

Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology

Bill Devall

Exploring ecological self is part of the transforming process required to heal ourselves in the world. Practicing means breathing the air with renewed awareness of the winds. When we drink water we trace it to its sources – a spring or mountain stream in our bioregion – and contemplate the cycles of energy as part of our body. The „living waters“ and „living mountains“ enter our body. We are part of the evolutionary journey and contain in our bodies connections with our Pleistocene ancestors.

Extending awareness and receptivity with other animals and mountains and rivers encourages identification and engenders respect for and solidarity with the field of identification. This does not mean there will never be conflicts between some humans and some other animals in specific situations, but it does mean that a basis for „good actions“ or „right livelihood“ is not based alone on abstract moralism, self-denial, or sacrifice.

When exploring our ecological self openly and with acceptance, no judgment is made, nor is there a pursuit of anything. The self is not an entity or a thing, it is an opening to discovering what some call the Absolute or in Sanskrit, atman.

Awakening the self beyond the barbed wire fence the ego has constructed engages us in the world, in the grounding of being-in-the-world. Naess frequently talks of spontaneous joy we experience because we are part of what really is. Other aspects include compassionate understanding, wisdom, receptivity, intuitiveness, creativity, allowing to happen, connectedness, openness, and peacefulness. The expanded, deepened self is not impersonal but transpersonal.

The process of healing, in transpersonal psychology, begins with self-awareness. „We must know ourselves and accept ourselves before attempting to manipulate ourselves for the purpose of changes we think are desirable. To understand all is to forgive all, and forgiving ourselves for being just as we are is the first step to healing“ (Vaughn 1986, 56).

As we discover our ecological self we will joyfully defend and interact with that with which we identify, and instead of imposing environmental ethics on people, we will naturally respect, love, honor, and protect that which is of our self.

We need environmental ethics, but when people feel they unselfishly give up, even sacrifice, their interest in order to show love for nature, this is probably in the long run a treacherous basis for conservation. Through identification they may come to see their own interest served by conservation, through genuine selflove, love of a widened and deepened self. (Naess, „Self realization“, 1986)

There are many reasons to defend the integrity of landscape from the invasion of industrial civilization. Supporters of deep ecology especially defend the integrity of native plants and animals living in their own habitat unmolested by humans. We also defend the integrity of certain places (the Grand Canyon comes to mind) because they are awesome, beautiful and unique, or because we use those areas for sport or recreation.

Another strong reason is „if we, after honest reflection, find that we feel threatened in our innermost self. If so we more convincingly defend a vital interest, not only something out there. We are engaged in self-defence and defend fundamental human rights of vital self-defence“ (Naess, „Self-realization“, 1986.). No moral exhortation or dogmatic statement of environmental ethics is necessary to show care for other beings – including rivers or mountains – if our self in this broad and deep sense embraces the other being.

Naess contrasts this view of enlightened self-interest with altruism which, he says, „implies that ego sacrifices its interests in favour of the other, the alter. The motivation is primarily that of duty: it is said that we ought to love others as strongly as we love ourselves“ (Naess, Self-

realization," 1986). But humans have limited ability to love from mere duty or moral exhortation.

Spokespeople for the reform environmental movement, and some philosophers, offer many statements of environmental ethics and call upon people to sacrifice for future generations, for people in developing nations, etc. Now, according to Naess, „we need the immeasurable variety of sources of joy opened through increased sensitivity towards the richness and diversity of life.“

We need to be reminded of our moral duties occasionally, but we change our behavior more simply with richer end through encouragement. Deeper perception of reality and deeper and broader perception of self is what I call ecological realism. That is, in philosophical terms, however important environmental ethics are, ontology is the center of ecosophic concerns. ...

Self-realization has no artificial boundary. Some people say they identify with Mother Earth or with the biosphere. Naess, however, prefers to use the term ecosphere because this term implies a broader definition of living beings.

A community with appropriate rituals, social mentors, languages, art forms and methods of education can facilitate exploration of the ecological self. Ecological spiritual cultures will emerge, of necessity, as more and more people together engage the healing process of exploring ecological self. ...

Ecological self is not a forced or static ideology but rather the search for an opening to nature (Tao) in authentic ways. If a person can sincerely say after careful self-evaluation and prayer that „this earth is part of my body“, then that person would naturally work for global disarmament and preservation of the atmosphere of the earth. „If this place is destroyed then something in me is destroyed,“ then that person has an intense feeling of belonging to the place.