

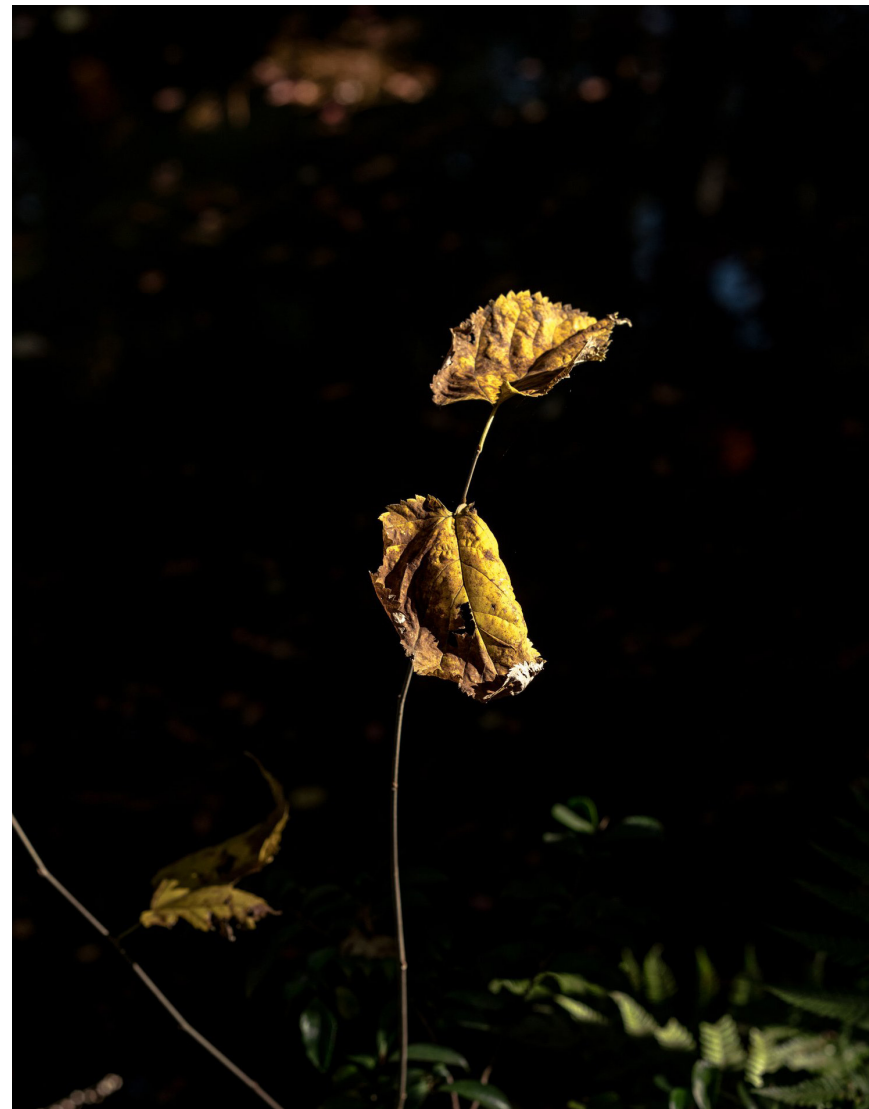
PICO IYER
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my guidebook to japan

*Sit still—this is the heart of
Thoreau’s message—
and you can be most deeply moved.*

WHEN I FLEW AWAY FROM NEW YORK CITY, thirty-four years ago, and arrived outside a tiny temple on a narrow lane in Kyoto, Japan’s ancient capital, I was carrying a suitcase big enough to sustain me for a year. Inside were clothes, medicines and just a handful of books that I thought might serve as medicines of a different kind, guides to the four seasons I had mapped out, living in a Buddhist temple.

I’d brought along the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson because he had sung the gospel of possibility as ringingly as any writer I knew, and when I’d arrived in the New World from low-clouded Oxford, it was Emerson who urged me towards a fresh life and reminded me that “everything good is on the highway.” I had a copy of the essays of Oscar Wilde, to ensure that I didn’t take anything—least of all myself and my high-minded intentions—too seriously (and, besides, I’d noticed that Wilde was a diligent student of Emerson’s, in the guise of an insouciant dandy). But the book that I really





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depended upon was my black-spined Penguin edition of the essays of Henry David Thoreau.

It was Thoreau who'd told me that I could find the whole world in a single room—and in fact do so better in a single room than a large mansion, by learning to look closely at everything around me. It was Thoreau who'd taught me that it was “not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar,” but that there is a virtue in finding the clarifying space that can reveal that truth to you, a space that tends to sit along the margins of the world. Most hauntingly, it was Thoreau who had nudged me awake by simply stating that he did not wish to die, having found he had not lived. I was just thirty, free of dependents, and I was ready to live; the very fact I was enjoying my fast-paced life as a journalist in Midtown Manhattan made me realize that I could easily remain so exhilarated by it that I'd awaken, forty years on, and wonder why I'd never listened to some deeper summons.

Emerson and Thoreau had come into my life like Mr. Theory and Practice at boarding school in England. As we struggled through another passage of Xenophon on some ancient battle—we'd been studying Greek for almost a decade now—and then filed into a classroom from 1441 to recite the Lord's Prayer in Latin, dressed in formal tails, I secretly imbibed the American gospel of the future tense as if it were moonshine whiskey. We should never accept the system, Thoreau told me, when there were higher laws, more soulful truths to attend to. The world was full of old wisdom, both writers sang in harmony, but it took on fresh meaning in new bottles; what each of us has to discover is a forward-looking perspective, suitable to the fresh possibilities of right now. There was a vision that could arise only from a young, relatively unhistorical country predicated on freedom; and yet it was upheld by a classical eloquence and command of learning that ensured that (especially in Thoreau's sturdy, carpentered sentences) there was no sense of short-cuts. The “optative mood” to which Emerson fashioned psalms didn't feel at all like the dusty grammatical terms we inhaled in our copies of Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*.

As soon as I completed my university education in England, I came over to the New World, and in fact Boston. Suddenly, a twenty-minute drive in the red-and-black Plymouth Duster my father had bequeathed me (with California plates) would take me to Concord and Walden Pond. In my first semester at grad school I got to steep myself in the “American Romantics,” as they were called, and also, bracingly, to go deep into their contemporaries, who raised unflinching questions about the



gospel of optimism. Melville's *Confidence-Man*, Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, the poems of Emily Dickinson: the woods around me had been the forum for as passionate a debate about reality—and sin and belief—as any in Plato's day. When I got to be a section leader in the same class three years later, I could examine Thoreau's meticulous construction of a shrine within and get paid for it. As if—as he might say—the business of making a life could be the way I made a living.

In those days, it was widely suspected that Thoreau had overseen the first translation of the *Lotus Sutra* into English (from the French); only much later scholarship would find that it was Elizabeth Peabody, Hawthorne's sister-in-law, who had been the person responsible for getting that piece of foundational Buddhism into *The Dial*. Certainly, one had only to read *Walden* in 1978 to see that the easy, searching command of the scriptures of Persia and India and East Asia that were becoming so current in North America had all been prefigured, like so much else, by Thoreau. A few years later, as I settled into my tiny *tatami* room in the shadow of the eastern hills, along which many of Kyoto's great temples are arrayed, the Sage of Walden seemed to be explaining to me the empty room, the chants from the altar room next door, the hills themselves—

and the autumn that began to spread around me, its mix of rusting leaves and brilliant sunshine echoing the October he regularly enshrined in New England.

As a student of literature, I tried to begin fathoming the culture around me through its books, and very soon I felt I was sitting inside a room full of Henry David Thoreaus. An entire philosophy of impermanence, cherishing the luxury of living without, had been unfolded in 1212 by a former court poet, Kamo no Chomei, who published a book called *The Ten Foot Square Hut*. When I read his account of leaving the capital for a small space in Nature, it didn't seem foreign; I'd encountered that revolution before in the pages of *Walden*.

I moved on to the fourteenth century monk Kenko, whose book of reflections, translated as *Essays in Idleness*, had a title that Thoreau (like Whitman) would gladly have borrowed. But it was especially in the Buddhist poets—Basho and Ryokan and Issa—that I felt I was meeting my old friend disguised in black robes; I was sure he had studied as well as intuited their works, and found in them an echo of his own secret thoughts much as I had felt when reading him.

I was learning very quickly in Kyoto that nothing can be more dangerous than projecting on an unknown place all your boyish dreams, or your hope of finding simply the inverse to what you know; as the monks around me went about their daily lives—cleaning and cooking and crashing out with beers in front of baseball on TV—I was reminded that reality has its own demands, and what I'd been seeking was an image of Kyoto only to be found on the Avenue of the Americas. And yet what I was after—an inner life, a life in the light of what I respected, time and space instead of money—was not at its heart a pipe dream; I had Thoreau to confirm that.

I might be reading Japanese poets through the screen of my wishful ignorance, but I was fairly sure that I wasn't entirely misreading Thoreau. The true poet, he'd pointed out, is what the poet has become through his work, and I understood why a new friend, trained for years in Zen-inflected brush-and-ink painting, said that the point of his practice was not to produce something, but to be something; your brushstrokes could only be as strong and clear as you were. As friends started exulting in the fact that now I could stay in touch with New York by fax, by e-mail, by Skype, I kept coming back to Thoreau's wise reminder that "The man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most important messages." All the communication tools in the world could not offer something worthwhile to communicate. We live by the accounts we keep in our diaries, not our bank balances, my friend from Concord reminded me; all the achievements in the world do not add up to depth (and often may take away from it).



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I should probably confess at this point that I am no creature of the wild; I couldn’t build a cabin—or boil an egg—if my life depended on it. My life has all been spent in urban settings, and after I left my unfurnished room along the eastern hills, I ended up—for twenty-eight years now—in an entirely Western, rented apartment in a modern Japanese suburb that looks like a poor translation of L.A. But Thoreau had prompted me to look beyond surfaces—his cabin, after all, was within sight of Concord’s main road, and the railway line—and to realize that reoriented principles can flourish in any setting.

Freed from distractions—no car here, no media—I really could learn to tell the time by the play of light and wake to the cackle of crows instead of a mechanical alarm. Taking walks around the neighborhood, I could come, even as an unregenerate urbanite, to tell the week of the year by the smell of the flowering plants, and to see something new every time I trod the same unremarkable paths. Sitting out on the thirty-inch-wide terrace of the flat I shared with my wife, I never felt lonely, thanks to the conversations I shared with the old friends who sat on my single bookshelf, most notably Emerson and Thoreau and Dickinson and Melville. Observing the world around me was not so different, I found, from observing a religion; the park across the street was my chapel, and the maples and ginkgos around it offered a homily every week, on the subject of changelessness and change.

Nothing remains constant, they said, and yet that inconstancy is itself an anchor. The currents do not change, as in fact Kamo no Chomei had famously suggested, but the water’s always moving.

Thoreau was teaching me to be a surveyor; to look, rather than just to see. And though I’d been practicing journalism in my twenty-fifth floor office four blocks from Times Square, he showed me that the deeper meaning of the word is realized when one simply keeps a journal, chronicling the story of a life. His prose was nuttier, crunchier, more solid and deliberate than Emerson’s, and though Emerson could seem more like a mature householder and patriarch, it was Thoreau’s sentences that aged better, and kept growing as I hoped to do.

Japan, I was finding, was a deeply pragmatic society, farther from analysis and theory, the games of intellect, than anywhere I’d been; it was committed, as the Buddha had expressed it, not to debating where the arrow shivering in one’s side came from, but how to pull it out. The neighbors I played ping-pong with were economical in their speech here—the fewer words were exchanged, people seemed to know, the less scope there was for misunderstanding or gossip—and while my friends in Japan didn’t traffic much in theologies, they had a deep sense of reverence for the rivers and trees and mountains around us all.

When I heard them refer to the moon as “*o-tsuki-sama*,” giving it an honorific prefix as well as suffix (akin to “Most

Honorable, God-Like Moon”), I smiled to think how Henry David, natural Shinto spirit, would appreciate the bow. “*Kami-sama*,” or local gods, inhabit every glass of Coke and mote of dust in Japan, which is why temple ceremonies are conducted every winter to remember sewing needles broken in our service. And of course the Buddha, as Thoreau knew well, had only one lesson, ultimately, to teach: how to wake up. And especially wake up to the properties of mind, using our understanding to make friends with reality (and loss and possibility).

The fact that nothing lasts, for the shopkeepers in my neighborhood, is precisely the reason why everything matters; impermanence is a cause not for grief, but for grateful attention. Tune yourself to those forces much larger than yourself—most evident in the turning leaves and the racing clouds—and you’ll never forget you’re a part of a great turning wheel. Sit still—this is the heart of Thoreau’s message—and you can be most deeply moved.

I had arrived in Japan, as I say, a kid barely out of his twenties who had a clearer sense of what he didn’t want (the surface excitements of a life in New York City) than of what he did, and fired by a hunger for exploration and the chance to spend my days more spaciouly. I’d been quickened by many of the great spokespeople for self-liberation—D.H. Lawrence, say, and Hermann Hesse—but none of them gave me a practical path to follow, as Thoreau did, and firmly told me that it doesn’t matter where you are so long as you know where you stand. Live by your own foundations, I heard Thoreau saying, and every day can last a thousand hours. “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”

In the course of my first year in Kyoto, a gracious new friend from California, living as so many foreigners did in an old wooden house along a forgotten lane, following principles more or less laid down by Thoreau (and updated by Gary Snyder or Kenneth Rexroth), introduced me to a Zen master, a small, shaven-headed monk who was not only abbot of one of the five great temples of the ancient capital, but in charge of three hundred and sixty temples scattered across the country: a man with the authority (and responsibilities) of an archbishop at the very least.



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Keido Fukushima-roshi was warm and informal and full of fun, especially with the foreign students he liked to encourage (and with whom, perhaps, he could relax, as he couldn't, given the importance of his role, with Japanese patrons). He invited me to come and stay in his temple to get a taste of monastic routine in Japan, and instructed a young monk from L.A. to show me the ropes.

At the end of my stay, Fukushima-roshi sat down to talk to me and stressed, "The point of the practice is not in the going away from the world, but in the coming back." Monks in Japan (and, I'd come to see, everywhere) are separating themselves from clatter and movement only so that they will have more kindness and clarity to bring back to our confusion.

As he spoke, my old friend from Walden came into sharper focus. For generations, those not sympathetic to Thoreau's vision, like those who have picked up a few vague details about his life, have claimed that he was a misanthrope or selfish idler, a misogynist. They like to stress that he went back to his mother's home for dinner every Sunday and that he entertained visits from his family on Saturdays; they've made a lot of the fact that the apostle of self-sufficiency, like so many of us, didn't do his own laundry.

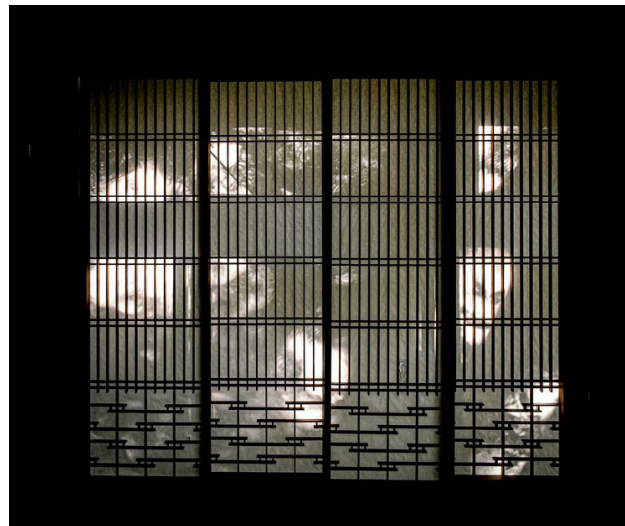
The truth, of course—which Thoreau never tried to hide—is that he was a deeply gregarious and civic-minded man: he'd grown up with three siblings, and his mother ran a boarding house. He lived in Emerson's house, kept Emerson's wife

company while her husband was away on long lecture tours and served as beloved honorary godfather to Emerson's little boy Waldo. "I think that I love society as much as most," he wrote unequivocally, and "I am naturally no hermit."

In going to Walden, in other words, he was just showing us what any of us could do, even in an urban (or suburban) setting. He didn't join a monastery, and he took pains to return to town after his experiment of two years, two months and two days was concluded. He was no Unabomber, even though (as Emerson noted in his eulogy to his dead friend) he did have a habit of defining himself by what he rejected and resorting to simple binaries in overturning conventional wisdom; and he was no Chris McCandless, an idealist trying to get away from it all. Illuminating for us the difference between loneliness and true solitude, he also showed how much true community differs from society.

As the Japanese monk was speaking, I thought back to the book Thoreau wrote as a tribute to his late brother John, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. At its heart is the most soaring tribute to friendship in American literature. Friendship, wrote Thoreau, "is the secret of the universe." Friendship, for him, "is first, Friendship last." Friendship, he went on "purifies the air like electricity" and "our life without love is like coke and ashes."

It's impossible to read the book without realizing that our great laureate of being alone is also our great hymnist to



the possibilities of human connection; just as the roshi was explaining, Thoreau stepped away from the world only so that he would have more to give back to it. By gathering himself in quiet, he recovered an intimacy and a depth that were the richest presents he could give his friends; for more than fourteen years, until his death, he lived amongst his neighbors once his Independence Day experiment was over.

"There are passages of affection in our intercourse with mortal men and women," wrote Thoreau, "which transcend our earthly life and anticipate heaven for us." In truth, I would say the strongest charge to be laid against Thoreau is that he perhaps expected too much of friendship and exalted it too highly: "O how I think of you! You are purely good,—you are infinitely good. I can trust you forever. I did not think that humanity was so much. Give me an opportunity to live." And on and on for twenty-three long pages.

Living in Japan has taught me to bow before an empty room and a room full of people; one has no meaning without the other. And sitting at my tiny desk in my mock-Californian suburb in the middle of nowhere, alert to the autumn the cosmos flowers are announcing, I see how lifelong friends and the places we come to think of as homes are interchangeable. Thoreau was my best guidebook to Japan—not its sights and roads, but, much more important, the values it cherishes and lives by—and Japan has given me a richer and deeper Thoreau. I think of all the classic East Asian poems dedicated

to friendship and the scrolls that show two poets conversing in a hut, about both the passing clouds and the non-passing of what's behind them.

There are many ways to read Thoreau, but none of them will ever be so deep as the ways he reads us, and our most private longings, often so well-hidden that we forget about them ourselves. And none of them can ever match the witty, invigorating, global way he reads the facts of life. It was a privilege to meet him in Concord; it's been a lifelong blessing to sit with him on the far side of the world.

PICO IYER is the author, most recently, of twinned—and contradictory—books on his longtime adopted home, *Autumn Light* and *A Beginner's Guide to Japan*. His next book, *The Half Known Life*, comes out at the end of the year. This essay appeared in *Now Comes Good Sailing*, a 2021 collection of essays on Thoreau edited by Andrew Blauner.

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