

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

Thoreau, Henry David (1817–1862)

Henry David Thoreau was an author, naturalist and leading member of the nineteenth-century literary, social and religious movement that came to be known as Transcendentalism. Thoreau is best remembered for his two-year venture in “living deliberately” on the shores of Walden Pond in his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts from 4 July 1845 to 6 September 1847, an experiment which led to the publication of *Walden* in 1854. Though few of his writings were widely known at mid-century, his work became increasingly sought after in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His other well-known published writings include: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), *Cape Cod* (1865) and *The Maine Woods* (1864).

Even in his own time, local responses to Thoreau’s experiment at Walden helped to shape two competing portraits of Thoreau that have persisted into the present: Thoreau as “wilderness man” *par excellence*, living self-sufficiently in the wild woods and, to a lesser extent, Thoreau as hypocritical crank, grinding his literary ax to chop at society and its conventions, while regularly going into town and dipping into the maternal cookie jar. While both of these portraits contain some truths, they are caricatures of a man and his work that often miss the complexity of his vision and the multifaceted dimensions of his legacy.

Thoreau’s sojourn at Walden was never intended to be an attempt at perfect self-sufficiency or wilderness living. In terms of setting alone, Thoreau’s retreat to Walden cannot be considered a wilderness venture, as Concord in the mid-nineteenth century had been a settled village for two centuries. Thoreau’s purpose in going to Walden should be understood as practical, spiritual and symbolic, none of which demanded a lifelong retreat to the woods or absolute purity in his practice of self-reliance.

Practically, Thoreau sought a means of making a living which would preserve the time he desired in order to cultivate his craft as a writer, while maintaining a mode of life that permitted generous swaths of time for outdoor walks, leisure and meticulous nature study. The retreat to Walden was, at a fundamental level, a first step in solving the practical problem of livelihood that all writers face.

The spiritual dimensions of Thoreau’s decision were tied to the practical impetus behind his choice, but also went beyond them. While Thoreau sought to reduce his needs (of food, clothing, shelter and leisure) to a minimum in order to maximize time to write, this pursuit of simplicity was itself a form of spiritual practice. With Emerson and other New England Transcendentalists, Thoreau subscribed to principles of plain living: a simple, often vegetarian diet; avoidance of tea, coffee and alcohol; regular excursions in the fresh air, frequent intellectual interchange and a complementary pursuit of solitary

contemplation. All of these practices were understood to be means of cultivating the self and, more particularly, “Reason” (knowledge through intuition) and imagination. In addition, Thoreau (like other Transcendentalists) assumed that nature had particular lessons to teach and that simple, “natural” ways of living would help to cultivate his moral sense. The spiritual practice of “self-culture” (which began when the young Thoreau changed his name from David Henry to Henry David) was an essential aspect of the retreat to Walden.

The experiment at Walden was also intended to resonate symbolically, both in Concord and beyond. While living at Walden enabled Thoreau to develop inwardly (to learn about himself in a natural context, to practice his craft as a writer, and also to grieve the early death of his brother), his life at Walden was also intended to be an outwardly directed comment about (and against) prevailing social norms. While he farmed beans for part of his livelihood, he denigrated the commercial aspects of farming and praised instead the educational and spiritual benefits of tilling the soil. While he made trips to the village almost daily, Thoreau constantly criticized village life, particularly the idle conversation and status-seeking mores he felt dominated the town.

Although he cultivated a sometimes biting and misanthropic persona in his texts, Thoreau’s reputation as a misanthrope is inaccurate. Thoreau was no hermit. He enjoyed frequent visitors from among family, friends and laborers near the pond and went into town frequently, especially in the winter months when he supported himself with odd jobs as a handyman and surveyor. During his time at Walden, he maintained an active correspondence, regularly attended lectures and often appeared at gatherings at the homes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott and other Concord friends. Through the symbolic act of withdrawing to the woods, Thoreau intended not to recommend such a withdrawal for everyone, but rather to symbolize through deed (and then word) the virtues of independent thought and action, rather than behaving in line with social convention.

Walden (1854) is Thoreau’s most celebrated text, a carefully crafted manuscript that went through eight drafts before publication. Thoreau’s ambitious reworking of the material from his journals included the adoption of a seasonal structure (summer to spring) and the collapsing of two actual years into a single narrative one, a model nature writers have followed to this day. The text stands as the most complex fusion of his post-Christian, Transcendentalist religious orientation with his detailed and scientifically informed observation of a particular natural surround. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), which preceded *Walden* (and was a publishing failure) is more obviously metaphorical. While a travel narrative in some respects, it is interspersed with philosophical departures, essays, poems and fragments from

Thoreau's reading, while also intending to serve as an elegy to his brother, John. Throughout the text, attention to natural detail appears and recedes, but ultimately takes a back seat to Transcendentalist philosophy and the workings of Thoreau's young literary and religious imagination. Thoreau's late writings lean in the other direction, his unpublished manuscripts on seed dispersion and the development of flora in Concord (recently collected and published posthumously as *Faith in a Seed* [1993] and *Wild Fruits* [1999]) contain still accurate and scientific useful documentation of the growth, development and distribution of plants in New England.

When traced through the corpus of his writing, Thoreau's view of nature is clearly a dynamic one, shifting and changing in response to Thoreau's own growth as a writer and his synthesis of naturalistic observations accumulated over the years. In general terms, Thoreau's interpretive stance toward nature is a view shaped by his European and New England, Protestant heritage, yet defying easy categorization. It is neither Christian, nor secular; neither wholly scientific, nor traditionally religious. With the European Romantics, and older Transcendentalists, Thoreau saw nature as something other than simply God's creation (the traditional Christian view and one that was itself comparatively neglected by Christians of his day, who placed more emphasis on personal salvation).

Thoreau was a lifelong critic of the Church, even the liberal Unitarian church attended by the majority of his family. His vision of nature was pursued outside the boundaries of both Christian orthodoxy and liberalism and his contemporaries therefore often criticized his writing (or expurgated it) because of its "paganistic" tendencies. Even Thoreau's Aunt Maria worried that portions of *A Week* sounded like "blasphemy" both because of Thoreau's approving nods toward Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as his claims that the divine could be found *within* both nature and humanity. While *Walden* was a comparative success, the same kinds of criticisms came from more theologically conservative circles, who praised the examples of detailed "nature study" in the text, but not the more radical philosophical and religious themes.

Thoreau's approach to the natural world was particularly informed by his reading of the Romantics, who saw nature as the ultimate source of insight and a means of return to childhood innocence untainted by "civilization's" expectations and failings. Thoreau's sense of ethics and aesthetics emerged from the Romantic (and later, Transcendentalist) presumption that nature is the ideal teacher. His purpose was to cultivate himself, in return, as an ideal pupil. Yet such an embrace of nature was not wholly positive, nor was his construction of nature exclusively beneficent, though it was prevailing so. The "Higher Laws" section of *Walden* show a Thoreau who is sometimes ill at ease with the unseemly, violent, or lowly aspects of nature (including his own body) and reveal a

typical Transcendentalist and post-Christian preoccupation with purity: nature in her ideal, good and "higher" aspect. His writings of travels in the Maine woods also display an unexpected fear of the wilderness in its most rugged form. Overall, however, nature is a source of goodness and a model for humanity in Thoreau's view.

Nature occupied a space in Thoreau's imagination that his Christian neighbors reserved for God. Thoreau enjoyed needling others with this unorthodox, but increasingly popular, approach, commenting toward the end of his life that "a snowstorm was more to him than Christ" (Harding 1965: 464). Thoreau was also influenced by the newly (and sometimes inaccurately) translated Eastern religious and philosophical texts becoming available in America, which gave testimony to the sacredness of particular aspects of the physical world (mountains, rivers, etc.) Thoreau welcomed the *Vedas*, *The Laws of Manu* and purported sayings of the Buddha into his literary repertoire (using them often to support his own Transcendentalist assertions) and argued for the equal legitimacy of the religions of the world. In addition, he drew deeply – though perhaps less consciously – on a broader legacy of Christian and especially Protestant, New England interpretations of nature as a book to be read, the so-called "Book of Nature." While leaving Christian theology behind, Thoreau retained the Christian – and particularly, American – legacy of finding in nature lessons and morals for leading an ethical life. While rejecting traditional Christian typology, Thoreau maintained a "typological stance" toward nature, seeing lessons for humanity in battles between ants, the lure of the woodchuck and the play of the loon.

Thoreau's daily practice of attentiveness toward nature, however, enabled him to go beyond a "reading" of nature only for moral and spiritual guidance. His daily walks became a means for gathering precise naturalistic data within the limited boundaries of a particular watershed over several decades, an invaluable contribution – before its time – that leaves us with a thick ecological portrait of a particular bioregion. His "amateur" conclusions regarding the succession of trees, his identification of rare plants and his innovations in everything from pencil-making to predicting ways to lengthen the cranberry harvest were all discoveries that were independently supported or produced by professionals in later years.

While Thoreau's Transcendentalism always led him to see "more" in nature than a scientist would discern, his unflagging curiosity and rigorous record-keeping also helped him to become a self-taught naturalist and to establish literary naturalism as an American genre. More than any other Transcendentalist, Thoreau wove together contemporary scientific knowledge and liberal, post-Christian interpretations of nature's symbolic capacity. On the other hand, Thoreau's criticism of Christian institutions, his insistence on seeing the divine *in* nature (and in the self) and his respect for other religious traditions of the world

opened his writing up to charges of paganism and pantheism that persist in conservative, evangelical circles. Yet a close reading of Thoreau's work clearly reveals its intellectual and spiritual debt to New England Protestantism. His thinking and writing is "post-Christian" more than it is anti-Christian, pantheistic or pagan. Like Emerson, but going beyond him, Thoreau knitted together a Protestant heritage, a philosophical interest in idealism and a passion for observation and study of natural phenomena in the field.

Today, Thoreau's legacy is less felt in religious circles than it is in environmental ones. Hand in hand with the growth of the environmental movement from the 1960s forward has been an ever-increasing enthusiasm for Thoreau's work, though few read more than portions of *Walden*. Thoreau's relative self-sufficiency, his concerns about the marketplace and emerging capitalism, and his view of nature as a beneficent source of spiritual transformation all contributed to the dominant themes of contemporary environmentalism: a growing interest in simple, sustainable living, a critique of consumer culture and a view of nature as the source for personal (often spiritual) renewal.

Though prone to misrepresentation, Thoreau's writing and his example continue to speak to both religious and non-religious audiences, to scientists and to humanists, to those who read nature symbolically and to those who simply admire the vast records of this "self-appointed inspector" of snowstorms.

Rebecca Kneale Gould

Further Reading

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's "Journal"*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden*. New York: Viking, 1972.
- Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- Peck, Daniel. *Thoreau's Morning Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Shanley, James Lyndon. *The Making of Walden*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- See also: Back to the Land Movements; Book of Nature; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Radical Environmentalism; Transcendentalism; Unitarianism.

Tibet and Central Asia

The Tibetan form of Buddhism is the dominant religious system throughout the Tibetan plateau, and is also widespread in surrounding areas, particularly Mongolia, northern Nepal, Bhutan, areas of Central Asia and Russia, and the northern Indian regions of Sikkim and Ladakh. Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet during the early dynastic period from the seventh to ninth centuries. Following the demise of the Yarlung dynasty (so called because its power base was the Yarlung Valley of central Tibet), Buddhism's influence declined until it was reintroduced in the twelfth century. In the following centuries it became increasingly popular throughout the Tibetan plateau as well as neighboring states.

The main sources of Tibetan Buddhism were the great north Indian monastic universities and charismatic Tantric lineages that were centered in Bengal and Bihar. The Buddhism of the monastic universities emphasized scholasticism along with meditative practice, and the Tantric lineages taught a more meditation-oriented form of practice based on visualization and ritual practices. The present-day forms of Tibetan Buddhism are mainly derived from these two sources.

From the mid-seventeenth century until 1959, Tibet was ruled by the Dalai Lamas or their regents. The Dalai Lamas are believed to be physical manifestations of the Buddha Avalokiteśvara (Tibetan: Chenrezi), and the present one, Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935), is the fourteenth incarnation. In 1950 China invaded and annexed Tibet, and in 1959, following an abortive popular uprising against Chinese rule, he fled to India, where he established a government-in-exile headquartered in Dharamsala in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

In many ways, Buddhism might seem to be an unpromising religion for someone seeking conceptual resources for an environmental ethic. According to Buddhist doctrine, all sentient beings are reborn over and over as a result of their actions (*karma*), and the world is conceived as a place of suffering. The ultimate goal of Buddhist practice is liberation from the world and the cycle of rebirth, and cyclic existence is conceived as irredeemably unsatisfactory. There is no way to fix it up and make it bearable, but despite these attitudes, Buddhists have traditionally asserted the importance of avoiding harm to the environment. In the Indian text Dhammapada, for example, one of the distinguishing features of an awakened being (buddha) is that he or she avoids harming plants and animals and lives in harmony with the surrounding environment.

In recent decades, a number of Tibetan Buddhist thinkers have developed a Buddhist approach to environmentalism based on the doctrine of interdependence (*pratitya-samutpada*), which holds that all things come into being in dependence upon causes and conditions and