

## HENRY DAVID THOREAU: A TRANSPERSONAL VIEW

Michael Keller  
Muncie, Indiana

*Henry David Thoreau was born July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts and spent nearly all his days there until his death on May 6, 1862. He lived a relatively retired life and supported himself by working in his father's small business, by performing odd jobs, by surveying, and by occasional lectures and published essays. He graduated from Harvard University in 1837 and in the fall of the same year developed a friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thereafter he was associated with a group of American thinkers and writers, the Transcendentalists, who acknowledged Emerson as mentor. Though not well known in his own time, Thoreau now enjoys one of the highest artistic reputations of any of the Transcendentalist writers. He is also recognized as an accomplished and knowledgeable naturalist.*

*Thoreau's Walden (1960), his best known work, records his two year living-experiment at Walden Pond. His vast Journal (1962), covers the period 1837-1861 and is the most valuable document for students interested in his character and temperament. It is cited here by volume and page.*

*Reactions to Thoreau, in his time, ranged from seeing him as a nay-saying, cold, solitary eccentric to an impression of him as an amiable and gentle spiritual guide. Some of this controversy continues to the present day. In his Journal (V, 4), Thoreau describes himself as both a "natural philosopher" and a "mystic." This latter aspect is the subject of the present essay (see Keller, 1977), which is based primarily on his life up to the publication of Walden in 1854. His mystical experience is examined in terms of Evelyn Underhill's (1965) three-stage view of psychospiritual development-Illumination, Dark Night, Unitive Life.*

*biographical  
introduction*

ILLUMINATIONS

In a letter to Harrison Blake on February 27, 1853, Thoreau wrote:

I have had but one *spiritual* birth (excuse the word.) and now whether it rains or snows, whether I laugh or cry, fall farther below or approach nearer to my standard, whether Pierce or Scott is ejected, or not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising & everlasting new light dawns to me, with only such variations as in the coming of the natural day, with which indeed, it is often coincident (1958, pp. 296-97).

Thoreau is referring here to his various illumination experiences. His reference to "one *spiritual* birth" seems to point to an "awakening" experience early in life, such as is common in the lives of other mystics. "Awakening" is a powerful *initial* illumination experience or experiences which suddenly introduce the subject to the realm of spiritual realities, and start him off on a course of self-purification so that he may finally live completely within the Reality he has perceived.

*early  
illumination  
experiences*

Thoreau describes his early illumination experiences in a quite detailed way in a July 16, 1851 *Journal* passage. Just before the excerpt from this passage quoted below, Thoreau refers to these experiences, in one instance, as "the experiences of my boyhood," and in another, as experiences that occurred "in youth."

This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us, such ecstasies begotten of the breezes! I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself, I said to others, "There *comes* into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and {I} have had nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself. I speak as a witness on the stand, and tell what I have perceived.' The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I led a life aloof from society of men. I wondered if a mortal had ever known what I knew. I looked in books for some recognition of a kindred experience, but, strange to say, I found none. Indeed, I was slow to discover that other men had had this experience, for it had been possible to read books and to associate with men on other grounds. The maker of me was improving me. When I detected this interference I was profoundly moved. For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated, and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science

can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul? (II, 307)

A number of elements mark Thoreau's early experience as genuinely illuminative. In the long passage quoted above, Thoreau's references to music should not necessarily be passed off as merely "poetic." They occur in many other of his mystical accounts, and they recall the statements of other mystics about their illuminations. In an account of an illuminative experience quoted by James (1902, 1961), the subject notes that along with other elements in his consciousness at the time, he experienced that "'the woods were vocal with heavenly music' .. (p. 204). Thoreau's noting how "astonished" he was by his experiences is also important, since it suggests that he felt they had a different character from the experiences of normal consciousness, that is, that they were "altered states of consciousness" (Tart, 1971). His sensations of "elevation and expansion" also tally with other mystical accounts. James quotes an account of illumination from a Swiss, who says in the beginning of his account, "'All at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself' " (p. 76). This sense of elevation is sometimes so powerful that the subject may feel he undergoes actual physical levitation (Underhill, 1910, 1965, pp. 186,376). A sense of expansion is also a common accompaniment of illumination. James (p. 206) quotes another case: "'Suddenly there seemed to be a something sweeping into me and inflating my entire being--such a sensation as I had never experienced before.'" Thoreau's sense that he was "*dealt with* by superior powers," that he "had nought to do with it," is significant too. He felt that his will was not involved in his experiences; he was not improving himself, but "the maker of me was improving me"; when he detected this, it seemed an "interference" to him, i.e., as something that was done to him by a power outside of him. His use of the word "interference" may also indicate some slight resistance. Underhill says that this sense of things is common to mystics in their illuminations:

*elevation  
and  
expansion*

We find in all the mystics this strong sense of a mysterious spiritual life—a Reality—over against man, seeking him and compelling him to Its will. It is not for him, they think, to say that he will or will not aspire to the transcendental world. Hence sometimes ... [an] inversion of man's long quest of God. The self resists the pull of spiritual gravitation, flees from the touch of Eternity; and the Eternal seeks it, tracks it ruthlessly down (p. 136).

Finally, Thoreau's reference to his experiences as "indescribable, infinite;" and "divine," and his characterizing them as "light" coming into the soul, recall the way that other mystics frequently describe their illuminative experiences.

*Meditative States*

Thoreau's *Journal* records of contemporary illuminative experiences, as opposed to passages of recollected past experiences, begin in 1838. On August 13 of that year, Thoreau recorded an experience that he had quite frequently and that he could apparently occasion at will:

If with closed ears and eyes I consult consciousness for it moment, immediately are all walls and barriers dissipated, earth rolls from under me, and I float, by the impetus derived from the earth and the system, a subjective, heavily laden thought, in the midst of an unknown and infinite sea, or else heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought, without rock or headland, where are all riddles solved, all straight lines making there their two ends to meet, eternity and space gamboling familiarly through my depths. [ am from the beginning, knowing no end, no aim. No sun illumines me, for I dissolve all lesser lights in my own intenser and steadier light. I am a restful kernel in the magazine of the universe. (I, 53-54)

*metaphysical  
speculation  
or  
intuitive  
discovery*

Thoreau frequently put himself in this state of consciousness for its power to resolve, or at least to render unimportant, what he felt as vain metaphysical speculations about the nature of reality. Just after the above account, he says, "Men are constantly clinging in my ears their fair theories and plausible solutions of the universe, but ever there is no help, and I return again to my shoreless, islandless ocean, and fathom unceasingly for a bottom that will hold an anchor, that it may not drag" (1,54). Thoreau evidently felt himself to be engaging in that process of incommunicable intuitive discovery of which Chogyam Trungpa (1974) speaks: "Finally that vague feeling of discovery becomes very clear, so that almost no doubt remains" (p. 54). Certainly the ability of Thoreau to occasion this experience at will reveals that he had a considerable facility in the specific process that Trungpa was referring to, that is, a power of meditation. And he was also quite advanced in it, as "closed ears" in his account shows. Suspended "sensory perception" characterizes very high levels of attainment in meditation (Goleman, 1972).

There is no indication that Thoreau received any training in meditation or even that he practiced it, or trained himself in it, on a regularly scheduled basis. Apparently the ability to meditate arose in him spontaneously as a result of his unsolicited experiences of illumination. Underhill indicates that illumination does occasion the power to meditate; she says of meditation, "The 'New Birth,' the awakening of the deeper self, must have taken place before it can begin" (p. 303). What meditation is, in Underhill's words, is "an extreme form of ... withdrawal of attention from the external world and total

dedication of the mind ... releasing the faculty by which he [the mystic] can apprehend the Good and Beautiful, enter into communion with the Real" (p. 299). It is a purely non-rational, non-reflective process, which nevertheless brings spiritual knowledge on an intuitive level, as Thoreau himself apparently felt. Underhill further observes about meditation:

The price of this experience has been a stilling of that surface-mind, a calling in of all our scattered interests: an entire giving of ourselves to this one activity, without self-consciousness, without reflective thought. To reflect is always to distort: our minds are not good mirrors. The contemplative, on whatever level his faculty may operate, is contented to absorb and be absorbed: and by this humble access he attains to a plane of knowledge which no intellectual process can come near (p. 302),

Thoreau's sensation of floating "in the midst of an unknown and infinite sea," "a restful kernel in the magazine of the universe," is a common aspect of reports of illumination. James quotes a 1. Trevor on his illuminative experiences, which he had with some frequency: " 'It was in the most real seasons that the Real Presence came, and I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God' " (pp. 312-13). A present-day Vedantist, Swami Nitya (1973), declares on the basis of his experiences:

*floating  
in an  
infinite  
sea*

When we say soul or self, we do not mean that which is animating one single body. We think of it as a universal consciousness, so to say, which is indivisible, which is everywhere, which is expressing through every person. The basic concept is that there is only one Mind, We are all floating in that Mind. This organism with the senses, mind, everything-is floating in that ocean of consciousness (p.20)].

Speaking of illuminative experience in meditation, Joseph Hart (1970) says, "... This experience .. , can be very pleasurable, even blissful. .. , In the void, the person will feel much bigger than his puny ego, he will float in infinity (p, 164), The noetic element in Thoreau's experience also of course links it up with genuine illuminative experiences, as does Thoreau's reference to "my own intenser and steadier light," which probably should not be taken as only a metaphor for spiritual knowledge. "Luminous shapes or flashes of bright light" are common within meditative experiences of illumination (Galeman, 1972).

As mystics experience infinity, it can be felt as either outward or inward or both; it is indeed meaningless to try to make the distinction, **In** a passage in *Walden* (1960) on fishing in the pond, Thoreau seems to be trying to reflect his meditative

consciousness of exploring both vast outer and vast inner depths. He resolves this inner and outer vastness into the same thing, and seems to be reflecting the noetic element that was a feature of his meditative experience. The passage is from "The Ponds":

Sometimes, after staying in a village parlor till the family had all retired, I have returned to the woods, and, partly with a view to the next day's dinner, spent the hours of midnight fishing from a boat by moonlight, serenaded by owls and foxes, and hearing, from time to time, the creaking note of some unknown bird close at hand. These experiences were very memorable and valuable to me. s-anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with their tails in the moonlight, and communicating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below, or *sometimes* dragging *sixty* feet of line about the pond as I drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make up its mind. At length you slowly raise, pulling hand *over* hand, some horned pout squeaking and squirming to the upper air. It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element, which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook (p. 121).

*internal  
and  
external  
vastness*

In the *Journal* Thoreau expresses much the same thought, linking external and internal vastness, on June 23, 1840: "I cannot see the bottom of the sky, because I cannot see to the bottom of myself. It is the symbol of my own infinity. My eye penetrates as far into the ether as that depth is inward from which my contemporary thought springs" (I, 150). The perception of his own vast depths was wondrous to him: "We are height and depth both," he noted on May 31, 1841, "a calm sea at the foot of a promontory. Do we not overlook our own depths?" (I, 261) Such statements and images reflecting awareness of a vast, calm inner self cannot be given their proper weight unless we appreciate fully that actual experience of a mystical sort lies behind them. Expressions such as "overlook our own depths" and "calm sea" in the *Journal* passage are essentially concrete; they render Thoreau's emotional experience and are quite accurate descriptions of aspects of consciousness during meditation.

The experience within meditative consciousness of a vast, calm inner self also forms the basis for another passage on the pond:

It is a soothing employment, on one of those fine days in the fall when all the warmth of the sun is fully appreciated, to sit on a stump on such a height as this, overlooking the pond, and study the dimpling circles which are incessantly inscribed on its otherwise invisible surface amid the reflected skies and trees. Over this great expanse there is no disturbance but it is thus at once gently smoothed away and assuaged, as, when a vase of water is jarred, the trembling circles seek the shore and all is smooth again. Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast. The thrills of joy and thrills of pain are undistinguishable, How peaceful the phenomena of the lake! (*Walden*, p. 130).

Some remarks on meditative consciousness by Shunryu Suzuki (1973) may make clearer what Thoreau is seeking to reflect in this passage. Suzuki says of "zazen," which is a form of meditation, "When you are doing zazen, you are within the complete calmness of your mind" (p. 121). Elsewhere he elaborates on this: "Even though waves arise, the essence of your mind is pure; it is just like clear water with a few waves" (p. 35). This is the experience in Thoreau's passage, the resolution of inner waves into the predominant calm of the self.

Thoreau also apparently had "spontaneous" (non-meditative) experiences of infinity and of flotation in infinity, that is, experiences not occasioned by more or less formal practice. In an entry that may belong to 1850, Thoreau recounted, "The oldest nature is elastic. I just felt myself raised upon the swell of the eternal ocean, which came rolling this way to land" (II, 18). This experience is probably similar to that which Thoreau described twelve years earlier as occurring in his meditations; there he felt himself "heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought." The later experience seems to have occurred, and to have been jotted down, while Thoreau was on a walk in nature. It has close affinities with an earlier state of consciousness recorded on February 27, 1841:

*spontaneous  
experiences  
of  
infinity*

My future deeds bestir themselves within me and move grandly toward a consummation. as ships go down the Thames. A steady onward motion I feel in me, as "till as that, or like some vast, snowy cloud, whose shadow first is seen across the fields. It is the material of all things loose and set afloat that makes my sea. (I, 225)

In 1850, upon the occasion of what seems to be another infinity-experience, Thoreau reflected about this ultimate reality: "Thou art a personality so vast and universal that I have never seen one of thy features" (II, 77). Thoreau had experiences occasionally in sleep which he felt were similar to infinity-experiences, and he interpreted these as a dissolution into Universal Mind. He recorded on March 17, 1852:

I am conscious of having, in my sleep, transcended the limits of the individual. and made observations and carried on conversations which in my waking hours I can neither recall nor appreciate. As if in sleep our individual fell into the infinitemind, and at the moment of awakening we found ourselves on the confines of the latter. On awakening we resume our enterprise, take up our bodies and become limited mind again. (III, 354)

*receptivity  
to  
nature*

Thoreau's infinity-experiences that occurred in the out-of-doors were no doubt facilitated by the particular way that Thoreau sometimes approached his outings in nature. William J. Wolf(1974) perceptively notes that Thoreau could practice a kind of "meditation ... while walking" (p. 116). Certainly Thoreau often cultivated on his sojourns in nature a passivity and openness that resemble the state of receptive, stilled, "empty mind" characteristic of meditation. Such a state of mind in meditation is a necessary prelude to illuminative moments. Mental content in meditation, in the form of thoughts or pronounced moods, is a barrier to transcendental experience. On the other hand, says Shunryu Suzuki, "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything (p. 21).

Thoreau cultivated this passive and open state on his outings. Like Suzuki, he felt that *this state* prepared the way for transcendental experience. On August 15, 1851, he noted in his *Journal*, "Granted that you are out-of-doors; but what if the outer door *is* open, if the inner door is shut! You must walk sometimes perfectly free, not prying nor inquisitive, not bent upon seeing things. Throwaway a whole day for a single expansion, a single inspiration of air" (II, 416). Again on September 13, 1852, he stressed the importance of open receptivity on walks:

Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you. When I have found myself ever looking down and confining my gaze to the flowers, I have thought it might be well to get into the habit of observing the clouds as a corrective; but no! that study would be just as bad. What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye. (IV, 351)

### *Silence*

In late December of 1838, Thoreau made numerous entries in his *Journal* in preparation for an essay that was to be called "Sound and Silence." Silence in these entries coexists with external noise: "She is always at hand with her wisdom, by roadsides and street corners; lurking in belfries, the cannon's mouth, and the wake of the earthquake; gathering up and



fondling their puny din in her ample bosom" *O*, 65). It is the same silence that is experienced in meditation. A previous entry links it up with the more or less formal meditation that Thoreau practiced, although Thoreau could experience it outside of this practice as well: "Silence is the communing of a conscious soul with itself. If the soul attend for a moment to its own infinity, then and there is silence" (I, 64).

Within silence, Thoreau evidently experienced the sense of "resting in the divine atmosphere" of which Underhill speaks, that "dim yet vivid consciousness of the Infinite" (pp. 315, 317). This atmosphere was pregnant for him with an incommunicable noetic element, Eckhart's "Word" (Underhill, p. 319). Thoreau says about silence in another of these December entries:

Who has not hearkened to her infinite din? She is Truth's speaking trumpet, which every man carries slung over his shoulder, and when he will may apply to his ear. She is the sole oracle, the true Delphi and Dodona, which kings and courtiers would do well to consult, nor will they be balked by an ambiguous answer. Through her have all revelations been made. (I, 67)

Although the answer received in silence may not be ambiguous, its clarity is not rational but intuitive. Knowledge received in silence had for Thoreau the same "ineffability" that James saw as characteristic of valid mystical revelation. Accordingly Thoreau added:

*knowledge  
received  
in silence*

It were vain for me to interpret the Silence, She cannot be done into English. For six thousand years have men translated her, with what fidelity belonged to each; still is she little better than a sealed book. A man may run on confidently for a time, thinking he has her under his thumb, and shall one day exhaust her, but he too must at last be silent, and men remark only how brave a beginning he made; for, when he at length dives into her, so vast is the disproportion of the told to the untold that the former will seem but the bubble on the surface where he disappeared. (I, 68-69)

The sense of dwelling near to absolute Truth made the state of silence for Thoreau the same spiritually comfortable refuge, the same "great satisfaction of soul," that it was for St. Teresa (Underhill, p. 321): Thoreau wrote:

Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel of all dry discourses and all foolish acts, as balm to our every chagrin, as welcome after satiety as [after] disappointment; that background which the painter may not daub, be he master or bungler, and which, however awkward a figure he may have made in the foreground, remains ever our inviolable asylum. (I, 67)

glows  
and flashes  
of  
light

Thoreau's cultivation of a passive, open, "empty mind" while in nature also led to his experiencing other aspects of mystical awareness in addition to silence. He frequently experienced the glows or flashes of light that are associated with illumination. "When we have emptiness we are always prepared for watching the flashing," says Suzuki, speaking of these glows or flashes (p. 84). They either accompany a sense of incipient illuminative insight, in which case, so to speak, they prefigure a fuller dawn; or they accompany full illumination. In an Eastern work that summarizes the progressive stages of consciousness in meditation, the *Visuddhimagga*, these glows or flashes are associated with the "access" level of meditation (Goleman, 1972); this is the lowest level of meditation but nevertheless represents a considerable departure from normal consciousness. In works on mysticism, however, glows or flashes are most often associated with fuller illumination, Joseph Hart (1970), for instance, says about LSD subjects experiencing illumination that, after their "ego disintegration is complete," they may encounter "the white light of the void" (p. 158). R. M. Bucke (1901, 1969) reports a light experience as part of his full illumination. He begins his third-person account:

All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city [London]; the next, he knew that the light was within himself (pp.9-10),

Rulman Merswin, a German mystic of the fourteenth century, says that "a brilliant light shone about him" at the moment of his initial illumination or "awakening" (Underhill, p. 185). And an account of an illumination experience by J. Trevor, reported by James, also includes light as part of the experience: "Suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven-an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light" (p. 312).

As late as 1850, Thoreau was still having experiences of illuminative light, as is indicated in a *Journal* entry of this year:

I saw the sun falling on a distant white pine wood whose gray and moss-covered stems were visible amid the green, in an angle where this forest abutted on a hill covered with shrub oaks. It was like looking into dreamland. It is one of the avenues to my future. Certain coincidences like this are accompanied by a certain flash of hazy lightning, flooding all the world suddenly with a tremulous serene light which it is difficult to see long at a time. (II, 106-07)

When Thoreau says at the end of *Walden*, "The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us" (p, 227), his statement is a metaphor for illuminative light.

### *High Tide States*

Thoreau's *Journal* also contains many general references to a state of "high tide" within. It was a state of joyous affirmation of life in which all partial judgments of value disappeared in the felt innocence of the whole of existence. On August 1, 1841, Thoreau wrote:

*JOYOUS  
affirmation  
of life*

The best thought is not only without sombreness, but even without morality. The universe lies outspread in floods of white light to it. The moral aspect of nature is a jaundice reflected from man. To the innocent there are no cherubim nor angels. Occasionally we rise above the necessity of virtue into an unchangeable morning light, in which we have not to choose in a dilemma between right and wrong, but simply to live right on and breathe the circumambient air. Silent is the preacher about this, and silent must ever be, for he who knows it will not preach. (I, 265)

This passage is reminiscent of R. M. Bucke's statement that all sense of sin vanishes with illumination; in the overwhelming affirmation that the illuminated self experiences, "he no longer sees that there is any sin in the world from which to escape" (p. 22). Suzuki also speaks of this high illuminated vision of the level innocence and goodness of life: "In your big mind [the calm, "empty mind" within advanced stages of meditation], everything has the same value. Everything is Buddha himself" (p. 44). For Thoreau, in the high tide state all life seemed a levelly vigorous epic without the slumps experienced by normal consciousness. He wrote on September 5, 1841:

There are times when we feel a vigor in our limbs, and our thoughts are like a flowing morning light, and the stream of our life without reflection shows long reaches of serene ripples. And if we were to sing at such an hour, there would be no catastrophe contemplated in our verse, *no* tragic element in it, nor yet a comic. For the life of the gods is not in any sense dramatic, nor can be the subject of the drama; it is epic without beginning or end .... (I, 283-84)

For Thoreau, various things could trigger this state of high tide within, in one or another of its facets, either nature in her general aspects or specific occasions or objects within nature. As examples of the former, Thoreau noted on August 23, 1845, an unusually expansive and elevated frame of mind while simply walking across a field: "I sometimes walk across a field

with unexpected expansion and long-missed content, as if there were a field worthy of me. The usual daily boundaries of life are dispersed, and I see in *what* field I stand" (I, 385).

*normal  
consciousness  
and  
illuminative  
experiences*

Thoreau frequently recollects past morning illuminations. In his descriptions of these elevated morning experiences, he should not be regarded as simply using hyperbolic expressions to refer to the "good spirits" that are within the range of normal consciousness. Practiced in introspection in regard to his emotional states, he was careful to distinguish between what he considered normal "good spirits" and the break with normal consciousness that illuminative experiences involve. Thoreau again referred to his morning illuminations on May 24, 1851:

My most sacred and memorable life is commonly on awaking in the morning. I frequently awake with an atmosphere about me as if my unremembered dreams had been divine, as if my spirit had journeyed to its native place, and, in the act of reentering its native body, had diffused an elysian fragrance around. (II, 213)

"Sacred," "divine," "elysian fragrance"—this is not hyperbole, but an attempt to render an essentially indescribable state of spiritual elevation. Regarding the issue of the trustworthiness of Thoreau's mystical accounts, Joel Porte (1966) says:

The reader of Thoreau with no sympathy for mystic states may be inclined to write off his descriptions of his ecstasies as simply hyperbole, or perhaps even effectation, *but* there is a good deal of evidence to show that neither explanation will suffice, that Thoreau was writing of something he knew (p. 163).

Thoreau also recorded specific and present morning illuminations often in the *Journal*. On the morning of June 22, 1851, he had an experience of the calm and depth of his own self such as we suggested was also a part of his meditative periods:

To be calm, to be serene! There is the calmness of the lake when there is not a breath of wind; there is the calmness of a stagnant ditch. So is it with us. Sometimes we are clarified and calmed healthily, as we never were before in our lives, not by an opiate, but by some unconscious obedience to the all-just laws, so that we become like a still lake of purest crystal and without an effort our depths are revealed to ourselves. All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity! obtained by such pure means! by simple living, by honesty of purpose. We live and rejoice. I awoke into a music which no one about me heard. Whom shall I thank for it? The luxury of wisdom! The luxury of virtue! Are there any intemperate in these things? I feel my Maker blessing me. To the sane man the world is a musical instrument. The very touch affords an exquisite pleasure. (II, 268-69)

## *Self-Culture*

Thoreau's illuminations acquainted him with a realm of spirit to which he continually strove to conform in his own character so **that** his experience of it might be more frequent and complete. This, according to Underhill, is the second mark of the mystical temperament:

[mysticism] shows itself not merely as an attitude of mind and heart, but as a form of organic life. It is not only a theory of the intellect or hunger, however passionate, of the heart. It involves the organizing of the whole self, conscious and unconscious, under the spur of such a hunger: a remaking of the whole character on high levels in the interests of the transcendental life. The mystics are emphatic in their statement that spiritual desires are useless unless they initiate this costly movement of the whole self towards the Real (p, 90).

When Thoreau summed up the purpose of his life, he usually declared that it was to live psychologically in the realm of spirit. In a long letter to Harrison Blake on February 27, 1853, Thoreau (1958) asked rhetorically, "Haven't we our everlasting life to get? And isn't that the only excuse at last for eating drinking sleeping or even carrying an umbrella when it rains?" (p. 298). Thoreau genuinely conceived of his life as a course of growth toward the "everlasting life" of communication with spirit. "My desire for knowledge is intermittent," he wrote in early February, 1851, "but my desire to commune with the spirit of the universe, to be intoxicated even with the fumes, call it, of that divine nectar, to bear my head through atmospheres and over heights unknown to my feet, is perennial and constant" (II,

*Thoreau's  
conception  
a/his  
life's  
purpose*

Thoreau very frequently had a sense of definite growth and progress along the life-path he had chosen. This sense usually stayed with him even though he was occasionally irritated and distracted by the necessity to make a living. While negotiating the purchase of the Hollowell farm, for example, Thoreau wrote:

My life will wait for nobody, but is being matured still irresistibly while I go about the streets and chaffer with this man and that to secure it a living. It will cut its own channel, like the mountain stream, which by the longest ridges and by level prairies is not kept from the sea finally. So flows a man's life, and will reach the sea water, if *not* by an earthy channel, yet in dew and rain, overleaping all barriers, with rainbows to announce its victory. It can wind as cunningly and unerringly as water that seeks its level; and shall I complain if the gods make it meander? This staying to buy me a farm is as if the Mississippi should stop to chaffer with a clamshell. (1,244-45)

Thoreau indeed had a sense of more or less continual transmigration from a state of mind mired in the actual to a state of mind that was at one with the Real. He expressed this sense of continual translation in an entry of 1850:

This stream of events which we consent to call actual, and that other mightier stream which alone carries us with it--what makes the difference? On the one our bodies float and we have sympathy with it through them; on the other, our spirits. We are ever dying to one world and being born into another, and possibly no man knows whether he is at any time dead in the sense in which he affirms that phenomenon of another, or not. (II, 43)

*experiences  
of  
self-loss*

"Ever dying to one world and being born into another" behind this statement lie the repeated experiences of self-toss or ego-dissolution that accompanied Thoreau's illuminative moments. Thoreau's experience of self-loss parallels that of other mystics. Speaking of such experiences, Richard Katz (1973) explains, "During an experience of psychological death, you give up who you are, what you are accustomed to. And in the process of giving up your identity, you can enter the state of transcendence" (p. 153). Moreover, the conception of his life that Thoreau expressed in the above *Journal* entry bears a striking resemblance to that of Ram Dass (1973). Like Thoreau, he conceives of his life as a progression towards the Real or the One: "The whole dance of my life is the training in which the universe is teaching me things which are bringing me towards the One" (p. 189). And also like Thoreau, he interprets this growth process as a gradual self-death: "... In a way it's a horror show because you have died. I am sitting at my own dying and funeral. That's really what this process is that I am going through. I am surrendering into pure instrumentality" (p. 198).

Thoreau focused on himself rather than on circumstances as a means of adjusting his inner life. This approach is similar to that of others who follow a spiritual path. It emerges in a remark by Chogyam Trungpa (1974) about meditation: "If we are meditating at home and we happen to live in the middle of the High Street, we cannot *stop* the traffic just because we want peace and quiet. But we can stop ourselves, we can accept the noise. The noise also contains silence" (p. 18). Trungpa says flatly that as regards improving one's response to life, "one should not expect anything from outside" (p. 48). The Zen Buddhist Shunryu Suzuki has the same approach of focusing on the inner rather than the outer:

Nothing comes from outside your mind. Usually we think of our mind as receiving impressions and experiences from outside, but

that is not a true understanding of our mind. The true understanding is that the mind includes everything; when you think something comes from outside it means only that something appears in your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind (pp, 34-35).

Suzuki claims, ". . .If your mind is calm and constant, you can keep yourself away from the noisy world even though you are in the midst of it. In the midst of noise and change, your mind will be quiet and stable" (p. J5).

Self-change is what Thoreau wanted, not for the negative to disappear from life, which is impossible, but for the negative to be resolved in consciousness. In an entry belonging to the Walden period, Thoreau implied the ability of man to remain calm and constant even in the face of frequent "moral disease" in life:

*the  
ability  
to remain  
calm  
and  
constant*

All places, all positions—all things in short—are a medium happy or unhappy. Every realm has its centre, and the nearer to that the better while you are in it. Even health is only the happiest of all mediums. There may be excess, or there may be deficiency; in either case there is disease. A man must only be *virtuous* enough. (1,414)

#### DARK NIGHT

It is well known that Thoreau's mystical experiences gradually became less frequent and less intense and that this disappointed him. This decline in illuminations had probably occurred by 1841, when Thoreau started to complain in his *Journal* of an experience of life that was not as full and intense as that of former years. Starting with 1841, passages lamenting lost faculties and lost youth alternate with joyful and grateful accounts of illuminations. There is therefore a special need for balance in examining this issue of the decline of Thoreau's illuminations.

In *The Shores of America* and in his Introduction to the Riverside Edition of *Walden* (1960), Sherman Paul seems to consider Thoreau's life as predominantly tragic by virtue of the fact that Thoreau could not recover his youthful fullness of spiritual experience in his adult life. In *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*, Joel Porte (1966) takes Thoreau as experiencing inevitable personal tragedy; his mystical experiences, being based on the senses, probably had to decline as the body aged. Both Paul and Porte tend to regard Thoreau's experience of declining illuminations as constituting a

personal tragedy for him. The present section invites another point of view by seeing the decline of Thoreau's illuminations from the standpoint of the total sweep of mystical experience.

*the decline  
of  
illuminations*

What happened to Thoreau is quite normal for a mystical life: illuminations decline, and the Dark Night of the Soul comes on. Some mystics go on through this crisis to achieve full union with "the Absolute" and "enlightened being," "nirvana," the "unitive life." Others remain caught in the Dark Night, and with their illuminations totally gone, have only their memories of former joys as consolation. Thoreau seems to have shared in the initial stages of the Dark Night. The illuminative phase of his spiritual life was crossed over, as it were, and qualified by the Dark Night phase. His illuminations never vanished totally, so the Dark Night phase for Thoreau never reached completeness. If it had, Thoreau might have passed on through it, and we would have a different Thoreau, a Thoreau without the lamentings, the dissatisfactions, that part of Thoreau that was a "god in ruins." At the same time, however, we do not have an utterly desolate Thoreau either. His continued illuminations kept faith up in him and provided him with a sense of continued spiritual growth. He had other compensations too, such as certain highly positive elements of personal character, the effects of his illuminations. All in all, to adapt an expression quoted by Underhill, Thoreau emerges "partly shining and partly dark" (p. 28).

In a mystical life, illuminations pass as a matter of course, and a spiritually deprived period sets in. Underhill says:

During the time in which the illuminated consciousness is fully established, the self, as a rule, is perfectly content: believing that in its vision of Eternity, its intense and loving consciousness of God, it has reached the goal of its quest. Sooner or later, however, psychic fatigue sets in; the state of illumination begins to break up, the complementary negative consciousness appears, and shows itself as an overwhelming sense of darkness and deprivation (pp. 381-82).

*Eastern  
and  
Western  
similarities*

Underhill is speaking specifically of Christian mystics. An Indian account of levels or stages in the mystical life, the *Visuddhimagga*, documents a similar experience for Eastern mystics. At a certain advanced level in the consciousness of one on a meditative "path," this work says, a stage is reached which consists of "the vision of a *brilliant light* or other form of illumination, which may last for just one moment or longer; *rap-turous feelings* . . . ; a calm *tranquility* of mind and body . . ."; and "sublime feelings of *happiness* suffusing the whole body, a wholly unprecedented bliss which seems never-ending"



(Goleman, 1972, p. 21). This is the illuminative phase of the mystical life, which this work terms "pseudo-nirvana" (p. 22). This term records the fact that the illuminative phase, although considered the ultimate mystical stage by the subject at the time, is not the end-point at all of a mystical life. A brief poetic summary of mystical stages by George Herbert (1964), "The Pilgrimage," reflects this deceptiveness of the illuminative phase:

At length I got unto the gladsome hill,  
   Where lay my hope,  
   Where lay my heart; and climbing still,  
   When I had gain'd the brow and top,  
 A lake of brackish waters on the ground  
   Was all I found (p. 142).

The *Visuddhimaggā* continues with an account of the "brackish waters" or the "complementary negative consciousness" that inevitably follows upon the passing of illuminative experiences in the mystic. "These experiences gradually diminish," the *Visuddhimaggā* says, and the mind of the mystic "becomes gripped with fear and dread"; the mystic sees "suffering and misery" everywhere; "his mind is dominated by feelings of discontent and listlessness .... Even the thought of the happiest sort of life or the most desirable objects will seem unattractive and boring"; he experiences "dread, despair, misery" (pp. 22-23).

Exactly why illuminations pass is an open question. Perhaps the body cannot sustain them. This is the opinion of Abraham Maslow (Krippner, 1972):

*why  
 illuminations  
 pass*

I found that as I got older, my peak experiences became less intense and also became less frequent. In discussing this matter with other people who are getting older, I received this same sort of reaction. My impression is that this may have to do with the aging process. It makes sense because to some extent, I've learned that I've become somewhat afraid of peak experiences because I wonder if my body can stand them. A peak experience can produce great turmoil in the autonomic nervous system; it may be that a decrease in peak experiences is nature's way of protecting the body (pp. 112-13).

Thoreau was only twenty-four when his illuminations began to decline, if we are right about the date of 1841, so Maslow's hypothesis that the aging process causes a decline in illuminations would not seem to apply to him. However, Thoreau did have a congenital pulmonary disorder. Perhaps this weakness in his physical system caused his illuminations to decline, as "nature's way of protecting the body," in the same way that

*entering  
the dark  
night*

aging does in other people. Underhill also has an explanation which may explain Thoreau's experience. She says, "Psychologically considered, the Dark Night is an example of the operation of the law of reaction from stress. It is a period of fatigue and lassitude following a period of sustained mystical activity" (p. 382). "Sustained mystical activity" certainly characterizes Thoreau's youthful experience. Living so long in a spiritually heightened state, Thoreau may indeed have swung away from his mystical experiences by a simple psychological law of reaction. Whatever the reason, he did swing away from them and entered the Dark Night. He thus shared in, to use Underhill's words,

those strange and painful episodes in the lives of great saints-indeed, of many spiritual persons hardly to be classed as saints-when, perhaps after a long life passed in faithful correspondence with the transcendent order, growing consciousness of the 'presence of God,' the whole inner experience is suddenly swept away, and only a blind reliance on past convictions saves them from unbelief (pp, 382-83).

The Dark Night may be a fairly short period in the life of the mystic, a matter of months, or it may last for many years. In Thoreau's case, the Dark Night, or at least the degree of it that he shared, began at the point at which his illuminations declined and continued at least up to the publication of *Walden*, in 1854. Experience of the Dark Night is partly what led Thoreau to Walden. Although his illuminations continued after 1841, Thoreau became dissatisfied with their sporadic occurrence; long periods without illumination left him feeling desultory and purposeless. He commented on the intermittent nature of the illuminated state on February 20, 1842:

My path hitherto has been like a road through a diversified country, now climbing high mountains, then descending into the lowest vales. From the summits I saw the heavens; from the vales I looked up to the heights again. In prosperity I remember God, or memory is one with consciousness; in adversity I remember my own elevations, and only hope to see God again. (1, 320)

*inward  
poverty*

Additional elements of the Dark Night emerge in other pre-Walden entries. With long periods without illumination, Thoreau often lacked the sense of a transformed, sacramentalized world that used to attend him continually. This is the same as to say that he experienced the felt inward poverty that attends other mystics in the Dark Night. Nature sometimes gave nothing to him because there was nothing in him, no joy, no zest. He complained on April 3, 1842, "I can remember when I was more enriched by a few cheap rays of light falling on the pond-side than by this broad sunny day. Riches have

wings, indeed' (I, 358). Thoreau experienced that sense of personal triviality, that sense of being an "abominable thing," which John of the Cross says results from the mystic's apprehension that God has deserted him (Underhill, pp. 389-90). "What am I good for now," Thoreau lamented on March 14, 1842, "who am still marching after high things, but to hear and tell the news, to bring wood and water, and count how many eggs the hens lay?" (I, 330).

Since Thoreau's spiritual search, his "marching after high things," yielded little compared with earlier years, then a sense of personal failure and inconsequence naturally followed. "How trivial the best actions are!", he exclaimed on March 15, 1842. "I am led about from sunrise to sunset by an ignoble routine, and yet can find no better road" (I, 332). He wrote again on March 19, 1842, "I do not know but my life is fated to be thus low and grovelling always. I cannot discover its use even to myself" (I, 338-39). His feelings of self-inconsequence and triviality affected his view of other men. He wrote with rare cynicism on March 28, 1842:

*a sense  
of  
personal  
failure*

How poor is the life of the best and wisest! The petty side will appear at last. Understand once how the best in society live.s-with what routine, with what tedium and insipidity, with what grimness and defiance, with what chuckling over an exaggeration of the sunshine. Altogether, are not the actions of your great man poor, even pitiful and ludicrous? (I, 353)

Thoreau could manage his feelings of personal inconsequence by supposing that they sprang from unproductivity and then telling himself that he was still in the germinating stage-"I inclose and foster the pearl till it is grown" (I, 350), he wrote on March 26, 1842. Moreover, illuminations continued to come now and then. On December 29, 1841, he referred to experiences that occurred in the midst of desultory days and elevated him "above the plane of the actual" for some weeks following (I, 300-01).

To some degree, Thoreau had reached the stage of despair and necessary self-surrender that any spiritual seeker experiences as he begins to move out of his present level of consciousness and to approach a higher level. Ram Dass (1971) says, "Despair and depression" are an "absolutely necessary prerequisite before we can start to hear the next level"- "a very deep despair and a depression about everything we have going (pp. 67-68). To discard the despairing self, to effectuate further self-loss and to enter the next spiritual level, is a step into the unknown and takes real courage. At some unconscious level, Thoreau knew that he was at a transitional point in his spiritual

*the stage  
of despair  
and  
self-surrender*

*fear of  
annihilation*

life. His sojourn at Walden was an essential experiment in inner change, and it brought the fear that all such ventures into the psychically unfamiliar do. He spoke of his fear on March 19, 1842: "I cannot detect failure anywhere but in my fear. I do not fear that right is not right, that good is not good, but only the annihilation of the present existence. But only that can make me incapable of fear. My fears are as good prophets as my hopes" (I, 339). "Annihilation of the present existence" -this was the fearsome element in the Walden experiment, the self-loss necessary for real life-change,

In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (*Walden*), Thoreau says he wanted

to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the *world*; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion (pp, 62-63).

There is no doubt that *Walden* as a whole resolves this confusion. The rebirth cycle in *Walden* begins with the announcement in the opening chapters of a spiritual quest, as in the above passage and others. In the early portions of *Walden*, Thoreau reflects symbolically some initial successes in finding the sublime, as in the *Walden* passages that attempt to render "infinity-experiences, experiences of Silence, and experiences of vast, calm inner self. Thereafter, illuminative experiences diminish, and the Dark Night, symbolized by winter, comes on. In the winter chapters, Thoreau reflects his experience of the meanness of life; in these Dark Night chapters, we will see in detail later, Thoreau conveys symbolically the listlessness and deadness, the God-deprivation, of the spiritually dry periods of his *life*. This Dark Night eventually breaks up in *Walden* with an experience of self-surrender, a giving up of intellectual and emotional striving, an admission by Thoreau that he cannot effectuate rebirth by personal instrumentality alone:

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when-where? But There was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no questions and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution (p. 193).

Mystics hold this giving up of intellectual questioning to be a necessity if one is to advance in the spiritual life. The author of a fourteenth-century mystical work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, advises the mystic on a meditative "path":

Look that nothing live in thy working mind but a naked intent stretching unto God, not clothed in any special thought of God in thyself, how He is in Himself or in any of His works, but only that He is as He is. Let Him be so, I pray thee, ... nor search in Him by subtilty of wit. ...

Underhill comments:

'Let Him be so, I pray thee!' It is an admonition against spiritual worry, an entreaty to the individual, already at work twisting experience to meet his own conceptions, to let things be as they are, to receive and be content. Leave off doing, that you may be. Leave off analysis, that you may know (p. 320).

"Leave off analysis, that you may know"; "let things be as they are" -this well describes the mental action that Thoreau represents in the passage from *Walden*, which is a kind of intellectual surrender, a giving up of rational striving. The spiritual openness that this surrender occasions awakens Thoreau from the winter "sleep" of the Dark Night and brings on a rebirth. In the spring chapters, the Dark Night has passed, a major illumination comes- "Suddenly an influx of light filled my house" -and rebirth ensues. Thereafter, the joyful life-affirmation and utter confidence of the "Conclusion" imply that this rebirth is permanent and final. *Walden* suggests complete spiritual success.

Thoreau's actual years spent at the pond did not yield quite this much. They brought an illuminated sense of things occasionally, and they brought the pronounced illumination experience recorded in the "influx of light" passage; but in contrast to the implications of *Walden*, they did not dispel the Dark Night totally and bring permanent rebirth. This is to say that *Walden* is primarily an artistic product and not primarily spiritual autobiography. It contains much spiritual autobiography, to be sure, but it moves beyond it in portraying a complete and final rebirth. The rebirth in *Walden*, which is portrayed as a powerfully regenerating single experience, is based on experiences that Thoreau in fact had numerous times as his desultory days or dry periods were occasionally brightened by illuminations. None of these junctures was final; none brought total release from the Dark Night.

*incomplete  
spiritual  
"success"*

*Journal* entries from the Walden period, many of which were later incorporated into the book, suggest that Thoreau felt

closer to "the Absolute" while there than in the previous few years. On July 7, 1845, three days after Thoreau took up residence at the pond, he wrote, "The Great Spirit makes indifferent all times and places. The place where he is seen is always the *same*, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses" (1,363).

Thoreau felt real self-liberation at Walden. "Your fetters are knocked off," he exclaimed on August 23, 1845, "you are really free" (1, 385). And on March 26, 1846 there ensued the pronounced illumination experience recorded in *Walden's* "influx of light" passage.

The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last. Suddenly an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at hand, and the clouds of winter still overhung it, and the eaves were dripping with sleety rain. I looked out the window, and lo! where yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope as in a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening sky in its bosom, though none was visible overhead, as if it had intelligence with some remote horizon. I heard a robin in the distance, the first I had heard for many thousand years, methought, whose note I shall not forget for many a thousand more. e-the same sweet and powerful song as of yore (pp. 212-13).

To some extent, then, with all this highly positive experience, Thoreau genuinely found what he had gone to the pond to seek, liberation from the long periods of spiritual dryness that had characterized the few years leading up to his experiment.

*infrequent illuminations*

And yet even amidst this felt advance at the pond, there remained something wrong, something insufficient. During his stay at the pond, he still felt that illuminations came too infrequently. He wrote sometime in the Walden period:

How many an afternoon has been stolen from more profitable, if not more attractive, industry ... spent, I say, by me away in the meadows, in the well-nigh hopeless attempt to set the river on fire or be set on fire by it, with such tinder as I had, with such flint as I was. Trying at last to make it flow with milk and honey, as I had heard of, or liquid gold, and drown myself without getting wet, - a laudable enterprise, though I have not much to show for it. (1,434)

Neither did the years after the Walden experiment bring any change in his felt God-deprivation. In fact the sojourn at the pond did not permanently alter Thoreau's psychological state at all. The *Journal* entries for the years after Walden show precisely the same elements of the Dark Night as the entries for

the years before, and even in more intense form. On July 16, 1851, Thoreau lamented the reduced nature of his present experience compared with that of the past.

Methinks my present experience is nothing; my past experience is all in all. I think that no experience which I have to-day comes up to, or is comparable with, the experience of my boyhood. And not only this is true, but as far back as I can remember I have unconsciously referred to the experiences of a previous state of existence. (II, 306)

Reflections on the relative poverty of present experience continue all the way up to the publication of *Walden*. On March 30, 1853, Thoreau complained of the passing of his youthful consciousness on walks in nature, when he was in a natural state of "empty mind" and was attended by a sense of vital self and by the sense of existing in a wondrous infinity. Thoreau wrote:

*recollection  
of  
youthful  
consciousness*

Ah, those youthful days! are they never to return? when the walker does not too curiously observe particulars, but sees, hears, scents, tastes, and feels only himself,-the phenomena that show themselves in him.-his expanding body, his intellect and heart. No worm or insect, quadruped or bird, confined his view, but the unbounded universe was his. A bird is now become a mote in his eye, (V, 75)

Thoreau was much pained by this frequent inner desolateness, On February 19, 1852, he commented on the ice and snow that covered the Concord River and added, "There is a similar crust over my heart." In vital periods, he could find spirit in winter as well as in summer. But now only desolation was visible to him.-"cold, unvaried snow, stretching mile after mile, and *no place to sit*" (III, 313). He experienced this inner desolateness with enough frequency that at times it seemed to him a stable state from which he would never escape, He reflected on March 30, 1852, "Though the frost is nearly out of the ground, the winter has not broken up in me. It is a backward season with me. Perhaps we grow older and older till we no longer sympathize with the revolution of the seasons, and our winters never break up" (III, 363). He exclaimed with agony on April 11, 1852, "For a month past life has been a thing incredible to me. None but the kind gods can make me sane. If only they will let their south winds blow on me! I ask to be melted" (III, 398).

The experience of inward desolation occasionally combined with a lack of desire for spiritual things, and at these times Thoreau felt his occupation of surveyor to be especially harmful. He felt he was degenerating into spiritual coarseness, as it were, through contagion. On September 20, 1851, he com-

distrust  
of  
contented  
periods

plained of feeling "inexpressibly begrimed" by associating with "the *select* men of this and the surrounding towns" in connection with town boundaries. Through these "common-place and worldly-minded men," who dealt only with "emphatically *trivial* things," he feared he had caught "a fatal coarseness" and had been reduced to "a cheap and superficial life." "I feel as if I had committed suicide in a sense," he commented (III, 5). Thoreau (1958) also complained to Blake of spiritual insensitivity. He began a letter of July 21, 1852, "I am too stupidly well these days to write to you. My life is almost altogether outward, all shell and no tender kernel" (p. 284). Thoreau tended to 'distrust even contented periods if he had no spiritual ambition during them. On February 27, 1853, he wrote Blake about past weeks spent surveying, in which he felt desultory but also strangely contented. He commented on such periods:

Not that they are quite lost to me, or make me very melancholy, alas! for I too often take a cheap satisfaction in so spending them. e-weeks of pasturing and browsing, like beeves and deer, which give me animal health, it may be, but create a tough skin over the soul and intellectual part (pp. 295-96).

Contentment was suspect if he was not on the spiritual stretch. Lack of desire for spiritual vitalness, just as with inner desolateness generally, sometimes seemed to be a possibly stable, inescapable state. Thoreau reflected in his *Journal* on August 23, 1853, "Perhaps after middle age man ceases to be interested in the morning and in the spring" (V, 393).

Occasionally Thoreau's feelings of unworth could rise to a nearly desperate pitch. He wrote dolefully in his *Journal* on August 18, 1853:

What means this sense of flatness that so comes over one now--as if the rest of the year were downhill, and if we had not performed anything before, we should know? The season of flowers or of promise may be said to be over, and now is the season of fruits; but where is our fruit? The night of the year is approaching. What have we done with our talent? All nature prompts and reproves *us*. How early in the year it begins to be late! The sound of the crickets, even in the spring, makes our hearts beat with its awful reproof, while it encourages with its seasonable warning. It matters not by how little we have fallen behind: it seems irretrievably late. The year is full of warnings of its shortness, as is life. The sound of so many insects and the sight of so many flowers affect us so--the creak of the cricket and the sight of the prunella and autumnal dandelion. They say, 'For the night cometh in which no man may work.' (V, 378-79)



Such severe onsets of a sense of uselessness and unworth constituted some of the most painful junctures in Thoreau's post-Walden Dark Night.

Thoreau's Dark Night, however, was never total. Although his illuminations were less frequent than in boyhood and adolescence, they did continue. Even when illuminations occurred, however, Thoreau often reacted to them as insufficient. In fact the *Journal* frequently exhibits bewildering shifts of mood as now Thoreau exuberantly records an illuminated sense of things and shortly afterwards laments the insufficiency of his present experience. For example, Thoreau had a very pronounced illumination experience on August 15, 1851 (II, 392-93). This is an experience that came upon Thoreau as he drank at a brook, the intensely moving experience of a «flood of life that is passing over me," which occupied Thoreau for a full four pages of his *Journal*. Only four days following this experience, however, on August 19, Thoreau wrote, "I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct and scientific; that, in exchange for views as wide as heaven's cope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope. I see details, not wholes nor the shadow of the whole" (II, 406). This suggestion of the loss of "divine faculties" seems to discount the recent illuminative experience entirely.

*bewildering  
shifts  
of  
mood*

#### THOREAU'S SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

The infrequency of Thoreau's illuminations, and the resultant return of a despondent or at least dissatisfied state, poses a special problem. Why did such a powerful and vital experience as illuminated consciousness come to seem insufficient to Thoreau? Why did his Dark Night persist even in the face of occurrences of the very state of consciousness that he sought to dispel it? Thoreau at times seems to be on a frustrating treadmill. He seeks illumination to dispel his languor and sense of spiritual loss; he finds it too, not continuously but with enough frequency that one would suppose that the illuminations might permanently brighten his day-to-day consciousness; upon experiencing illumination, he writes of it rapturously as though it were an end-state, as though he could experience nothing higher; then finally he comes to feel that the experience is insufficient, and he lapses back into his Dark Night.

Part of the explanation for the felt insufficiency of illumination for Thoreau may lie in the repeated nature of the experience. What is repeated becomes familiar and therefore seem-

ingly less intense than prior experiences of the same sort. Explaining the decline in intensity of his own mystical *states*, Abraham Maslow *says*, "For me, part of the loss of peak experiences was the loss of newness and novelty" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113). He says again, "There is ... an element of surprise, and of disbelief, and of esthetic shock in the peak-experience, ... the quality of having such an experience for the *first time*." "Maturing and aging," he continues, "means, .. some loss [in the peak experience] of first-timeness, of novelty, of sheer unpreparedness and surprise" (Maslow, 1974, p. xv). Thoreau may have been reacting partly to the lack of novelty in his later mystical states when he claimed they were not as pronounced as those of his youth.

But there is probably more than this. With the decline of his illuminations and with his experience of the Dark Night, Thoreau had entered upon the next stage in a continuum of mystical growth leading finally to experiences of God-union and to the state, in Underhill's words, of "the New Man, the transmuted humanity, whose life is *one* with the Absolute Life of God" (p. 402). He was in a transitional phase, in other words, between the full illuminative stage in the mystical life and the end-state of continuous God-union. In all likelihood, he reacted to his illuminations as insufficient because, relative to the state of God-union that he was in transition to, they *were*. His reaction of insufficiency is quite typical for a mystical life. According to Underhill, "Illumination brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it" (p. 169). Underhill says that mystics eventually become aware of this limited character of their illuminations and become dissatisfied with them:

*the  
limited  
character  
of  
illuminations*

The great seekers for reality are not as a rule long delayed by the exalted *joys* of Illumination. Intensely aware now of the Absolute Whom they adore, they are aware too that though known He is unachieved. Even whilst they enjoy the rapture of the Divine Presence-of life in a divine, ideal world-something, they feel, makes default.

Hence for them that which they *now* enjoy, and which passes the understanding of other men, is not a static condition; often it coexists with that travail of the heart which Tauler has called 'stormy love.' The greater the mystic, the sooner he realizes that the Heavenly Manna which has been administered to him is not yet That with which the angels are full fed (p. 265).

"Travail of the heart" well describes Thoreau's state as he repeatedly reacts to his illuminations as *not enough*)*not enough*. He is discontented, as it seems, even in the midst of paradise.

Thus Thoreau's reacting to his illuminations as insufficient was part of a transitional process. Illuminations were insufficient because they did not bring God-union. God-union, however, was not the very next step on the mystical continuum. Thoreau first had to pass through the phase of the Dark Night before God-union could be achieved. Underhill calls the Dark Night a "dark fire of purification" (p, 381). Its function is completely to burn out self. This extreme psychological demand that the Dark Night poses-complete self-loss-is what makes it the most critical point in the mystic life. Underhill says of the Dark Night:

The great contemplatives, those destined to attain the full stature of the *mystic*, emerge *from* this period of destitution, however long and drastic it may be, as from a new purification. It is for them the gateway to a higher state. But persons of a less heroic spirituality, if they enter the Night at all, may succumb to its dangers and pains, This 'great negation' is the sorting-house of the spiritual life. Here we part from the 'nature mystics; the mystic poets, and all who shared in and were contented with the illuminated vision of reality. Those who go on are the great and strong spirits, who do not seek to *know*, but are driven to *be* (p, 383).

The Dark Night represents a parting of the ways, as it were, between the ordinary mystic and the "saint" or "enlightened man." The mystic advances through the Dark Night *in* proportion to the degree to which he is able to discard self-interest and self-preoccupation. The very elements of the Dark Night alert him to the burdensome reality of self. Not only are his illuminations either absent or pale; not only is he languid, dissatisfied, unworthy-feeling; but he also *cares about all this and wants it changed*. It is this aspect of self-pity and the yearning for a better personal state that alerts the mystic to his essential selfishness. Eventually the mystic must achieve what seems a psychological impossibility. He must relinquish the desire for personal satisfaction. Having been either stripped of his illuminations totally or denied any lasting sense of fulfillment in them, the mystic experiences this demand of self-loss as utterly concrete. He naturally wants illuminated consciousness to return. Underhill says of the Dark Night, however;

*differences  
between  
ordinary  
mystic  
and saint  
or enlightened  
man*

The function of this episode of the Mystic Way is to cure the soul of the innate tendency to seek and *rest* in spiritual *joys*. . . . The ascending self must leave these childish satisfactions; make its love absolutely disinterested, strong, and courageous, abolish all taint of spiritual gluttony. A total abandonment of the individualistic standpoint, of that trivial and egotistical quest of personal satisfaction which thwarts the great movement of the Flowing Light, is the supreme condition of man's participation in Reality (p. 395).

The disappearance or paling of illuminations is finally, for the mystic, a spiritual opportunity. If he continues selfishly to desire and to pursue these personal joys, these "childish satisfactions," he will stay in the Dark Night. On the other hand, if he can jettison the self-preoccupation and self-focus that underlie this desire, and cease to strive for personal satisfaction, he can enter into full communion with the Real. Here we are face to face with that major psychological paradox that forms part of the mystical core of all religions. Self-loss, which seems to the "unregenerated" man to promise only the total bleakness of psychic death, is in fact the gateway to eternal life.

*Dark  
Night  
and  
spiritual  
maturity*

Henry Suso, the fourteenth-century German Dominican, is a good example of a mystic who came to see that the illuminative phase of his spiritual life was immature and childish. When he entered the Dark Night, he knew intuitively that its function was to develop spiritual maturity. The *Visuddhimaggas* says that, accompanying the various aspects of illumination in the mystic, is "a subtle *attachment*" to these states (Goleman, 1972). To Suso, this personal attachment to personal joys characterized the mystic in the "lower school" of mysticism, that is, all phases of the spiritual life through the illuminative phase. In Suso's case, this "lower school" lasted from late adolescence through his fortieth year. In this year, his intuitions concerning the essential immaturity of his illuminative phase were objectified to him in a vision of a "magnificent young man" who announced Suso's departure from the "lower school" of mysticism and his entrance into the "upper school." In his *Autobiography* (quoted in Underhill), Suso represents the young man as saying to him:

'Hitherto thou hast been but a child at the breast, a spoiled child. Thou hast been immersed in the divine sweetness like a fish in the sea. Now I will withdraw all this. It is my will that thou shouldst be deprived of it, and that thou suffer from this privation' (p. 406).

Thus the young man characterizes the illuminative phase and announces the onset of the Dark Night. The young man says further to Suso:

'Thou hast been long enough in the Lower School, and hast there sufficiently applied thyself. Come, then, with me; and I will introduce thee into the highest school that exists in the world.'

'In this Upper School they teach the science of Perfect Self-abandonment; that is to say, that a man is here taught to renounce himself so utterly that, in all those circumstances in which God is manifested, either by Himself or in His creatures, the man applies himself only to remaining calm and unmoved, renouncing so far as is possible all human frailty' (pp. 404-05).

The "science of Perfect Self-abandonment" is taught in the Dark Night, the "upper school." Even before Suso entered the Night fully, this vision of the young man alerted him to various aspects of self-preoccupation which it would be the function of the Dark Night to expunge. His account of these selfish elements clearly indicates the radical self-extinguishment that the Dark Night involves. After his vision leaves, Suso counsels himself:

'Examine thyself inwardly and thou wilt see that thou hast still much self-will: thou wilt observe, that with all thy mortifications which thou hast inflicted on thyself, thou canst not yet endure external vexations. Thou art like a hare hiding in a bush, who is frightened by the whispering of the leaves. Thou art also frightened every day by the griefs that come to thee: thou dost turn pale at the sight of those who speak against thee: when thou doest fear to succumb, thou takest flight; when thou oughtest to present thyself with simplicity, thou dost hide thyself. When they praise thee, thou art happy: when they blame thee, thou art sad. Truly it is very needful for thee that thou shouldst go to an Upper School' (p.405).

Suso is pointing to self-preoccupations and anxieties that the non-mystic mind accepts as perfectly normal for life. That Suso sought to expunge this "normal egotism," and apparently did, gives concrete meaning to the expressions "new Man," "enlightened being," and so on. Such a person is transfigured in a very real sense, made new, so much is his emotional level advanced above the "normal."

*expunging  
"normal  
egotism"*

Suso's Dark Night lasted for ten years and was extremely severe, finally reaching an acme of personal suffering when Suso was nearly expelled from his order over the unjust suspicion that he had fathered a child. At this point, with the whole weight of his long sufferings upon him, Suso said simply, "If it cannot be otherwise, *fiat voluntas tua* (thy will be done),' " whereupon, Underhill says, "the act of submission was at once followed by an ecstasy and vision, in which the approaching end of his troubles was announced to him" (pp. 411-12).

If the mystic reaches complete self-surrender in the Dark Night and experiences a psychic turnover to non-ego-driven sources of energy, what may follow is what Underhill calls the "unitive life." In this life, Underhill says, "there is a final swallowing up of that wilful I-hood, that surface individuality which we ordinarily recognize as ourselves. It goes for ever, and something new is established in its room" (p. 425).

Thoreau was only in the initial stages of the Dark Night. He had not yet seen, at least on a conscious level and with any real clarity, the ego-dominated aspect of his desire for and deliberate quest for spiritually elevated states. We must now see Thoreau's activity of questing in a different light. The spiritual ambition involved in deliberate questing is a necessary stage in the mystical life, but it is also, and necessarily, a temporary stage. Ram Dass (1973) says that spiritual ambition is ego-motivated, like any other desire; it is needed as a means to erode non-spiritual desires; but when that process of erosion nears completion, the spiritual ambition itself must drop away:

It's another desire. The desire to become enlightened is still you desiring something. What happens is you start to touch places way beyond what you ever thought you were. Or you start to awaken, and it's like the bliss is much more incredible, the understanding is more incredible, and so on, and the craving for it. It's like a super crave, and that desire is what is used to finish all the other desires. Then, near the *end* of that sequence, you're *left* with *only* that desire; and you see that the desire for it is what's keeping you from it. Then there's the having to let go of the desire in order to become it, which is the final process of dying, really. It's the psychological dying-because desiring that last desire is your final statement of who you are. But the predicament is that who you are can't go through the doorway (pp, 197-98).

*desire  
for  
spiritual  
fulfillment  
as impediment*

In his Dark Night, Thoreau was in full possession of what Ram Dass *calls* the "super crave" of spiritual ambition, and its presence was actually holding him back from advancing through the Night. He had not come fully to the insight that the desire for spiritual fulfillment "is what's keeping you from it,"

Often Thoreau's expressions of desire for elevated states do have an unmistakably self-involved note. In these expressions, Thoreau's striving for illumination emerges as so intense, so driving, as to force the observation on the reader that such striving *is* essentially as selfish as any other drive for personal satisfaction. On September 7, 1851, for example, Thoreau exclaimed:

If by patience, if by watching, I can secure one new ray of light, can feel myself elevated for an instant upon Pisgah, the world which was dead prose to me become living and divine, shall I not watch ever? Shall I not be a watchman henceforth? If by watching a whole year on the city's walls I may obtain a communication from heaven, shall I not do well to shut up my shop and turn a watchman? Can a youth, a man, do more wisely than to go where his life is to [be] found. (II, 472)

From the standpoint of the "upper school" in the mystical continuum, what now becomes apparent in this passage is the single-minded channeling of all one's life-energies into the

search for personal joys. It would miss the point to look on this rarified egotism, so to speak, as a "fault" in Thoreau. It was part and parcel of the psychological position he occupied in the mystical continuum; he was behaving no differently than St. Teresa or Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, when they were at the same stage of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, this rarified selfishness would have to disappear from Thoreau's consciousness before he could move along on the continuum.

Thoreau's complaints about the various discomforts and agonies of his Dark Night, too, would have to disappear, since these also bespoke the desire for personal satisfaction. Thoreau's manifest impatience with "low periods" in his life, and his desire for a "high" that would last forever, reveal his preoccupation with personal joy. He exclaimed on June 22, 1853:

I long for wildness, a nature which I cannot put my foot through, woods where the wood thrush forever sings, where the hours are early morning ones, and there is dew on the grass, and the day is forever improved, where I might have a fertile unknown for a soil about me. I would go after the cows, I would watch the flocks of Admetus there forever, only for my board and clothes. A New Hampshire everlasting and unfallen. (V, 293)

Thoreau's demand for a "woods where the wood thrush *forever* sings," for a day "*forever* improved," has the compulsive note that characterizes any ego-driven pursuit. Eastern spiritual teachers also counsel against deliberate striving for spiritual fulfillment. Although understanding that this striving is inevitable in early and intermediate stages of the meditative "path," they warn the meditator about it all along the "path." To Chogyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist, if the meditator approaches the inward advancement and joys of the "path" in a selfishly appropriative way, he is involved in "spiritual materialism," a condition no different in kind than material acquisitiveness. Trungpa (1973) says:

*inward  
advancement  
and  
"spiritual  
materialism"*

In a materialistic sense, we try and become a rich, respectable, or powerful person. **In** a spiritual sense we try and adapt to a basic discipline. Finding a basic discipline could be a process which enriches the ego or the self. Even if we follow a spiritual rather than a worldly life, if we don't have the basic understanding of why we are trying to accumulate, we are still materialistic in outlook. This is what is known as psychological or spiritual materialism (p, 64).

Ideally, the meditator should approach the "path" not as a means to a fulfillment that he does not presently have, but as an end in itself. Trungpa says further:

The other way of approaching the practice is the game-like approach. The game is that the path and the goal are the same. You are not trying to achieve anything, but are trying to relate to the path which is the goal. We try to become completely one with the techniques .... We do not try to do anything with the technique but identify and become one with it (p. 66).

Shunryu Suzuki (1973), the Zen Buddhist, says, "It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it" (p, 72). The reason that a "greedy," self-acquisitive approach assures disappointment is that ego-drives tend to be insatiable. Nearly everyone is familiar with the money person who continually talks and acts as though he is headed for the poorhouse, or with the prestige-seeker who regardless of his status seeks always more and more "respectable" positions. Ego-drives are cyclic: a sense of dissatisfaction and insufficiency eventually follows the attainment of the self-enlarging goal, upon which a still "higher" goal must be sought, and so on endlessly.

*the  
loss  
of  
"I-hood"*

As in Christian mysticism, the loss of "I-hood" in Eastern mysticism is practically synonymous with the experience of God-union, which in Zen Buddhism is called "satori" or "enlightenment." Janwillem van de Wetering (1975), who has received training in both Japanese and American Zen Centers, says of the meditator, "The moment he manages to stop thinking of his imitation 'I,' the moment that he acknowledges that this 'I' has no substance at all, he is free, definitely and altogether free" (pp, 59-60). De Wetering recounts a beautiful and moving allegory that expresses the same truth:

A Chinese allegory tells how a monk sets off on a long pilgrimage to find the Buddha. He spends years and years on his quest and finally he comes to the country where the Buddha lives.

He crosses a river, it is a wide river, and he looks about him while the boatman rows him across.

There is a corpse floating on the water and it is coming closer.

The monk looks. The corpse is so close he can touch it. He recognizes the corpse, it is his own.

The monk loses all self-control and wails.

There he floats, dead.

Nothing remains.

Anything he has ever been, ever learned, ever owned, floats past him, still and without life, moved by the slow current of the wide river.

It is the first moment of his liberation (p. 184).

Was Thoreau in fact *growing* spiritually or was he instead locked within an ego-dominated level of the mystical life? There are indications that Thoreau was verging on the neces-



sary insight that the presence of self was what was keeping him from ultimate spiritual satisfaction. This awareness was intermittent and subliminal in the period discussed, not full or sharp; perhaps Thoreau advanced to full awareness in later years. Perhaps a dim awareness of this barrier of self lies behind a *Journal* entry in which a "lawed" hound (a hound that man has deliberately maimed so that it cannot catch deer) symbolizes spiritual seekers who find themselves puzzlingly "disqualified" from ultimate spiritual attainment:

[It] reminds me of the majority of human hounds that tread the forest paths of this world; they go slightly limping in their gait, as if disqualified by a cruel fate to overtake the nobler game of the forest, their natural quarry. Most men are such dogs. Ever and anon starting a quarry, with perfect scent, which, from this cruel maiming and disqualification of the fates, he is incapable of coming up with. Does not the noble dog shed tears? (III, 419)

There is much uncertainty involved, of course, in speculating about what might have been in Thoreau's unconscious mind. Nevertheless, in a dream that Thoreau alludes to on January 21, 1853, the desire to jettison the self may again be apparent. Thoreau wrote:

I easily read the moral of my dreams. Yesterday I was influenced with the rottenness of human relations. They appeared full of death and decay, and offended the nostrils. In the night I dreamed of delving amid the graves of the dead, and soiled my fingers with their rank mould. It was *sanitarily, morally, and physically* true. (IV, 472)

Thoreau takes the dead human matter in the dream to represent "the rottenness of human relations." However, the most common approach toward dreams in present-day psychotherapy is that dreams are commentaries of the dreamer on the self. From this standpoint, Thoreau's dream may just as well reflect an attitude of disgust towards his personal self. In mystics, an attitude of acute disgust towards the self, which springs from their perception of the self's spiritual limitations, of the consciousness-narrowing effect of its presence, is part and parcel of the desire to "let go" of this self.

*interpretation  
of  
a dream*

Thoreau also seems to have some insight about the spiritually harmful effects of a focus on self. In a letter to Blake of July 21, 1852, evidently responding to a specific question Blake asked, Thoreau (1958) wrote:

As for passing *through* any great and glorious experience, and rising *above* it, - as an eagle might fly athwart the evening sky to rise into still brighter & fairer regions of the heavens, I cannot say

that I ever sailed so creditably, but my bark ever seemed thwarted by some side wind and went off over the edge and now only occasionally tacks back toward the center of that sea again. I have outgrown nothing good, but, I do not fear to say, fallen behind by whole continents of virtue which should have been passed as islands in my course; but I trust-what else can I trust-that with a stiff wind some Friday, when I have thrown some of my cargo overboard, I may make up for all that distance lost (p. 286).

To advance spiritually, Thoreau must throw his "cargo" overboard-that is, doubtless, his self-involvement, his self-preoccupation, which he feels to be a psychic burden. Thoreau senses here the necessity of self-liberation if he is to tack "back toward the center of that sea again."

Thoreau's sense of growth, then, which persisted throughout *his* Dark Night, was not unfounded. The insight that would release him from the Night lay in a germinating stage, as he might say, in his consciousness. He had good reason to continue hopeful and faithful. However, there is no indication that Thoreau was aware of this progressive element in his mental experience,

Although in his later life Thoreau frequently felt the discomforts and agonies that were germane to his particular stage in the mystical continuum, it would be a distortion to think of his inner life during this period as predominantly bleak. Positive entries in the *Journal* far outnumber negative ones. I have in mind not only Thoreau's accounts of illuminations, but also the very numerous entries *that* reveal a day-to-day state that shared neither in emotional heights nor depths, but was levelly calm, serene, and contented. Thoreau's Dark Night must be adjudged as consisting of despondent intervals amidst a predominantly level and serene existence. He does not seem to have experienced the nearly continuous storm of troubled feeling that characterizes the Dark Night of many mystics; he was only in the initial phases of the Night.

*the  
variable  
quality of  
Thoreau's  
Dark Night*

#### CONCLUSION

This discussion of Thoreau has been confined to the period up to the publication of *Walden*, August 9, 1854. Whether Thoreau after this date effectuated the necessary self-loss and passed on through the Dark Night to what Underhill calls the "unitive life" must remain for the present an open question, being extremely difficult to assess. Specialists on Thoreau are divided about his state of mind in his later years, some seeing it as "bitter and disappointed," others, including his best modern biographer (Harding, 1966), as "vibrant, creative, and happy."

The present author's preliminary impression is that Thoreau, in general, continued to live vitally and contentedly in the years after 1854. Regardless of whether he achieved ultimate spiritual levels, his illuminative experiences, in conjunction with his "moral self-culture," produced a personal character in him that was remarkable for its capacity to be gratified by daily life, for its calm, its joy, its trustfulness, even its lovingness.

The experience of illumination need not always affect the Subject's character in positive ways. Especially if the subject has very deep-rooted fears or negative feelings about people and life, illumination may leave his character the same as it was before the experience (*see* Krippner, 1972, pp. 114-15). What seems to be the deciding factor in whether or not illumination will take effect is the subject's emotional receptiveness to the experience. If after illumination the subject reacts to its psychological effects—the sense of security and safety in life, the feeling of joy, the "sacramental" sense of the outside world, and so on—as "all wrong" for him, illumination cannot overcome this inner resistance and bring about, in James' words, a "shifting of the emotional center" (p. 221) in the Subject's character. Thoreau was very receptive to the effects of illumination, and consequently his character, as revealed throughout his writings, was much affected in positive ways by it. He seems to have been free of any emotional pathology, any severely negative orientation, that might have blocked the positive phenomena that were taking place in him.

The level of emotional growth that illuminations fostered in Thoreau is well indicated by his frame of mind in the period just preceding his death. When Thoreau contracted a cold on December 3, 1860 (*see* Harding, 1966, P: 441), the cold activated his tuberculosis, and by mid-winter of 1861, it was obvious that he would die from it (Meltzer & Harding, 1962, p. 285); he became progressively weaker from the disease and died during the morning of May 6, 1862. Thoreau's behavior as his death drew near was quite remarkable. Channing (1873, 1966) writes dramatically of Thoreau's self-detachment during his final months:

The wasting away of his body, the going forth and exit of his lungs, which, like a steady lamp, gave heat to the frame, was to Henry an inexplicably foreign event, the labors of another party in which he had no hand; though he still credited the fact to a lofty inspiration. He would often say that we could look on ourselves as a third person, and that he could perceive at times that he was out of his mind (p. 339).

Thoreau's saying that at times he was "out of his mind" is reminiscent of his description of self-detachment in *Wal-*

*the  
period  
preceding  
his  
death*

*den*-*"we* may be beside ourselves in a sane sense" (p, 93). Standing outside himself, as it were, he could remain at peace even though enduring what was potentially a profoundly disturbing experience. His emaciation and coming death did not ruffle him. Channing says again of Thoreau, "For the most he did not realize his illness-that is, did not make it real; but seemed to look on it as something apart from himself, in which he had no concern" (p. 342).

*detachment  
and  
consolation*

Being detached from what was happening to him personally, Thoreau had no self-pity as he proceeded toward his death; although he was too ill to pursue his beloved walks in nature, he did not grieve over the fact. Channing says that no stranger could "in the least infer that he had ever a friend in field or wood" (p. 339). With his attention off himself, Thoreau could console his family, who were in grief over his coming death even if he was not.

Thoreau was not in the least despondent or dour as he approached his end. Edward Emerson (1917, 1968) stresses Thoreau's actual cheerfulness at the time. Emerson quotes Sam Staples, Thoreau's former jailor and always his amiable acquaintance, who visited Thoreau in his last months: Staples remarked to Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he passed upon leaving Thoreau's house, that he "never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace" (p. 117). Harding (1966) quotes another of Thoreau's visitors in his last months, a certain Thea Brown, who reported of Thoreau, "He seemed to be in an exalted state of mind for a long time before his death. He said it was just as good to be sick as to be well.-just as good to have a poor time as a good time" (p. 457). Brown also saw in Thoreau real zest and joy: "... His talk was up to the best I ever heard from him,-the same depth of earnestness and the same infinite depth of fun going on at the same time" (p. 456). Brown's observation squares with Thoreau's own account of his frame of mind in his last months. On March 21, 1862, he wrote Myron Benton, a young poet who had written to him to express admiration of his works, "... I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing" (Meltzer & Harding, p. 288). Alcott visited Thoreau in January of 1862 and found him "failing and feeble" but still "talkative" and "interested in books and men" (pp, 285-86). Even in his last months, Thoreau seemed to be in a loving frame of mind, which expressed itself not only toward his family, but also toward the many acquaintances and friends who visited *him*. Harding says of Thoreau in his final months, "He was greatly moved by the attentions of his friends and neighbors. He came to feel very differently toward people and said if he had known he wouldn't

have been so offish. He had got into his head before that pie didn't mean what they said" (p. 462). Thoreau came to feel a special tenderness for the neighboring children. Harding continues:

A neighboring child has remembered: "In his last illness it did not occur to us that he would care to *see* us, but his sister told my mother that he watched us from the window as we passed, and said: 'Why don't they come to see me! I love them as if they were my own.' After that we went often, and he always made us so welcome that we liked to go" (p. 463).

After Thoreau died, his sister Sophia wrote a long letter to Daniel Ricketson describing her brother's character and behavior in the months before his death and the peaceful manner in which he died. This letter sums up much that has been brought out about Thoreau's manner in his dying months- his equanimity, his continuing good spirits and zest, his self-detachment:

*a relative's  
view of  
his death*

You ask for some particulars relating to Henry's illness. I feel like saying that Henry was never affected, never reached by it. I never before saw such a manifestation of the power of spirit over matter. Very often I have heard him ~~ten~~ his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body. The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him. His thoughts entertained him all his life, and did still,

When he had wakeful nights, he would ask me to arrange the furniture so as to make fantastic shadows on the wall, and he wished his bed was in the form of a shell that he might curl up in it. He considered occupation as necessary for the sick as for those in health, and has accomplished a vast amount of labor during the past few months in preparing some papers for the press. He did not cease to call for his manuscripts till the last days of his life.

During his long illness I never heard a murmur escape him, or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us; his perfect contentment was truly wonderful. None of his friends seemed to realize how very ill he was, so full of life and good cheer did he seem. One friend, as if by way of consolation, said to him, 'Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go.' Henry replied, 'When I was a very little boy I learned that I must die, and I sat that down, so of course I am not disappointed now. Death is as near to you as it is to me.'

There is very much that I should like to write you about my precious brother, had I time and strength. I wish you to know how very gentle, lovely, and submissive he was in all his ways. His little study bed was brought down into our front parlor, when he

could no longer walk with our assistance, and every arrangement pleased him. The devotion of *his* friends was most rare and touching ....

I can never be grateful enough for the gentle, easy exit which was granted him. At seven o'clock Tuesday morning he became restless and desired to be moved; dear mother, Aunt Louisa, and myself were with him; his self-possession did not forsake him. A little after eight he asked to be raised quite up, his breathing grew fainter and fainter, and without the slightest struggle, he left us at nine o'clock (Meltzer & Harding, p. 288, 290).

The highly positive qualities that characterized Thoreau as he approached his death were made possible, it seems, by his ability to get out of himself, his ability, so to speak, to detach his feelings from his personal experience. Since he was self-detached, all the positive emotions were open to *him*.

*the  
function  
of a  
supportive  
cultural  
environment*

Thoreau's cultural environment was also partly responsible for the welcoming reception that he gave to illumination. In the transcendental philosophy then advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other contemporaries, Thoreau met with a system of intellectual beliefs that squared with the insights and emotional experiences that illumination brought him. Although Thoreau disliked merely intellectual discussion of beliefs in the existence of an "Oversoul," the propriety of joy as a response to life, the "divine" character of nature, and so on, he was no doubt encouraged to affirm and cooperate with his illuminative insights and responses by the supporting influence which this atmosphere of discussion provided. Thoreau's fellow transcendentalists could function as a support to him even though he apparently did not discuss, or discussed only very rarely, his mystical experiences with them. **In** an atmosphere of interest in and respect for things of the spirit, Thoreau could cooperate with his mystical experiences free from the sense that such cooperation rendered him an eccentric or worse.

With the desire constantly to "commune with the spirit of the universe," Thoreau characteristically conceived of his life as having a dynamic quality, growing, becoming, and somehow approximating itself more closely to the Real. Perhaps his own words offer the most appropriate conclusion that can be drawn about his development:

Some men's lives are but an aspiration, a yearning towards a higher state, and they are wholly misapprehended, until they are referred to, or traced through, all their metamorphoses. We cannot pronounce upon a man's intellectual and moral state until we foresee what metamorphosis it is preparing him for (III, 71).

## REFERENCES

- BUCKER, RICHARD MAURICE. *Cosmic consciousness*. New York: Dutton, 1969. Originally published 1901.
- CHANNING, WILLIAM ELLERY. *Thoreau, the poet-naturalist*. Ed. F. B. Sanborn. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1966. Originally published 1873.
- EMERSON, EDWARD WALDO. *Henry Thoreau as remembered by a young friend*. Concord: Thoreau Foundation, 1968. Originally published 1917.
- GOLEMAN, DANIEL. The Buddha on meditation and states of consciousness: Part I: The teachings. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1972, 4, 1, 1-44.
- HARDING, WALTER. *The days of Henry Thoreau*. New York: Knopf, 1966.
- HART, JOSEPH. The Zen of Hubert Benoit. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1972, 2, 2, 141-67.
- HERBERT, GEORGE. *The works of George Herbert*. Ed. F. E. Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964.
- JAMES, WILLIAM. *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Macmillan, 1961. Originally published 1902.
- KATZ, RICHARD. Education for transcendence: Lessons from the Kung Zhu/Twasi. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1973, 5, 2, 136-55.
- KELLER, MICHAEL. Henry David Thoreau: Mystic. Unpublished dissertation, Ball State University, 1977.
- KRIPPNER, STANLEY (Ed.). The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1972, 4, 2, 107-20.
- MASLOW, ABRAHAM H. *Religions, values, and peak-experiences*. New York: Viking, 1970.
- MELTZER, MILTON & HARDING, WALTER. *Thoreau profile*. New York: Crowell, 1962.
- PORTE, JOEL. *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in conflict*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1966.
- RAMDASS. Ram Dass lecture at the Menninger Foundation: Part II. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1971, 3, 1, 47-84.
- RAMDASS. Ram Dass lecture at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center: Part II. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1973, 5, 2, 171-99.
- SUZUKI, SHUNRYU. *Zen mind. beginner's mind*. Ed. Trudy Dixon. New York: Weatherhill, 1973.
- TART, CHARLES S. Scientific foundations for the study of altered states of consciousness. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1971, 3, 2, 93-124.
- THOREAU, HENRY DAVID. *Familiar letters of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. F. B. Sanborn. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1894.

- THOREAU, HENRY DAVID. *The correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode. New York: New York University Press, 1958.
- THOREAU, HENRY DAVID. *Walden and civil disobedience*. Ed. Sherman Paul. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
- THOREAU, HENRY DAVID. *The journal of Henry D. Thoreau*. 2 vols. Ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen. New York: Dover, 1962. This is a photographic folio reprint of the original fourteen-volume publication of the *Journal* in 1906.
- TRUNG, HACH GYAM. *Meditation in action*. Berkeley: Shambhala, 1974.
- TRUNG, PACH GYAM. An approach to meditation. *J. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1973, 5, 1, 62-74.
- UNDERHILL, EVELYN. *Mysticism*. Cleveland: World Publishing Co, 1965. Originally published 1910.
- WETERING, JAN WILLEMAN. *A glimpse of nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen community*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.
- WOLF, WILLIAM. *Thoreau: Mystic, prophet, ecologist*. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974.