

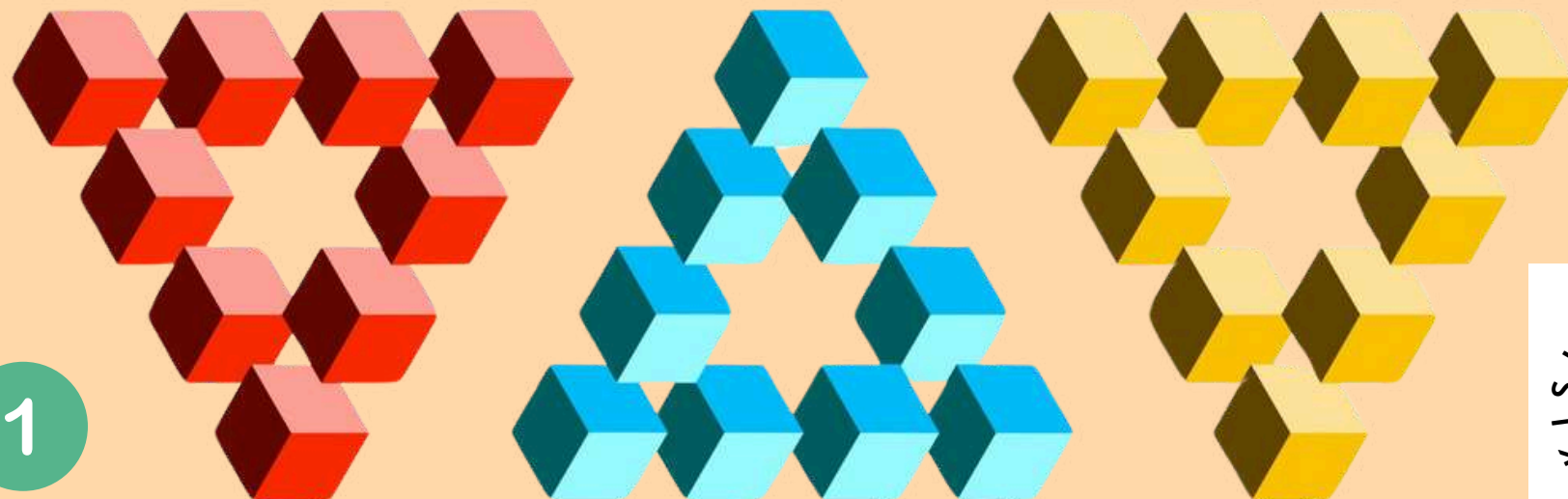
NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY

REFLECTIONS ON THOREAU & JAINISM

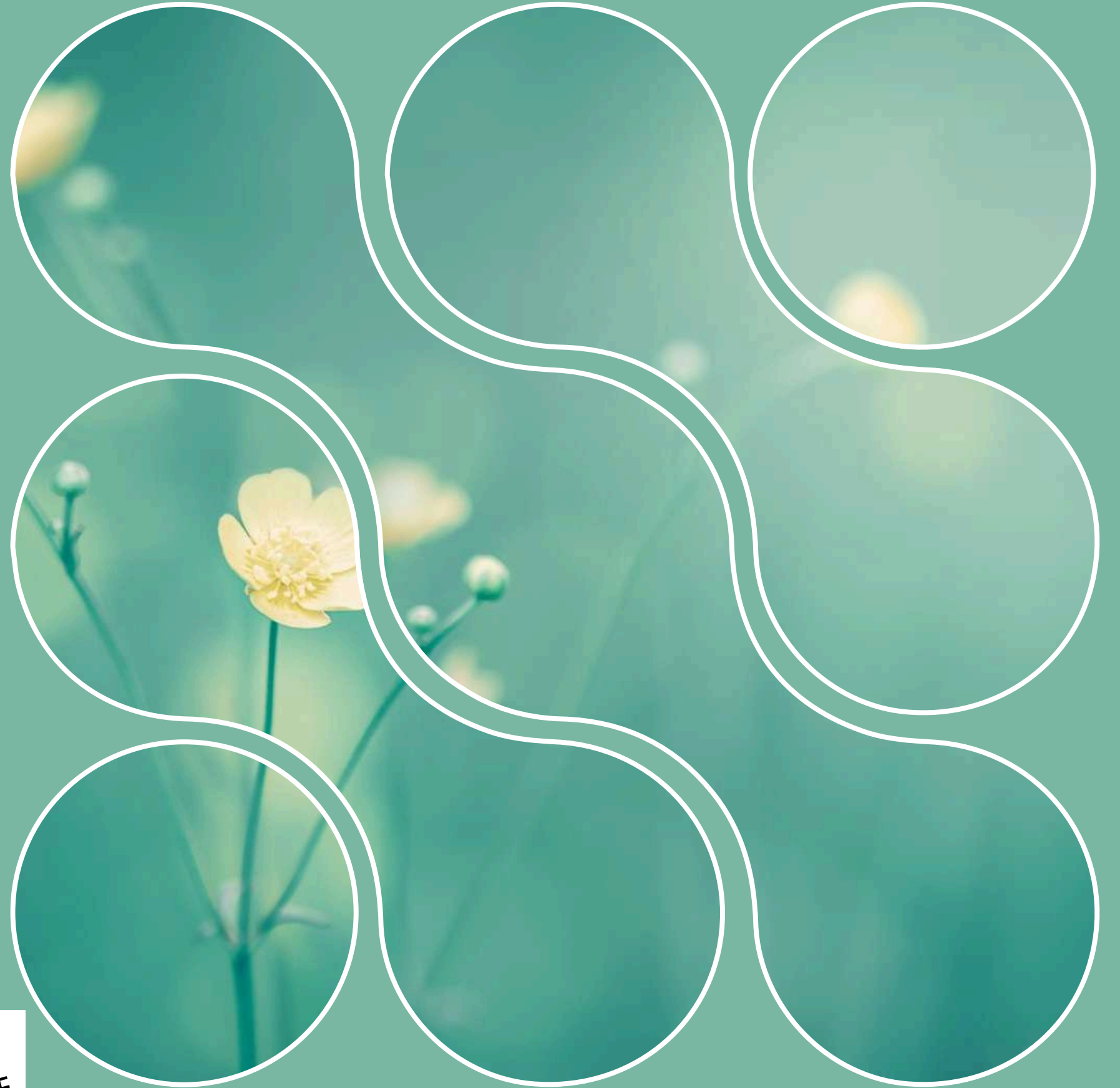
Successful modern life often involves technology, constant social connections, hard work, and conformity to rules. In today's fast-paced world, we often rush through life, focusing on materialistic pursuits and ignoring the beauty of small things.

National Simplicity Day, celebrated annually on July 12, which is the birth anniversary of American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who advocated for a life filled with happiness and simplicity. Thoreau's excellence lies in how his work and ideas are still so relevant today and as we will see later, many of his ideas are similar and have relevance for Jainism.

National Simplicity Day is a day for all of us to take a moment to reflect, clearing away both physical and mental clutter that hides what really counts, often overshadowed by social media and consumerism's endless pursuit of more.



12 JULY



NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY

Reflections on Thoreau & Jainism



IN SUMMARY NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY:

- Highlights the importance of a simple life, free from materialistic yearning.
- Serves as a reminder to slow down, declutter, and appreciate the beauty of simplicity.
- Highlights the importance of finding joy in the small things.
- Recognizes the overwhelming nature of life and the need to focus on the basics.
- To acknowledge that technology is a boon in the modern world but also appreciate that it takes us away from reality and our loved ones.
- To embrace simplicity, we should unplug devices and do something that connects us with people we love, nature, and ourselves.



HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts, USA and died in 1862. He was an American philosopher, poet, essayist, environmental scientist. Thoreau was well-versed in various scriptures and wisdom literature, including classical Greek and Roman philosophies, as well as modern philosophies like Descartes and Locke. He was also a Transcendentalist – someone who believes in the inherent goodness of humans and nature. Transcendentalism as a movement was strongly inspired by Hindu texts such as the Upanishads & Bhagavad Gita.

Thoreau liked to play the flute – reminiscent of Lord Krishna and practised Yoga.

His philosophy of life was based on living a simple life, studying nature, and living in natural surroundings to enhance growth. His thoughts and suggestions were both idealistic and practical, At the age of 25, facing dissatisfaction and spiritual void, Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for two years and two months as an experiment to test his ideas. He stated:

“I went to the woods 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.”

Thoreau never asked people to abandon their lives and live in the woods but advised people not to complicate their lives by comparing lifestyles and increasing the desire for accumulating more things. He urged people to unshackle from the complications and hustle and bustle of daily life and evaluate what aspects they enjoy the most.

NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY

Reflections on Thoreau & Jainism

His experiences at Walden Pond resulted in his famous book – Walden. An excerpt from the book:

"I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness."

Thoreau's philosophy of simplicity extends beyond material possessions to emotional well-being. Very often, we complicate things just by overthinking about them whereas Thoreau suggests taking the simplest and most obvious approach to reduce unnecessary complications.

THOREAU & JAINISM

The modern-day concept of 'minimalism' – meaning 'Less is more' is akin to Thoreau reflections in his book. Nowadays, many countries, including Japan, have embraced minimalism as a philosophy promoting well-being and sustainability.

Minimalism is not just about decluttering spaces, but it is about intentional living, prioritizing quality over quantity in material possessions and experiences.

Minimalism in Jainism goes beyond the concept of owning less. It's about leading a simple life, free from unnecessary distractions. It's about finding contentment in simplicity and focusing on what truly matters.



NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY

Reflections on Thoreau & Jainism



Thoreau was different from contemporary philosophers in that he walked his talk and lived a way of life that was rooted in a naturalist approach, focusing on spiritual exploration and personal growth – similar to Bhagwan Mahavir.

If we compare some of Mahavir Bhagwan sayings with those of Thoreau as expressed in his book – Walden, we see similar ideas being expressed.

“Happy are we, happy live we, who call nothing our own – the more you get, the more you want; your desires increases with your means” – Mahavir

In Walden, Thoreau writes – *“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail”*

Mahavir expresses the transitory nature of life and of the importance of making use of the here and now thus:

“You cannot prolong your life, therefore be not careless; you are past help when old age approaches”

Thoreau expresses the same sentiment stating, *“I went to the woods 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.”*

Both Mahavir and Thoreau realised that importance of time and stated:

Mahavir – *“Time is the cause of the shortening of the duration of life as well as of wealth; the amassers of wealth love money more than their lives.”*

Thoreau – *“Time is but the stream I go a fishing in. I drink at it: but while I drink, I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is.”*

Both were instrumental in non-violent change in the world. Mahatma Gandhi was influenced by Thoreau notable essay on civil disobedience as well as the non-violent teachings of Mahavir & Jain philosophy. Gandhi in turn had a profound impact on Dr Martin Luther King Jr – one of the most prominent leaders in the civil rights movement in USA.

Thoreau felt inclined to awaken in the morning and as stated in Walden – “abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind in order to preserve the higher and poetic faculties.” – this is reminiscent of the Jain practice of asceticism and vegetarianism. Thoreau’s diet was largely based on rice.

Nowadays, a common complaint or excuse for lack of personal spiritual growth is the perceived lack of time. Of the three jewels of Jainism – Darshan (faith) ; Gnan (knowledge) and Charitra (action) – the most difficult is Charitra which leads us to accept limitations to our spiritual progress. *“We become stagnant, content in living tomorrow like today and today like yesterday” or as Thoreau states – “leading lives of quiet desperation -- determined to be starved before we are hungry.”*

The Jain concept of Aparigraha is expressed in Thoreau idea of *“living free and uncommitted so long as possible.”*

“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.”

“I am convinced both by faith and experiences, that to maintain oneself on this earth is not hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.”

R W Emerson wrote that Thoreau *“inferred universal law from the single fact”*, whilst Mahavir stated that *“he who knows one thing knows all things”*. We can infer that ‘this single fact’, ‘this one thing’ was basically *‘reverence for life.’* Both were ‘aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well.’

According to Jain philosophy, the soul alone chooses its actions, and the soul alone reaps its consequences. Thoreau greatest insight maybe his karmic conviction that ‘each must find his or her own way.’ He ends his book -Walden with this advice to readers – ***“to advance confidently in the direction of your dreams, and endeavour to live the life you have imagined.”***

Let us reflect on how to simply our life as per Jainism and regularly to exult in nature – trees, wind, sky and the sea.

***The morning wind forever blows;
The poem of the world is uninterrupted,
but few are the ears that hear it.
Going nowhither; where travellers are not
too often to be met;
where my spirit is free;
where the walls and fences are not cared for;
where your head is more in heaven
than your feet are on earth***

Some suggestions to incorporate and embrace simplicity in our life.

Firstly, my understandings of the suggestions by Thoreau in his book Walden.

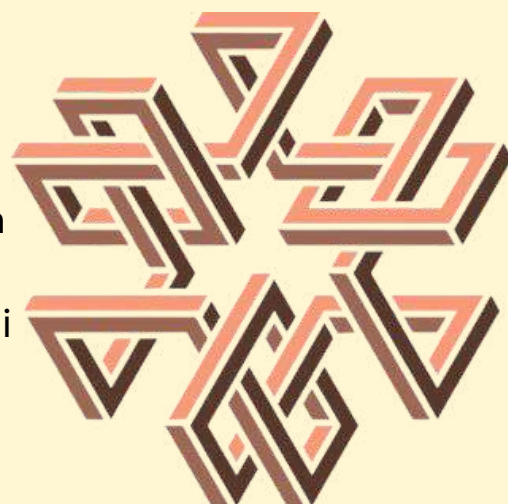
- **Avoiding complications:** Choose happiness and simplicity over complications.
- **Seeking Essential Factors:** Every human has a purpose on this earth – we should seek our purpose
- **Celebrating Achievements:** We should learn to aide by our goals, values, ethics and celebrate small and big achievements.
- **Unnecessary things:** Identity the important things and Remove unnecessary things
- **Unplugging Technology** from time to time to connect with loved ones, nature, and oneself.

References:

Walden by H D Thoreau

Selected Prose & Poetry by R Emerson
walden.org

Articles by N R Jain, R Jain & V M Doshi
Sayings of Mahavira



NATIONAL SIMPLICITY DAY

Reflections on Thoreau & Jainism



BY KISHOR B SHAH



Some further suggestions, which I am sure we all aware of but are worth reminding to prompt some action on our part.

- Material possessions can bring happiness but can also become burdensome. It's important to consider whether these items serve a purpose or are just 'stuff' taking up space. Leaving them behind can bring a sense of peace.
- Taking time for oneself is crucial for health and happiness. Set aside daily time for relaxation and recharge, such as walking, listening to music, or meditating.
- Reducing stress is a natural part of life, but it doesn't have to take over. Exercise, yoga, mindfulness, creating a relaxing environment, and stepping away from technology can help.
- Connecting with nature can bring joy and calmness. Spending time outdoors, such as walking or spending time in a garden or park, can be especially helpful when feeling overwhelmed.
- Spending quality time with loved ones is essential for well-being and happiness. This can include going out for dinner, playing board games, or simply having conversations about life.