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## **HENRY D. THOREAU'S HUT AND ANCIENT JAPANESE SUSTAINABLE WISDOM**

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### **Abstract**

*For millions of years, human beings have been part of nature. People have lived on this planet looking to the stars for direction, forecasting the weather, and watching seasonal changes. However, despite our recent efforts to develop technology that will help us live easier lives, we seem to be living more complicated lives than ever before. How can we return to living simple lives? This study examines the meaning of the concept "a simple life" by investigating some common beliefs our ancestors shared toward houses: Henry David Thoreau's cabin, the Japanese writer Kamono Chomei's "Hojo-An," and an Edo period fisherman's hut. Especially, the life record of the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) offers hints as to how we can live in nature. He observed natural phenomena and cared deeply about the environment, and in his writing, he urges us to identify and preserve the irreplaceable things in our lives. Analogously, Japanese people of the Edo Period devoted thought and effort to living simply. They lived in harmony with nature. This study describes several facets of society and commerce in the city of Edo (present day Tokyo). As a model of sustainability, Edo made great developments, such as the construction of an eco-friendly water system by employing "ancient wisdom." Finally, when dealing with natural disasters, we shouldn't forget our experiences: even the most basic systems of the past can help us prepare for the future. Sometimes the best answer is the simplest.*

## Keywords

Henry D. Thoreau, 19th Century American Literature, Edo Period, Japanese Wisdom, Simple Life

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## 1. Introduction: The Indispensable Part of Our Lives

The aim of my research is to contemplate “what a simple life is.” Imagine you are going on a camping trip. What do you think you would need most to survive for a few days in the wilderness? Most people would answer: water, food, clothing, fuel, shelter, and sanitation. Others may add a cell phone as a must-have item. Will this list alone suffice? Or: Will this complete your list?

Even when alone in nature, we humans may require more than daily necessities in order to live. In the adventure film *Cast Away* directed by Robert Zemeckis (2000), the protagonist Chuck Noland’s plane goes down in the South Pacific. He reaches a deserted island along with a volleyball that he names “Wilson” and treats almost like a human friend. When Wilson is washed far out to sea, Chuck nearly loses his strong will to continue living. This story illustrates the human need for “raison d’être.” We need something to live for. If you were stranded on a desert island, what would be your *raison d’être*?

In this study, Section 2 introduces Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817 - May 6, 1862), and his small-house life as well as the philosophy that undergirds it. Section 3 examines classical Japanese wisdom seen in Tokyo of the Edo Period (1603-1868). Section 4 contemplates some ways in which some recent disasters suggest we adopt simpler lifestyles for a more sustainable future.

## 2. Henry David Thoreau and his Hut

*Walden* (Thoreau, 1854) is my “Wilson.” The author, Henry D. Thoreau is well known as an essayist, poet, scientist, naturalist, surveyor, abolitionist, environmental critic, pencil maker, orator, and transcendentalist. Keeping a journal totaled 2 million words for almost twenty-five years, he became one of the major writers in the American literary canon. However, in his lifetime, he published just two books. The first book was called a commercial failure, and the second one was *Walden*. In the latter book, Thoreau provides us with the basic principles for living a simple life. The book is based on his experiences living alone in his hand-built cabin near Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts from 1845 to 1847. Interestingly, he did not build his house from scratch. He said, “I had already bought the shanty of James Collins, an Irishman

who worked on the Fitchburg Railroad, for boards” (Thoreau, 1854, pp. 42-43). Thoreau dismantled the hut, brought the boards, and recycled them. Figure 1 depicts the replica of Thoreau’s famous cottage outside and inside with ten by fifteen feet floor (Japan Thoreau Society, 2012, Picture 6 & 7). The desk and chairs are the most conspicuous furniture in his house. “Wilson” for the solitary philosopher was obviously related to “writing.”



Figure 1: Thoreau’s Cabin (Right: Inside)

It is often said that there are more ways to the wood(s) than one. In real life, young Thoreau decided to live alone to write his first book. He wanted to “live his philosophy.” He recorded how much he paid for making the cabin, and how he grew his crops in the bean field. He showed us that a human being could live with little money and less labor. In other words, as Chuck Noland needed Wilson, “a pen” was indispensable to this ultimate minimalist. We should read Thoreau better to learn about simple life in this mixed-up world.

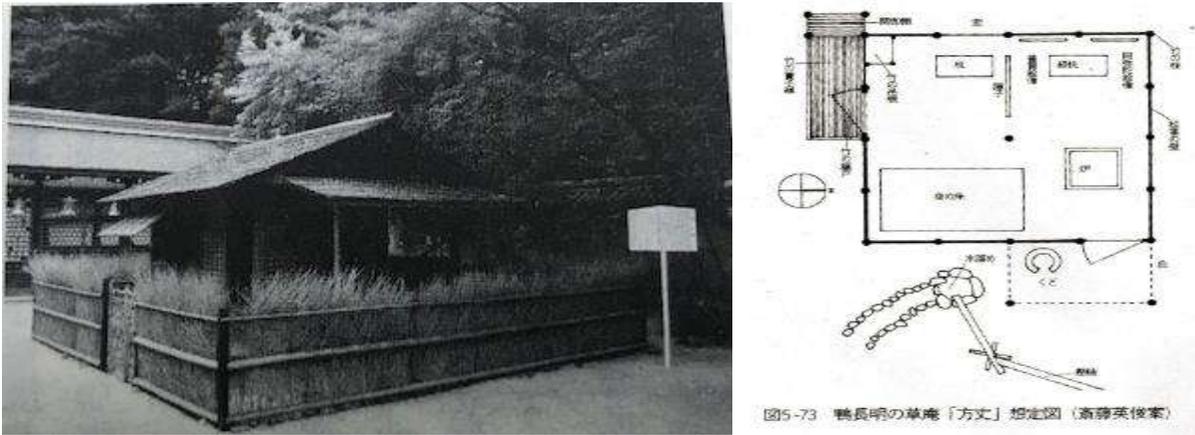
### 3. Edo Period and the People

It was in 1854 when *Walden* was published. The next year, 1855, a huge earthquake hit Edo city. More than seven thousand people died in the ensuing fires that incinerated most of the city (Noguchi, 1997, p. 9). The era, from 1603 to 1867 is termed the Edo period. It achieved a welcome and stable peace after many years of civil war in the 16th century. The people of the Edo period tried to use things as long as they could. So let us look at this era from the viewpoints of (1) simple compact housing, (2) water management, and (3) the eco-friendly recycling system.

#### 3.1 Compact Housing

Now, move your eyes from Thoreau’s cabin to an ancient Japanese hut called “Hojo-An” built by the famous Japanese essayist, Kamono Chomei (1155-1216)(Ito, 2017, p. 67 & Fujita, 1999, p. 164). Spatially, it approximates the size of Thoreau’s hut, about 3 meters square, but

materially, Chomei used thin wooden panels that he could easily disassemble and transport elsewhere. Several times Chomei moved with this hut.



**Figure 2:** *Hojo-An (replica) and Floor Plan*

Edo was famous for its city design of compact, simple houses built neatly and regularly in narrow areas. Traditional Japanese houses were mainly built of wood and paper, which is why great fires ravaged Edo so frequently. In addition to being one of the most densely populated cities of its day, another reason for austere living was for quick evacuation in the face of Edo's frequent conflagrations. More than 80 fires were recorded in 265 years of the Edo Period. So usually, citizens preferred to live with as little furniture and belongings as possible. That made their lives quite simple. Figure 3 depicts a typical Edo fisherman's house with an austerity resembling Thoreau's (Takeuchi, 2003, p. 110).

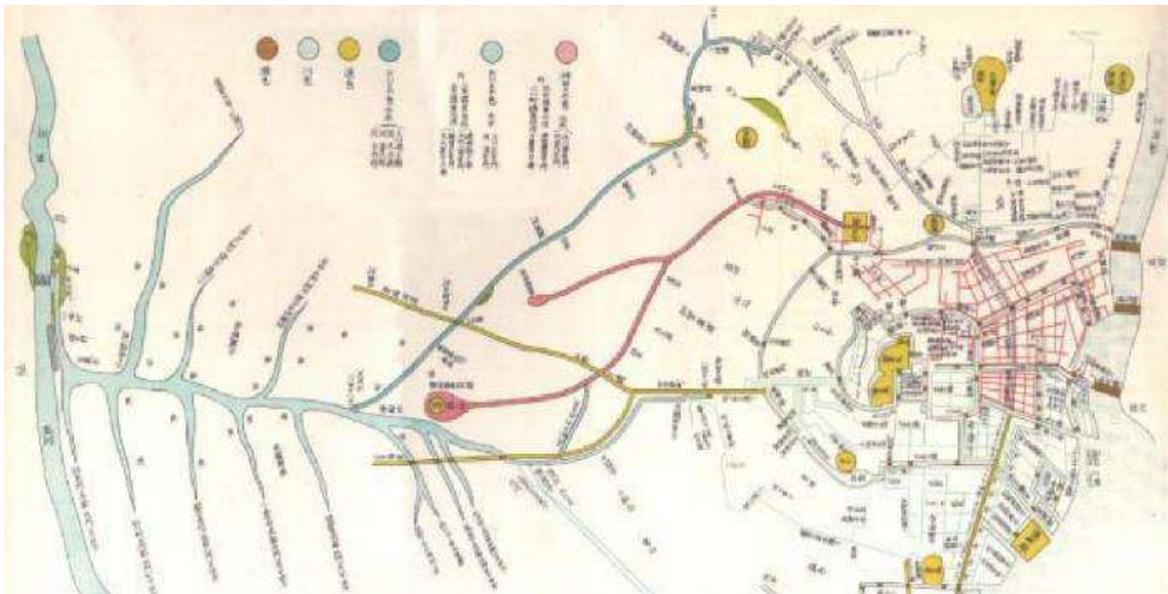


**Figure 3:** *A Typical Edo Fisherman's Hut*

### 3.2 Water Management

As a result of the rapid increase of Edo inhabitants in the 17th century, the city required much water. Therefore, lots of people were conscripted into labor by the government to dig long

canals connecting distant rivers: The biggest canal was excavated in only seven months. One canal called “Tamagawa-Jousui” runs almost 43 kilometers to each extremity of the city (Kato, 2004, p. 80). They connected square wooden pipes for plumbing, utilizing geographical inclinations averaging 2.14 meters per kilometer from the hills to the waterfront (Uchida, 2013, p. 127). Thus, people living in Edo city enjoyed ample access to water from their wells and water-tanks. Figure 4 depicts the resultant Edo water system (Yanagibashi, 2005, p. 71). After the fall of the Roman Empire, such water systems were rare. By way of comparison, in Britain, Londoners were required to ration their water use to seven hours for three days a week, and in France the city of Paris had no official water supply until the 19th century (Sugiura, 2003, p. 244).



**Figure 4:** *Edo's Water System*

### **3.3 Recycling Systems**

Sugiura (2003) describes Edo citizens as having been frugal with water. They used it quite deliberately. They shared public water tanks and toilets. Then, the used water ran down through sewers to downstream pools and rivers, where boats collected and stored the wastewater in tanks and carried it to drier agricultural areas outside of Edo city, in order to recycle it. Edo enforced eco-friendly recycling systems not only for water but for everything. The citizens used daily necessities repeatedly. For example, they recycled paper, used clothes, and even used fireplace ash as dye for fabrics and cloths. People collected rubbish across the whole city and recycled it without throwing anything away. Also there were various, skilled craftspeople who

specialized in repairing broken things such as pots, ceramics and umbrellas. Frugality was a significant virtue in Edo era. As a result of the recycling effort and its enforcement, various types of tradesmen in Edo city made their living by carrying such goods to their clients. Tradesmen even collected human and animal dung and urine to fertilize grain and vegetable fields. Edo citizens held jobs within this exhaustive recycling system. Some carried fish, vegetables, noodles, flowers, and materials. More than 200 retailers were active on the front lines of the city. Figure 5 (Awano, 2011, p. 45) depicts the ways in which fragmentation and subdivision of businesses provided the inhabitants of Edo with a myriad of employment opportunities.



**Figure 5:** *Tradesmen in Edo*

We should keep the recycling system in mind and pursue ways to convert waste into new resources with the spirit of simplicity and frugality.

## **4. We Should Learn from History**

### **4.1 The Indian Ocean Tsunami and Malaysian Miracle**

Finally, let us think about the status quo. The Indian Ocean Tsunami (December 26, 2004) was a huge and terrible disaster. This is known as the deadliest tsunami disaster that has ever happened on the globe. It killed almost 230,000 people in eleven countries including Malaysia. The shock of that earthquake was felt in countries as far as 4,500 km away.



**Figure 6:** 2004 Indian Earthquake Epicenter

Despite its proximity to the epicenter of the earthquake as we can see in Figure 6 (Tibballs, 2005, p. 25), Malaysia escaped the kind of damage that devastated countries hundreds of miles further away. As the epicenter was on the western coast of Sumatra, the island largely protected Malaysia from the worst of the tsunami. The country's worst affected areas were Penang and Langkawi. The number of deaths currently stands at 67 people. To many, such a low number was implausible. Amazingly, a simple red flag warning system used by lifeguards on beaches in some Malaysian resort areas in Penang is credited with reducing the number of fatalities. In other words, the simple warning system worked in real life, very effectively. Ultimately, none of us can foresee what will happen next. All that we can do to protect ourselves is to remember the famous words by an American writer Norman Cousins (1915-1990): "History is a vast early warning system" (Cousins, 1978). So we should try to learn from the wisdom of our ancestors.

#### **4.2 Japan: The Dangerous Country and the Effort**

Japan is, in some ways, a very dangerous country to live in. Tremendous earthquakes occur in every part of the country on several years basis. In fact, despite Japan's land and sea area amounting to about 1% of Earth's total, Japan has 111 active volcanoes, which is roughly 15% of the worldwide total. A result of all of the tectonic activities underground is a large number of earthquakes that terrorize people on the surface. One of the unforgettable earthquakes was the Great Tohoku (Northeastern Japan) Earthquake and Tsunami disaster in March 11, 2011. The powerful tsunami waves traveled up to 10 km inland, killed 18,434 people and destroyed

countless houses. The girl could find her favorite notebook in her completely-destroyed house at Ishinomaki City (Asahi Shimbun Company, 2011, pp. 130-131).



**Figure 7:** *I Found This!*

Even now, seven years later, more than 70,000 people are living in temporary rescue houses. The catastrophe, still fresh in our memory, involved a serious man-made disaster: the nuclear accident in Fukushima Prefecture. It spurred intense debate among Japanese about the sustainability of human society. After the disaster, no surrounding area has been observed with the level of radiation that can harm our health instantaneously. However, like the disaster at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant happened in the then Soviet Union (now Ukraine) in 1986, men need a long-term survey to give accurate information to the future. Also in 2016, my hometown Kumamoto City became the epicenter of two magnitude-7 earthquakes over the course of 24 hours. After the disaster, volunteers and relief supplies arrived relatively early. Nevertheless, thousands of people had to stay in their cars or in public shelters as you can see in these photos in April, 2016. The people are enduring hard lives as a result of the disaster, but they are trying to share their daily necessities (See Figure 8. Asahi Shimbun Company, 2017).



**Figure 8:** *The Disaster and Victims*

The Japanese have learned a lot from many destructive natural phenomena and have started to take measures to reduce the negative effects. In 1995, the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck Osaka. A Japanese architect, whose name is Shigeru Ban, made a paper house using cardboard tubing for disaster victims. He points out that the paper tubing is light in weight, easy to transport. Mr. Ban has been sending the paper houses to disaster areas worldwide. Let us prepare for the next disaster. Now remember, over 1000 years ago, there was a portable house called “Hojo-An.” Easy to build, easy to fold, and easy to carry. Such ideas can be applied to rescue houses.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we have examined the meaning of “the simple life.” There are many things we can learn from our past and ancestors. We are a product of our past, so it seems appropriate that we should sometimes look in that direction to find a way forward. While developing new technologies, such as sophisticated early warning systems for earthquakes and nuclear reactors for energy, let us not put so much faith in them. Rather, it is more important to remember that, as is the case with the water supply works, simple living and human networks of Edo Period Japan, we can share many things with our neighbors. We have relied on one another throughout history. Therefore we should put our efforts toward maintaining a cooperative spirit worldwide.

Finally, it will do us good to take time to think about our “Wilson,” in other words, our “raison d’être.” When the night comes, every survivor finds stars in the sky and his/her own precious and irreplaceable “thing” to live for. Even one pen, one notebook can be your Wilson. By considering this, we can work to downsize our lives to the most essential elements and live simply.

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