

Schoolteacher Thoreau

A sermon for Westwood Unitarian Congregation, 7 February 2010, by Trudy Grienauer – all rights reserved.

Good morning! My notes for this talk are about 8 years old. I am very grateful that you gave me a reason to pull that old notebook off the shelf and bring one of my many unfinished projects to a conclusion. Thank you for letting me share this today.

Teaching and support on our paths can come from anywhere, if our minds are open, and often they come from unexpected sources. I had such an experience about 8 years ago, when I was motivated to read Henry David Thoreau through a course on American literature. At the time, we were living in Atlanta, and I was struggling with my conversion from the Christian faith to Buddhism, which wasn't exactly easy to talk about in the Southern bible belt. Many western Buddhists say that Thoreau was an inspiration at the very beginning of their path away from their childhood faiths. I had already studied Buddhist teachings and philosophy for quite some time, and I was amazed by the Buddhist ideas speaking out of Thoreau's writing. Here was this American icon, saying things I could totally subscribe to. I couldn't be that far off with my new Buddhist faith then, could I?

Thoreau was not a Buddhist and I do not intend to make him one. That said, he had many traits of a good Buddhist teacher, and this is what I want to explore today.

Buddhism is a religion centered around a teacher, the Buddha. It offers lessons rather than a creed. Instead of worshipping or blindly imitating the historic Buddha or a living teacher, a student is advised to apply the teacher's message wisely and skilfully to his or her own life. The Buddha showed the way, but you have to walk it yourself. Buddhism revolves around achieving freedom, being enlightened by all things, and being a lamp unto yourself on your spiritual path. Let's see how this resonates with Thoreau's experience as a teacher.

Education was a subject that concerned Thoreau most of his life; however, this has often been overlooked, and it is not widely known that he worked as a teacher and ran his own school. For example, Wikipedia lists Thoreau as "author, poet, naturalist, tax resister, development critic, surveyor, historian, philosopher, and leading transcendentalist" but not as teacher or schoolkeeper.

Supervising about fifty students aged 7 to 18, who crowded the one-room schoolhouse in Concord, was called "schoolkeeping" and for most teachers probably had more to do with keeping discipline than actual teaching. Thoreau took this job immediately after graduation from Harvard in 1837, but resigned after 2 weeks because he refused to use corporal punishment. He had to teach in his own way, or not at all, and he never went back to a public school position.

From 1838 to 1841, Thoreau ran a private, coeducational school with his brother John. Some students were local, others boarded with the Thoreau family. The sources differ on the number of students they had, and whether the undertaking was a success. The important thing was that Henry could now set his own rules. The teaching techniques used were those of 20th century progressive education. He did believe in classical education, and geometry, geography, grammar, algebra, Latin, and English writing compositions were part of the curriculum. However, nature

study was equally important, and a good part of the school day was spent out of doors with observing plants and animals, studying local history, and hiking, rowing and swimming.

The children were impressed that he knew all the birds, beasts and flowers not like a scholar, who has dissected them, but like one child knows another with all their little quirks and habits. One of Thoreau's students recalled that one day out walking, Thoreau suddenly stopped, knelt down, and examined the ground with great care. Then, he plucked a tiny something and asked the boy if he could see it. Yes, the boy replied – but what about it? Thoreau took out his magnifying glass and showed the boy that when magnified, this little thing was a perfect flower, just then in its season of blossoming. He said that he had become so well acquainted with the flowers of Concord, large and small, that he could tell what month it was just by the blooming of the flowers. Thoreau was not trying to display his superior knowledge. He wanted to show the children how immense the sum of nature's activities is, and to help his students develop their own sensitivity for the world around them.

One of Thoreau's ways of extending his students' experience was to take them to visit the shops of local craftsmen. One student described spending time at the local newspaper, watching the compositor setting type, and then at the gunsmith's, where he saw how the gunsmith regulated the sights of a new rifle. Another time the class surveyed a piece of land in Concord. Wherever possible, the class situations were related to real life.

John stopped teaching in 1841, probably for health reasons, and Henry did not want to continue on his own and closed the school. Beyond his two periods of working as a teacher, Thoreau wrote about education again and again in *Walden*, his other essays, and his journals. In 1850, he noted somewhat bitterly: "What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook."

So, what does Thoreau's teaching philosophy have to do with Buddhist practice?

Buddhist practice discourages pure imitation and reliance on authorities. Instead, it encourages the same curiosity and freshness of perspective as Thoreau did. He said: "How novel and original must be each new man's view of the universe! For though the world is so old, and so many books have been written, each object appears wholly undescribed to our experience, each field of thought wholly unexplored."

In just this way, a student of Buddhism is asked to look at each object as if it was seen for the first time – over and over again for the first time. You will not find in a book the way the light sometimes falls an hour before sunset, you will not read what makes the treeness of a tree, or your own essence. You can only observe it, experience it, for yourself.

Also, in Buddhist practice there are no dogmas. Again and again, the student is asked to check their point of view and see how it fits reality – or that what we think reality is. Somebody who is not willing to give up preconceived notions and opinions, even of Buddhism itself, or who just wants to exchange old beliefs for a new set of everlasting "truths", will soon be frustrated by Buddhism. Thoreau encouraged his students to think for themselves, at the risk of being wrong or contradicting oneself. Even if we arrive at the same insights as our forebears, we will have made those insights our own.

Thirdly, experience, exploration and intuition are central to Buddhist teaching as well as to Thoreau's teaching methods. Thoreau says: "Is there any such thing as wisdom not applied to

life?” As I mentioned before, the Buddhist student is asked to apply the teaching to his or her own life and explore its implications in any situation as it arises. Insight has to come from direct experience. Compassion grows from experience of our own suffering and the intuition that others feel the same way. John Daido Looi, one of the great American Zen teachers, explained that real experience means no separation between the self and the other. He said: “Knowledge depends on the words and ideas that describe reality. There is no intimacy in knowing. Knowing involves the knower, and the thing that the knower knows, and that implies separation. Buddhist practice has nothing to do with knowledge. It is the experience of intimacy.”

Finally, exploration and experience are not possible without attention and awareness, which are also central concepts in Buddhism. Thoreau taught to give attention even to the tiniest flower or insect. This led him to awareness how all things work together and are dependent on each other. Awareness cannot be understood theoretically. It can only arise here and now, in this moment, with a particular person. What is real is always immediate, present, specific and particular. Awareness helps us to overcome our belief that one thing is as the other, helps us to overcome our urge to standardize and theorize. We live in a culture that reduces trees to 2-by-4s, fish to fish sticks, and persons to stereotypes – how are we going to see the uniqueness of each person, each thing, and each moment? Only with attention and awareness.

Curiosity, exploration, attention, and letting go our own dogmas: A Buddhist teacher worth his or her salt encourages all these things in a student and then steps aside as the students explore their own attitudes, habits, and points of fixation in their quest to gain insight. Each person is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all path. The teacher guides and challenges, but the student has to do the work. And it is a lot of work to get our ideas out of the way, to reach beyond common sense explanations, and to just see how things are! It takes a lot of time and patience, and goes very much against our grain, because we are so used to having everything laid out to us logically and conclusively.

I would expect of any great teacher in any tradition to assign full responsibility for the students’ personal growth to the students themselves. (I was tempted to throw in a couple of quotes by Rumi on the Sufi path, but let’s stick with Buddhism for today.) And that’s what I meant when I said that Thoreau would have made a great Buddhist teacher: he was a guide and encouragement to his students, but he stepped aside to let them have what he called their own “direct revelations”.

The American psychologist Carl Rogers wrote: “I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated. Truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience cannot be directly communicated to another. Teaching seems to cause the individual to distrust his or her own experience and to stifle significant learning.” Compare that with Thoreau’s quote: “How vain to try to teach youth, or anybody, truths! They can only learn them after their own fashion, and when they get ready.”

So if we see ourselves as students on our personal path towards truth, enlightenment, spiritual fulfillment or whatever we want to call it, what do we make of this? How do we step forward with our questions about life, without immediately grasping for ready-made answers? How do we find the courage for experience and exploration, for child-like curiosity?

I deeply believe that all of us already possess everything we need to walk our path and answer our questions. In Zen Buddhism, this is called ‘our own true nature’. It’s just that we are not

aware of it, that we have buried it under layers and layers of ideas, habits, fears, desires. And so we go looking for a teacher, and think we can get the answers from outside.

I do believe that teachers are essential on our paths, whether they be formal teachers, or other wayfarers who share their experience, or even children who with their direct questions challenge us and point out where we contradict ourselves. The role of the teacher is to coax us out of the dead ends of our ideas and habits, to open our eyes to a new way of seeing. But ultimately, the teacher cannot give us anything. There is nothing to be transferred from the teacher to us. Even if you open up to all your blind spots under his or her guidance, it will be your seeing, not the teacher's. You can study and soak up all the six Unitarian sources, but only when you personally appropriate their wisdom and assimilate them in experience, as Rogers said, will they be your truths.

Since we cannot abdicate our responsibility for our spiritual path to a teacher, there is something that is equally important as teachers – and that is great faith in ourselves. Faith may be a problematic word for some of us, but originally it came from the Latin word for trust, *fides*. The first meaning of faith therefore is confidence or trust in a person or thing. So great faith in ourselves means just that: Trust yourself! Trust that you already have everything you need to walk your path and find your answers. Trust that your experience and your insights count. Trust that you *can* personally appropriate the truth of a teaching. Faith in ourselves helps us to overcome our fears and to stay open to new experience and understanding.

We need teachers, and we need great faith in ourselves:

Thoreau wasn't spoon-feeding his students. He put a lot of trust in them, and a lot of responsibility on them. If we are looking for a teacher, do we expect explanations, or are we willing to follow somebody out there to kneel in the mud and look at flowers through a magnifying glass? Do we want somebody who has all the answers, or are we willing to embrace someone who has all the questions? Someone who is compassionate enough to point us back to ourselves, because providing an answer that we haven't found ourselves would not help us in the least?

Thoreau asked his students to see for themselves, to think for themselves, to ask questions. Are we willing to do that? Are we willing to hold still in that uncomfortable spot where we have more questions than answers, and just see how things are? Are we willing to hold still and trust ourselves, until we find our own direct revelation?

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