter—both of which are the attachments that had endangered their lives in the first place. The eschewal of external fitments and accouterments, the disengagement from all attachments, would allow people to transcend to attain wisdom and liberation (Thoreau, 1985, 375). The following verse from the *Dhammapada* reiterates the same tenor:

Riches ruin the man weak in discernment, but not those who seek the beyond. Through craving for riches the man weak in discernment ruins himself... (Thoreau, 1998, 116)

Thoreau was an adherent of a considerably austere and ascetic way of life like the "ancient philosophers Chinese, Hindoo" (Thoreau, 1985, 334). To Thoreau, "voluntary poverty" and freedom from piling up "outward riches" (Ibid.) were fundamental to arriving at a heightened perspective—a perspective that would grant the beholder an accurate, impartial, and objective vision and the ability to "suck out all the marrow of life" (Ibid., 394). In the following verse from the *Dhammapada*, a similar injunction is imparted. The spiritual practitioners who have relinquished all their mental defilements of sensual pleasures, their craving, and ignorance are

acquainted with the power to exert their aptitude for self-awakening—only they see the light of salvation and liberation:

Whose minds are well-developed, in the factors of self-awakening, who delight in non-clinging, relinquishing grasping, resplendent their effluents ended: they, in the world, are Unbound. (Thoreau, 1998, 46)

IV. “Confirmed Desperation,” Laziness

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. (Thoreau, 1985, 329)

At the time for initiative he takes no initiative. Young, strong, but lethargic, the resolves of his heart exhausted, the lazy, lethargic one loses the path to discernment. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 97)

One of the primary ills plaguing nineteenth-century Americans was their sinking into spiritual slumber. The entire text of *Walden* is laden with the leitmotifs of slumber and awakening; it is evident, even to the lay reader, that these tropes are evoked concerning the spiritual plane of life. The entire foundation and credo of Buddhist thought and practice is postulated on the doctrine of awakening (enlightenment). The etymological origins of the root word *Budh* connote awakening, and the term *Buddha* translates to one who is awakened or enlightened. In their writings, the Transcendentalists heralded the pressing necessity of rousing the soul and mind from moral and spiritual stupor, of understanding and uncovering “the laws which traverse the universe” (Emerson, 2007, 108). The gospel they preached was one of personal and spiritual ascendancy. The Transcendentalists reviled the sluggish minds of the multitudes—minds which had become blind and unreceptive to the incursions of intuition, to the sallies of the spirit, and Thoreau, in the following passage, challenges man’s innate predisposition to prolong what Kant termed as self-imposed “tutelage”:

I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience . . . perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a like reason, men remain in their present low and primitive condition . . . (Thoreau, 1985, 355)

Buddhism considers spiritual laziness, or *kausidya* (Sanskrit) or *lelo* (Tibetan), an enlightenment obstacle. It classifies laziness into three categories. The first is the laziness of idleness or procrastination. It refers to the neglect of spiritual practice, an ardor of deferral underlining this lethargy. Sakyong Mipham explicates, “The mind has withdrawn into itself. [...] It feels impossible to do anything. We feel like a snake crawling along the ground” (Mipham, 2003, 88). The metaphor employed by Mipham in her explanation is manifestly analogous to the excerpt from *Walden*. Thoreau compares people lethargic in their spiritual practice to the snakes he comes across during his morning walks, which lay “without inconvenience” (Thoreau, 1985, 355) at the bottom of the lake, waiting for the sun to rise. Correspondingly, man’s

prolongation of his spiritual stupor is indebted to his mettle, which is inherently predisposed to inertia, inactivity, and idleness. Unmoved by any sense of purpose or urgency, the nineteenth-century American, akin to the water snakes, had descended into a state of dormancy, numbness, and inflexibility, waiting for a stimulus, or as Thoreau puts it, the "spring of springs" to animate and "thaw" him, and thereby arouse him to the prospects of an ethereal life (Ibid.). In the chapter "Higher Laws," Thoreau re-echoes this postulation, as to how effort and "exertion" lead to "wisdom and purity," whereas "from sloth [emanates] ignorance and sensuality" (Ibid., 498) in a form that is indistinguishable from the following verse from the Dhammapada: From striving comes wisdom; from not, wisdom's end. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 97)

The second laziness in Buddhism is the laziness of unwholesome activity. It refers to indulgence in negative proclivities and unproductive habits, a relentless engagement in worldly activities in complete negligence of spiritual practice, or what Thoreau terms the "finer fruits" of life (Thoreau, 1985, 327). Thoreau, through the demonstration of his rudimentary existence at Walden, scoffs at the masses' relentless scurrying after "luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life," which serve as nothing but "positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Ibid., 334); relegating life's deeper concerns to the background. We may find that the incessant devotion to labor spares no time or space for contemplation or rumination. This Buddhist laziness of worldly and unwholesome activities is manifestly insinuated in his statement, "A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind" (Ibid., 329). In nineteenth-century America, people's enslavement to ceaseless labor, effort as part of a relentless materialistic quest, had subjected them to a process of dehumanization—metamorphosing them into objects and machines without a thinking mind of their own. However, Thoreau insists that the wise would restrain themselves from falling into the clutches of materialism, ignorance, and lethargy by abstaining from the conventional mode of mundane, materialistic living. They prevent themselves from veering down the path of foolishness and ruin (Ibid.). What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. (Thoreau, 1985, 329)

According to Buddhists, the third category of laziness is the laziness of defeatism. It implies the paucity of self-esteem and self-confidence. A mind filled with doubts, reservations, and lack of conviction in one's abilities is the most discreet form of lethargy that surreptitiously sinks into the mental rubric of man, severely detrimental to spiritual practice—the nineteenth century witnessed America's demotion, in Emerson's words, from "Man Thinking" to "the parrot of other men's thinking," "the victim of society" (Emerson, 2007, 84). The overbearing social and religious institutions and slavish dependence on them had destroyed their autonomy, intellect, and self-worth. When the Transcendentalists emphasized the need to cultivate self-reliance and self-trust in man, they were reigniting the debates and exhortations that the Buddha had raised and advocated centuries ago—the need to cultivate unfaltering determination and steadfast faith in one's abilities. In the above passage from Walden, Thoreau seems to allude to this very form of laziness. Unconscious despair has infiltrated, at a subliminal level, into the American psyche and spirit, thereby ushering

forth a sense of depravity, lowliness, and dispiritedness in them. Thoreau clamors for his fellow Americans to shed this veil of disconsolateness and wake up to their inmost potential.

V. Man's Capacities, Vajra Pride, and Buddha-Potential

...man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. (Thoreau, 1985, 330)

The Transcendentalists were self-professed champions of the heroism and power of the individual. Drawing on strains of idealism, mingled with unflinching faith in inherent goodness, inner genius, and latent potential of humankind, the American Transcendentalists were the torchbearers of humanism in America. Through the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, transcendentalist thought emerged as the most emphatic model, a symbol for the independent, autonomous, self-reliant American mind, transcending all boundaries and bringing the most seeds of genius to fruition. In the abovementioned excerpt, Thoreau reminds his fellow citizens that the reserves of their inmost potential are unlimited and, more importantly, unexplored and untapped. Human capacities have remained uncharted territory, and all the erstwhile human achievements and experiments are solely countable in number. Akin to the cure espoused by Buddhists for the laziness of defeatism, that is, the medicine of cultivating Vajra-pride or Buddha-potential, Thoreau, too, in his recantation of the sense of tedium and ennui in man, simultaneously apprises his fellow Americans of their hidden potential. The only bone of contention was the paucity of certitude and confidence in that boundless potential.

A blessing: conviction established. A blessing: discernment attained. (Bhikkhu, 1998, 110)

In the above verse, two of the five spiritual faculties in Buddhism have been referred to: conviction and discernment. Conviction or faith may be read as an assertion of the need to repose one's faith in the Buddha. Nevertheless, this signification can be extended to the realm of human beings, which indirectly amplifies the need to repose faith in oneself and one's potential. Edward Conze provides the intellectual aspect of the definition of faith: "*Volitionally*, faith implies a resolute and courageous act of will. It combines the steadfast resolution that one will do a thing with the self-confidence that one can do it" (Conze, 1980). However, according to Conze, the spiritual emphasis of the notion can better be understood because of Professor Radhakrishnan's association of faith with "striving after self-realization" (Ibid.; my emphasis). A person with conviction of his or her aptitude and potential for awakening can travel on the path of discernment and attain awakening. According to Buddhists' doctrine of universal salvation, the potential is present, albeit in a latent form, in every sentient being, inevitably bestowing them the potential to attain enlightenment in the present life or a later higher rebirth. In contrast to the Calvinist doctrine of sanctification or salvation only for God's chosen "elect," Buddhists

consider the potential for Buddhahood (*tathagathagarbha*), or Buddha-potential, to be universally present in all sentient beings. Buddha potential implies that all beings harbor within themselves the seeds of Buddhahood, that is, the ability to become a Buddha, which, by extension, implies the inherent potential to attain enlightenment eventually with faith, conviction, and practice. Lama Tsultrim defines it as "primordial self-esteem," an unfabricated, indestructible, primordial pride known as "Vajra Pride." Vajra pride is a form of "divine pride," what Tibetans call "*lha'I nga rgyal*," a practice that Tibetan Buddhists advocate practitioners cultivate. This "primeval reality already present within sentient beings" (Rotterdam, 2020) is concomitantly hearkened by Thoreau as he beckons the readers to actualize this unrealized potential, to wake up to the divinity and glory within. "Talk of a divinity in man!" (Thoreau, 1985, 328)

Conclusion

When Thoreau began his chapter "Economy," his overuse of the subjective first-person pronoun seemed a bit out of place, almost propitious and incongruous to the first-time reader's horizon of expectations. By the time we come to the end of this paper, we see the same strain of a heightened subjectivity as a common thread joining the other doctrines explored: self-knowledge, self-reliance, the need to dispel ignorance, attachment, laziness, and cultivate inner potential—all serving as motifs or precepts, fundamental to accentuate Thoreau's maxim of awakening: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake" (Thoreau, 1985, 587). Thoreau was a complete Buddhist transcendentalist, mainly owing to his vociferous appeal for shifting philosophical engagement from the social site to the individual's subjectivity and mindscape. His insistence on the "I," which, at the outset, had seemed incompatible with the Transcendentalist's broader vision of universal unity, actually marks a subtle circuitous return to and reworking of his grander vision.

From the analysis outlined in the paper, it is evident that there are therapeutic solid and soteriological undertones in Thoreau's chapter, otherwise credulously titled "Economy." Beneath the mundane nitty-gritty of debit, credit, and expenses on food, shelter, and clothing, Thoreau has interlaced his text with ethical injunctions and spiritual counsel. Akin to the Dhammapada, which is a "decisive program of [spiritual] training" (Bodhi, 1985, 13), Thoreau's catechetical teachings, like the Dhammapada and Buddha's corpus of teachings in general, serve as a blueprint for personal edification and spiritual instruction in the higher pursuits of life. *Walden* may not be a ringing endorsement of Buddhism, and there may indeed be disputes, disagreements, and counter-interpretations in scholarly circles regarding these intellectual similarities between *Walden* and Buddhism. However, comparative approaches are equally necessary to envision a hope for unity and agreement between thinkers from different cultural traditions, temporal time frames, and religious convictions. Albeit some minuscule differences in diction, the coincidental correspondence between the illustrations, examples, and even the imagery used; the uniformity in precepts; the intellectual, conceptual, and doctrinal similarities of Thoreauvian Transcendentalism and Buddhism are unassailable. The different doctrines of self-knowledge, self-care,

self-reliance, materialism and ignorance, laziness, and inner potential or vajra pride are linked together in a harmonious and coherent whole, deriving their unity and worth from the central object of life and spiritual practice—the goal of “awakening” in Thoreau’s vocabulary; or what the Buddhist lexicon calls “enlightenment.”

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