

The Geography of Freedom:
Ryokan at Gogoan, Thoreau at Walden Pond

*The mountain possesses complete virtue with nothing lacking;
therefore it is always safely rooted, yet constantly moving.*

Eihei Dogen Zenji
Shobogenzo “Sansuikyo”

Freedom is an outcome, an ultimate realm for the explorer of true self. Nothing else matters. The endurance of hardships, the sacrifice of one’s life, the tenacity to persist are natural qualities found in such a seeker. Such an explorer will gravitate to a geography that will serve as a route to freedom. For Ryokan (1758 – 1831) it was Gogoan; for Thoreau (1817-1862) it was Walden Pond.

Why equate these two poets and these two settings? Both poets represent men striving to live the highest ideal of the individual. Each was deeply respectful of and inspired by nature such that the memory of them today is a reminder in our societies of what we must preserve and hold sacred. Both Gogoan and Walden Pond act as symbols of the purity and fragility of nature and remind modern man of virtues lost in the fury of technological progress. Each poet achieved an uncommon state of freedom wrought by the geography of the hut and by the landscape of his mind.

While the word “geography” calls up a physical image of the world, geography described the nature features of any region seen or unseen—the region of the body, the region of the mind, of spirit, or the region of the poem. For Ryokan and Thoreau there is no difference between physical and spiritual worlds. Whatever map we might construct of them leads always to transcendence—the perfect marriage of body and mind. But, how did Gogoan serve Ryokan, and how did Walden Pond serve Thoreau?

After leaving Entsuji, Ryokan’s training temple, in Tamashima in 1791, Ryokan wandered for many years in territory that we are not quite sure of. Some say it was the area around Shikoku, the island in the Inland Sea just south of Tamashima. Others postulate that he may have illegally journeyed to China, following in the footsteps of Dogen Zenji. He also showed up in the Kyoto area to attend his father’s memorial service before deciding to make his way back to his birthplace in Niigata Prefecture. For five or six years thereafter, he was again unsettled in the area around his hometown of Izumozaki. He wrote:

Though travels
take me to
a different stopping place each night
the dream I dream is always
that same one of home.¹

He had no location that established him in a particular place. Yet, he had physical needs that could not be met in constant wandering, not to mention the tension of never knowing where to sleep for the night—the plight of the homeless. When Gogoan was offered to him permanently at the goodwill of the temple priest of Kokujoji in 1804, Ryokan

was overjoyed. The little hut called Gogoan served Ryokan as a center from which he could meet the world on a daily basis, and it meant a home to which he could return each night. Gogoan was a one room, one hundred year old hut on Mt. Kugami with difficult access from the village at the base of the mountain.

Still, the matter of living at Gogoan was not by Ryokan's human planning. He already lived as a recluse, living apart from the village people in abandoned shacks or camping beside the river, so it was natural to accept life in a remote setting. But, unlike Thoreau, Ryokan did not seek a particular place. We don't find in Ryokan the sense of determined direction in geography that we find in Thoreau. Ryokan did not seek to live at Gogoan in order to teach or because he was displeased with society or the encroachment of technology poisoning the forest with its noise and smoke. His very nature drew him toward a set of circumstances. "Our course," he tells us, "has been determined by Karma, a chain of causes."

Few of us, though, are wise enough to take it into account. After years of aimless wandering, I have at last come home. Though I still live in the mountains under drifting clouds. I seek shelter in a cottage, covered with a roof of pampas. Standing apart halfway up on a shadowy slope of Mt. Kugami. How appallingly transitory are the three divisions of time! How strangely undefinable are the six steps of our journey! ⁱⁱ

Ryokan, in questioning why he is in a particular place, does not give a concrete answer. He would not place himself so fixedly in one location. While the forest seems natural to him, he does not require that others live in the same way. In a dream poem, he speaks about meeting a wise old man on the road who asks why he lives so far away on the mountain, so high up near the clouds? Then, the voice of the poet asks the old man indeed, why he has spent his life in the middle of the teeming city? Ryokan ends the poem by saying, "Both tried to answer, and searched in vain for apt words . . ." ⁱⁱⁱ

The winters in Niigata were harsh with deep snow covering the mountain for many months each year. Ryokan had determined that as a monk he would live in strict poverty, that he would beg for food, and he would offer drawings or poems in return for goods that he received. Thus, the hut served his spiritual life of poverty. He wrote:

Having at last come home, in the shade of a cragged hill,
At a weedy cottage I found the restful life of a recluse.
I have since lived alone, turning to songbirds for music.
And for my friends I have white clouds rising in the sky.
Beneath a massive rock, a spring swells in a fair stream,
Whose clear water washes the dust from my black garments.
Near the ridges, tall pines and oaks rise towards heaven;
Their branches and leaves give me warmth in cold weather.
With nothing to worry me, not a care to disturb my peace,
I live from day to day till the day dawns no more for me. ^{iv}

Ryokan, in spite of any discomfort caused by the geography, has all that he needs: plants, rocks, water, his robe, pines, warmth, peace. In his “Statement on Begging for Food,” he wrote:

In general, to remove oneself from the doting involved with kin and family, to sit upright in a grass hut, to circle about beneath the trees, to be a friend to the voice of the brook and the hue of the hills—these are the practices adopted by the ancient sages and the model for ages to come. ^v

Both at Gogoan and at Walden Pond, there is freedom in the landscape and freedom from economic demands. In a *kanshi*, a Chinese style poem by Ryokan, we feel the deep luxury of freedom that allows the artist full sway. The bounty of nature surrounds him and he drinks in the riches that the solitude of Gogoan offers:

Where else can I lay aside my cane and stand at full ease?
In the ancient pond swarm fishes big enough to be dragons.
Quiet holds the enclosing woods, and the day moves slowly.
Within the house itself, not a hoard of worldly treasures,
But a jumble of books in verse and prose spread on a desk.
Flushed with inspiration, I loosen myself and my garments.
Gleaning some words from old masters, I make my own poems.
When the twilight comes, I stroll out to the east veranda.
A spring bird, an earlier visitor, greets me on its wings. ^{vi}

By the time Ryokan came to Gogoan, he had already undergone over a decade of demanding Zen training to Entsuji. He had in his belonging, an *inka*, a legitimate seal from Kokusen Roshi, his Zen master, that he was now capable of heading up his own temple. This implied that an Awakening had been demonstrated, and attested to his Transmission as a Zen master in his own right. Thus, we must realize that the poetry that follows is the poetry of a mind Awakened. The humble and self-effacing Ryokan is very subtle in his use of imagery. Nothing in him was showy. He would never display enlightenment. So, we must look closely and quietly to discern the depth of his meaning. Of course, Ryokan is talking about the physical geography here but he is really using the geography to discuss the Self, the Awakened nature. His road is solitary and difficult, and he realizes the mysteries that are yet to be penetrated in the cloud and mist.

A solitary trail stretches away through a million trees.
A thousand pinnacles above me are hid in cloud and mist.
Hardly a rainy day, but all the rocks are dark and grim.
Who can indeed content himself with this manner of life,
Unless he has seen himself altogether lost in the world? ^{vii}

He knows, too, that the enlightened mind exists with the mind of delusion. Life is difficult, and yet there is contentment. Perhaps only those who have already realized Emptiness, can possibly be content in a life of solitary practice where there is little but the seasons for change.

At this point, the geography of Gogoan becomes the geography of Self, inseparable and undivided. They begin to merge. Here, in a poem about his garden, Ryokan shows the mastery of one merged in the landscape. He is one with all that encircles:

Within my garden
I grew autumn bushclovers,
Along with pampas,
Pansies, golden dandelions
A tiny silk-tree,
A plantain, morning glories,
Hemp agrimonies
An aster, moist dayflowers,
And forget-me-nots.
And early and late each day,
Never neglecting
I fed them with clear water,
Defending them from the sun
Doing what I could for them.
My good plants were exalted
Above the others,
And I believed so too myself,
Yet destiny desired
That one evening in mid-May,
Or more precisely
At dusk on the twenty-fifth,
Came a huge tempest,
Assaulting my garden plants
With mighty anger,
Pulling them down with fury;
And without pity
Poured upon them heavy rain,
And all my flowers
Were ruined, torn to pieces.
For days thereafter
My heart sank in depression,
Yet no help I found,
For it was useless to blame
The wind above our reproach
My garden flowers
I planted and nursed myself
With genuine love,
I must learn to resign them
To the pleasure of the wind. ^{viii}

Ryokan's practice is one of non-attachment and so he proceeds knowing that in this life of Self, which is Selfless, he can only continue. The question is not whether one falters, experiences pain, cries, or does something foolish. The question is that one persists, accepts, lives fully, that one realizes the geography of the mountain and the geography of the Self are

limitless, unfixed, moving manifestations of Emptiness. He is safely rooted in Emptiness yet he is ever impermanent manifesting true freedom.

As John Stevens points out in his Introduction to *One Robe, One Bowl—The Zen Poetry of Ryokan*, the elements of *mushin* and *mujo* appear throughout Ryokan's poetry. ^{ix}*Mushin* is a natural state of detachment, a state of complete freedom from dualistic thinking. *Mujo* is an awareness of the impermanence of all things. Stevens writes: "Ryokan's life at Gogoan represents the highest stage of Zen spirituality. . . He was detached from his detachment, free from any sort of physical or spiritual materialism, in love with nature, he was sensitive to all the myriad forms of human feeling." Stevens demonstrates this with Ryokan's famous *mushin* poem:

With no-mind, blossoms invite the butterfly:
With no-mind, the butterfly visits the blossoms.
When the flower blooms, the butterfly comes.
When the butterfly comes, the flower blooms.
I do not "know" others,
Others do not "know" me.
Not-knowing each other we naturally follow the Way. ^x

Thus, Gogoan served the highest and deepest elements of Zen practice for Ryokan, for life at Gogoan brought a culmination of bliss, an abandonment of self-consciousness in an abandoned hut. Lacking nothing, Ryokan found, for himself, the way of no-Self.

Now, consider Henry David Thoreau's life at Walden Pond. How did Walden Pond serve Thoreau? He had studied at Harvard, mainly literature, but could not settle into a career, and tried his hand at teaching and pencil-making. Later he declared himself a poet, the occupation of his highest ideal. He had thought for many years of moving to the countryside and of purchasing a farm. After realizing that such responsibility would only encumber him he accepted the use of land a mile and a half from Concord on the shore of Walden Pond which was owned by his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. There he built a sturdy, one room cabin and moved his few belongings on July 4 1845. He wrote:

It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even. ^{xi}

This statement in the opening chapter tells us how the seen world, the constructed world, reflects Thoreau's inner world. What we build must reflect the spirit, for matters of spiritual nature are of greater importance.

Further along in the essay, "Economy," he shows that there is no need for decoration in the cabin and that there is no outside or inside to cause separation. The structure at Walden Pond is not a deterrent to unity, it allows for the light to shine in and out.

I would observe, by the way, that it costs me nothing for curtains, for I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and moon, and I am willing that they should look in. ^{xii}

Thoreau writes in the chapter “Sounds” about his freedom to be at one with nature, something he would be denied were he to follow the typical daily employment of the villager:

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some travelers’ wagon on the distant highway. I was reminded of the lapse of time. ^{xiii}

Walden Pond serves as the location, the place, the center, from which the poet/priest/philosopher may abide in order to give birth to inspiration—to discovery, to the unfolding Self, in nature and in poetry.

About Thoreau, Professor Shoeni Ando says in his book, *Zen and American Transcendentalism*: “He desired to realize his Self, directing his eye right inward, and to find a thousand regions in his mind yet undiscovered. In short, he was eager to exhaust himself until he came down to the root of life called reality. It was just for the achievement of this purpose that he practiced a life of simplicity, solitude, and self-introspection in a hut near Walden Pond.” ^{xiv} Thoreau explains his reasons and describes the internal map that will lead him to the answers:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike as to put to rout all that was not life to cut a broad swath and shave close, 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. ^{xv}

Thoreau is quite clear in his direction. He has, indeed, begun his life at Walden Pond in order to purify himself, to find true freedom, to lift himself out of a life without vision. He says in “Sounds:”

What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity.^{xvi}

Seeing into one's original Self, the invisible nature, if you will, is a great freedom, but Thoreau challenges us to find in ourselves the element for the search, to leave behind the brute nature within ourselves and to live in the higher truths of Nature.

Life at Walden Pond gave Thoreau a structure that became the very fabric of his book, *Walden*. The passage of season, as with Ryokan, is food for the poetry, but in *Walden*, the seasons are transcendent symbols through which the writer will "brag lustily . . . if only to wake up the neighbors." Aspects of nature are metaphors for teaching, for revealing the Self. The cycle of the year is felt as a lifetime condensed into a year.

The early chapters of *Walden* deal with Thoreau and society, an explanation of why he did what he did, his dissatisfaction with life in the city and what he hoped to achieve. As his experiences evolve, he delves more deeply into his spiritual nature and culminates in the cycle of seasons. Here, the pond undergoes a transition to winter and the poet seeks the true bottom of the pond. Of course, the pond is but a metaphor for the Self, but at last, the poet is able to see that. "The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges."^{xvii} There is no separation of the Self from nature and in the mingling waters we all are one. Winter give way to spring and he concludes by saying, "The seasons went rolling on into summer, as one rambles into higher and higher grass."^{xviii}

While Thoreau explains why he must eventually return to civilization, Walden Pond has served to teach him rich life lessons. He tells us in the Conclusion of *Walden*, "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that is one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

While Ryokan and Thoreau may diverge in many ways, today, Gogon and Walden Pond serve similar functions in our societies. To see the geography of Gogon or the geography of the cabin at Walden Pond, we are immediately reminded of the care of nature, of the love for fellow humans, of the spirituality of poverty, of the way of joyfulness, of the search for Self, consciousness of the environment, the strength of the individual, of the pioneer spirit, of solitude, sacrifice, enlightenment. By following a path of freedom, these masters explored a new geography. Thoreau said, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."^{xix}

ⁱ Daigu Ryokan. *Ryokan Zen Monk-Poet of Japan*. Trans. Burton Watson. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977. 17. (84).

(The number in parenthesis refers to the Chinese style poems in the text of Togo Toyoharu, *Ryokan Shishu*. Osaka: Sogensha, 1962, and *Ryokan Kashu*. Osaka: Sogensha, 1963, to the Japanese poems which Watson has used as the texts for his translations.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 85.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 64.

^{iv} Daigu Ryokan. *The Zen Poems of Ryokan*. Trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981. 60.

^v *Ryokan Zen Monk-Poet*, Watson. 120.

^{vi} *Zen Poems*. Yuasa, 58.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 51.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 164-165.

^{ix} Ryokan. *One Robe, One Bowl*. Trans. John Stevens. New York: Weatherhill, 1977. 16.

^x *Ibid.*, 16.

^{xi} Thoreau, Henry David. *The Portable Thoreau*. Carl Bode, Ed. New York: Viking Penguin, 1947. 300.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 321.

^{xiii} *Ibid.* 363.

^{xiv} Ando, Shoei. *Zen and American Transcendentalism: An Investigation of One's Self*. Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1970. 146.

^{xv} Thoreau. *Portable*. 343-344.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 363.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 539.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 558.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 564-565.

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