

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA RIPPLES FROM THOREAU

‘The ripples from the pebble that Henry David Thoreau tossed into the pond have spread out across the world,’ SGI President Ikeda writes. ‘His immortal voice has set in motion a vast chain of grassroots revolutions.’

The unchangeable laws of the universe...are all on the side of the just and fair.” This was the great conviction of the 19th-century American thinker Henry David Thoreau. A life actively committed to truth and justice is a life in accord with the unchangeable laws of the universe. A person who lives such a life will never succumb to any base harassment or oppression.

The luminescence of such a spirit transcends the trivial concerns of public opinion. It transcends nations and time, giving rise to an unfolding tide of sympathy, understanding and solidarity. This is a principle that is true, regardless of the age or country.



People the world over are congratulating us on celebrating our momentous milestone, May 3, 2001.

We are also honored that members of the Thoreau Society, including President Ronald Bosco and Secretary Joel Myerson, have come to Japan from the United States to offer us their congratulations on this joyous day.

Dr. Bosco is a professor at the University at Albany, State University of New York, and Dr. Myerson is a professor at the University of South Carolina. Both gentlemen are world-renowned scholars of Thoreau and of his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. They have noted a deep resonance between the SGI’s movement of human revolution, or inner transformation, and Thoreau’s philosophy of personal reformation.



Thoreau was born in July 1817, in the town of Concord, Mass. This region was the birthplace of the American Renaissance, a vibrant literary and intellectual movement led by the great poet and writer Emerson. Five decades had passed since the American Revolution, and the times were calling for change: to break through the wall of suffocating religious authority, to cut the binding chains of avarice and materialism, to give people back their pride.

It was against this backdrop that the young Thoreau found the warm friendship of Emerson and, under the latter’s influence, went on to give resounding voice to his dream of a spiritual revolution.

If the role of the mentor is to lay out the principles, then the role of the disciple is to develop them in actual practice.

On July 4, 1845, the 27-year-old Thoreau commemorated his personal independence by beginning his solitary life in a log cabin he had built beside Walden Pond, outside of Concord. He devoted more than two years of his youth to putting into practice his mentor Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance and self-cultivation.

He spent his days living with nature, reading, thinking, and interacting with his neighbors. The record of this experiment and his spiritual deepening is *Walden*, a classic

that remains widely read around the world.



A year after Thoreau began his life by Walden Pond, in July 1846, a major event in his life took place: He was jailed.

Thoreau was vehemently opposed to the United States' war against Mexico, not least because he viewed it as an effort to expand slavery. Refusing to contribute to his nation's unjust actions, he declined to pay the poll tax that was levied on all adult males at the time and was jailed as a result.

This experience gave birth to an essay that would change the world: Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience."

Thoreau believed that any individual "more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one." In other words, a true majority is not determined by sheer numbers. The rightness of one's position is the decisive factor.

One person is enough. When a person dedicates his life to truth and justice, he has taken the first step toward what Thoreau described as a "peaceable revolution."

He calls for us to become people of integrity and genuine backbone. True change begins from a single brave individual willing to fight against evil. Thoreau declared, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

In another July, almost a century after Thoreau made this pronouncement, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, the first and second Soka Gakkai presidents, were imprisoned for resisting the repression of religious freedom by the Japanese military authorities. And years later, I, the third Soka Gakkai president, was imprisoned on malicious, false charges and had to fight in court for years to prove my innocence.

Persecution and imprisonment for upholding truth and justice: This is the eternal pride of the Soka Gakkai.



Thoreau's thought had a profound influence on the renowned Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. Mahatma Gandhi, the towering hero of Indian independence, kept Thoreau's writings by his side as he led his nonviolent struggle. Many of the valiant fighters of the anti-Nazi resistance movements in Europe during World War II, as well as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the U.S. civil rights movement, were inspired by Thoreau's works.

Thoreau's views of nature and life, and his resolute refusal to compromise with injustice, have also been an immeasurable source of sustenance and inspiration for the environmental movement that flourished from the mid-20th century on, led by the efforts of individuals such as the noted marine biologist Rachel Carson.

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An English translation of "The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs" chapter of the Lotus Sutra was published in the January 1844 edition of *The Dial*, a journal edited by Emerson and Thoreau. This translation, thought to be the first publication of the sutra in English, was based on a French translation, and some believe that Thoreau was the translator.

"The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs" chapter of the Lotus Sutra sings the praises of all-embracing compassion and life's infinite diversity.

According to Emerson, Thoreau regarded the natural environment as a single living entity, with the birds and beasts, fish and insects “all known to him, and, as it were, townsmen and fellow creatures.”

Thoreau believed that all living things were intertwined and in harmony with one another. He had a solid intuition of the law of life that governed all phenomena. That is why even amid the harsh realities of society, rife with all its contradiction, he strove to live in accord with a higher law, to be as the pure lotus blossom that blooms in the mud.

That is also why he possessed the self-confidence to stand up unflinchingly to the authority of the state when the need arose. Thoreau viewed the process of history as it evolved toward democracy as “a progress toward a true respect for the individual.”

How great and noble is the life of a single individual! The Lotus Sutra, in which both Emerson and Thoreau had a deep interest, is a magnificent tribute to that truth.



On the morning of May 6, 1862, Thoreau died of tuberculosis at the young age of 44.

He was a true educator in the broadest sense, always ready to engage young people in openhearted dialogue. Thoreau hoped for the emergence of an academy that, while rooted in the local community, would invite great thinkers from around the world and nurture talented young people who possessed broad learning and understanding.

The new Soka University of America campus in Aliso Viejo, Calif., was officially dedicated on May 3. The university has four noble principles:

- 1) Foster leaders of culture in the community.
- 2) Foster leaders of humanism in society.
- 3) Foster leaders of pacifism in the world.
- 4) Foster leaders for the creative coexistence of nature and humanity.

I am confident that SUA will produce many Emersons and Thoreaus of the 21st century and extend a vast network of global citizenship, of creativity and friendship, all over the world.

Our aim is to continue our spirited pursuit of the universal path of humanistic education, just as Thoreau did, bathed in the refreshing morning light.



Thoreau stated: “It is not an era of repose.... If we would save our lives, we must fight for them.”

For us, the SGI members, May 3 is the day when we eternally embark afresh on our struggle for truth and justice, always in rhythm with the timeless Law of the universe.

This essay was published in the “Thoughts on *The New Human Revolution*” series in the May 4 *Seikyo Shimibun*, the Soka Gakkai’s daily newspaper.