



A CALL FOR AUSTERITY, SIMPLICITY AND MINIMALISM: REVISITING HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Dr. C. Muralidara Kannan

Associate Professor, Post-Graduate & Research Department of English
Government Arts College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at making a meaningful study of the minimum quantity of human requirements in general and how the American transcendentalist Thoreau practiced such an incomparable quality of asceticism in his own life in particular. In a way, this brief study here seeks the assistance of his invaluable works of subjectivity which are replete with such unparalleled moments of human life in seclusion. This is also an appeal to the readers to be aware of the most vital components simplicity, austerity and minimalism that lead one to the realm of happiness and peace especially in the modern context, a world that has espoused chaos and confusion and a society that suffers from spiritual constipation. There could be several solutions in tune with individual preferences. A salvation is better than any solution. In order to realize such status, one has to revisit great writers like Thoreau. Therefore, the paper has made an attempt to explore the same by revisiting the master transcendentalist.

Keywords: Austerity, Simplicity, Minimalism, Peace, Happiness

From time immemorial, man has been hunting and gathering for his survival. That is his basic trait. Initially it was all for his fundamental necessities, especially for his food. But with the passage of time, it did not stop there. He began seeking for more, more food, more belongings, more of everything. He thought that his gathering, possessing and amassing would make him eternally happy, a misconception neither the hunter gatherer nor the money-making modern man seem to realise. That's why man is running after money, material needs and other requirements with a masquerade of happiness. For him, plenty is bounty at the cost of sanity. What a stupidity!

One can see even today that a man, who owns one car, desires to own a number of cars. The man who owns one house greeds for two or three houses. Such people do know that even if they have many cars, they can travel in just one. So also, those who pride in two or three houses, can live in only one house, that too relax in one room. Some amass more and more wealth for their sons, daughters, and even to their grandchildren at the cost of their present happiness and peace.

As a matter of fact, modern children and grandchildren have never asked for such wealthy life that which their elders presume. Their ways are different. Many of them want to be on their own. These modern children are wiser than their parents and grandparents. For, they are in the present and do enjoy it as a present. Quite contrary to this, the parents and the elders are either crippled with the past or gloomy about the future, jeopardising their immediate peace and happiness. The French moralist of the seventeenth century, Jean de la Bruyere has rightly stated: “Children are neither for the past nor the future; but they enjoy the present, which we rarely do.” (292 **Bruyere**). Of course, Bruyere’s work is a compendium of worldly wisdom and granary of adages and maxims. The man who has grown greedy, always tries to amass more and more for his future use, not knowledge or wisdom, but materialistic wealth, however close he stays at the same home, psychically stays far away from his blessed children.

When such is the status quo of the miserable man, how can one expect him to be simple, down-to-earth espousing economy in all walks of his consumption? For instance, when one needs a little food, that is just what all he needs, for his tiny gut. Nothing more does he need. So also, when he needs some water, the divine water is the actual remedy. Be it food, clothing, or shelter, one can certainly be happy with the minimum requirement. Because, happiness is subjective and so, everyone cannot be compelled to scale it with an attitude of austerity.

Literature is the entity to inculcate the power of simple way of life for all and sundry across the globe. Readers preference too plays a considerable role in being receptive to such value orientation. Many writers have explored the theme of simple ways life under various literary genres. They would have already promulgated their doctrine of minimalism through their treatises. From among the masters of literature, it is observed that the American transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau is the most notable personality who has well understood the sense of austerity, simplicity and minimalism. Because, he did not just stop with the advocacy of the doctrines-trio, but he lived a life of his own to uphold the meaning of these doctrines. An astute observation, analysis and journey into his seminal work *Walden*, especially the first few chapters, would reveal what kind of ascetic, austere and simple life he lived there in Concord farm. More so in the case of the second chapter, *Where I lived and what I lived for*. His other works like *Civil Disobedience* and *Collected Poems* too carry his preoccupation with such ruminations on simplicity, contentment attained through least of things, economy of materialistic resources.

The terms trio: austerity, simplicity and minimalism may sound similar and synonymous. Of course, there are layers of differences. For, austerity enshrines an additional sense of asceticism and spirituality. Thus, in advocating austerity, Thoreau becomes an ascetic. Simplicity does not accept anything unnecessary and unwanted, be it a thing, thought or idea. And minimalism accounts for a willingness to get rid of the abundance of any sort. A similar thought is run viral by the duo popular minimalists,

“Minimalism is a tool to achieve fulfilment in life. It is a tool to achieve happiness, which is (let’s face it) what we are looking for. We all want to be happy. Minimalism can help. There are no rules in minimalism. Rather, minimalism is simply about stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what is important.” (12 **Joshua & Ryan**)

In yet another context, Joshua while answering a question of Ryan, explained that minimalism is the thing that gets us past the things so we can make room for life’s most important things—which aren’t things at all. Simplicity is also being present in the present time without furiously chasing the

uncertain future. The notion of simple manner of leading one's life has been exposed by Thoreau in various forms. What else can the opening stanza of his *Carpe Diem* mean?

*Build not on to-morrow
But seize on to-day!
From no future borrow
The present to pay. (21 Bode)*

Thoreau hits the nail on the head, the significance of simplicity in another poem, *Conscience is instinct bred in the house*, emphasising an overt behaviour. That is, everyone should fell the self constructed wall around them, and thus, cease to be an introvert. Thoreau calls out saying, "*I say, turn it out doors, into the moors, I love a life whose plot is simple.*" (42 Bode). It is also believed that God helps those lead a life of austerity. It is rightly stated in the Psalms, "the Lord preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me". So also, take a look at Luke's gospel where he says, Beware of Greed, "Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions". This is precisely the Lord's warning against greed and direct call for simplicity.

At the same time, it should not be misunderstood that one has to live in abject poverty or live in miserable and unsafe surroundings. Noteworthy rich and gentry have lived a life of simplicity despite their reach and affordability of all the comforts of life. Leo Tolstoy, for example, gave away all his riches to his workmen and declared that he was to live a life of simplicity. Thoreau asserts: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor." (13 Walden). The austerity of our ascetic, Thoreau always does prefer the bare minimum, a walk of routine that gives him freedom of movement, breath and joy that is close to nature. This affinity has an invariable nexus to simplicity. Therefore, such a streak of simplicity alone can give one happiness and peace. Thoreau's conviction in this regard is exposed in these lines:

I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion. I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a *malaria* all the way. The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. (30 Walden)

It is always better not only in terms economy but also healthy to indulge in a cheaper, easier and simpler form of transportation. When one's physique obliges and time is also congenial, be it the dawn or dusk, one can walk the minimum walking distance instead of relying on any automobile or mechanical transport. Practice of such simplicity would even stand at the threshold of longevity.

The Indian way of life accommodates unique rituals and religious practices that have reserved a solid footage for austere life dictating a strict self-discipline and simplicity emphasising self-denial for a spiritual uplift. Thoreau has well read the Indian philosophy and spirituality. His adoration for the Indian scripture, *Bhagavad Gita* is really commendable. Commenting upon both the *Bible* and *Gita*, he opined that the former is a scripture of pure morality and latter that of pure intellectuality. He has also suggested the general reading public to read *Bhagavad Gita*, if they prefer reading any good scripture.

No wonder he draws in a number of analogies from Vedhas and Upanishads. A popular Sanskrit shloka preaches, “Alpena santhushto bhava, Sarvasya hitam chikeershu; Nahi svaarthparah; shreyaan yadaa dukhkam praapuyaath”. That is: Be content with little, and wish well for all. Selfishness is not good, for when sorrow comes, it is painful. The meaning of the shloka could also be interpreted this way: When man is contented with little or less possessions, it would shed away selfishness, which in turn shoos away sorrow and pain. The land is so rich in such great philosophies because the people of the land have lived such an exemplary and austere life. Indian spiritual gurus, saints, and leaders like Ramkrishna Paramhansa and his disciple Swamy Vivekananda have also practiced an austere life. A close reading of Gandhiji’s *My Experiments with Truth* will also remind the readers of minimalism, for Gandhi himself was an apostle of austerity.

Frugality as well as economy does count every walk of human life. One’s wealth or material possessions should never be a hindrance. The level of man’s possessions and belongings has to be under his control. When they go beyond, he loses his line of control and equilibrium. Limited and less is countable and accountable. As stated already, even in matters of routine affairs, like intake of food one can practice simplicity. Observing fast is very common practice in all religions. In Indian way of life, the scientific benefits of fasting are inculcated via regular and intermittent *vratham* or *langanam* : that is going without food for a particular time. A popular Sanskrit shloka recommends, *Langanam Param Aushadam* which means “fasting is the panacea”. As an avid reader of Indian scripture and practitioner of such austere life, Thoreau epitomizes simplicity by giving a tall call:

Our life is frittered away by details. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases, he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail...Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.
(73 **Walden**)

The salvation for the greedy mind of the miserable man lies in the discrete practice of austerity, simplicity and minimalism in every walk of his life. The realm of peace or the kingdom of happiness is not far away for the ones who comprehend this truth. Great men and women like, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Mother Teresa have advocated the sanctity of austerity and brought peace to themselves and to the world. The treasure house of American literature prides the invaluable contribution of Henry David Thoreau by promoting peace and happiness via the practice of austerity and simplicity.

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