

Personal Sketches

Meeting with a Giant: An Informal Conversation with Arne Naess

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Mark and I had arrived in Oslo the previous night. The airline had lost most of the passenger's suitcases and we lost a couple of hours queuing and doing the required paperwork to get our luggage back. We were told that we wouldn't get it until the following night. It was very frustrating: my recorder, my camera, the Spanish Albariño wine that I was going to give to Arne as a tiny symbol of gratitude for allowing me to meet him, all was lost. I had prepared this trip with enormous enthusiasm and I was not going to allow an airline to cloud it. I had been studying Arne Naess's ecological thought for three years. My doctoral dissertation, which I was planning to finish over the next couple of months, was on deep ecology and education. And a meeting with Arne Naess was, for me, a very important personal accomplishment: a special *grounding* event in my academic and personal life; it meant to physically encounter the source of the thousands of ideas that had *impressed* me so deeply. While Mark and I waited in the lost-luggage queue, I tried to find the significance of the event. And I comforted myself with the thought that it might have to do with getting *new luggage* from this meeting. Well, then, welcome!

The next day, August the 9th, 25 degrees Celsius outside: it was perfect! At quarter to eleven we were at the right train station but somebody misled us and we lost our train and, with it, half an hour of conversation with Arne. My association of Arne with the mountains

made me see these obstacles as a challenging climbing job that is, at its end, worth the effort.

When we finally arrived, Kit-Fai (Arne Naess's wife) was sweeping the floor. She warmly welcomed us and we stepped in their simple brown cabin-like house. Arne stood up from his couch to greet us. There he was, in front of us, the giant I had admired so much: a great, sacred instant. Arne Naess was 91 years old, but in remarkable shape: tall, thin, still showing a good amount of hair, very intense eyes and a welcoming smile. He shook our hands for an unusually long time and in an unusual swinging movement. Right from the start he was making us taste his playful personality, so many times commended by writers who have described his character.¹ Arne kept smiling and his eyes were deeply focused on the two of us, as when somebody examines you carefully. He pointed to the couch inviting us to take a seat.

Arne knew that I was from Spain and he started telling us about the wonderful time he had had over there while he was on a climbing trip in the Pyrenees. He was only nineteen years old, but he remembered this experience fondly and he said that he preferred the Spanish side to the French one. (I certainly did not take this for granted). It was easy for him, he said, to communicate with the Spanish people, even without knowing the language. He found the people warmer, more generous. I appreciated the compliment and I told him that Mediterranean languages are "gesture" languages, so communication is never an insolvable problem. We all laughed.

We asked Kit-Fai where she was from and she asked us to guess. Her personal features didn't make it difficult. She is from Hong Kong. Arne and she met, she explained, while he was spending some time there as a visiting professor. Kit-Fai made us laugh when she told us that the coming September, she and Arne would have a small party to celebrate having *survived* each other for thirty years. Arne rolled his eyes.

As we were conversing with Arne about our trip, Kit-Fai approached us with a few books. One was titled *Arne Naess's Mountain*,² and it was written in Norwegian; two others had been written by Arne, and the fourth one was Arne's life—in cartoons! It was also written in Norwegian but we immediately felt very attracted to it. (We are all still children when it comes to spontaneous choices). In the very first few pages we distinguished a woman with a serious and distant look: a good representation of the typical stereotype of a fairy tale's stepmother. Arne said that she was his mother, and then he pointed toward another woman who appears playing with Arne and being teased by him as

well. “This is Mina, my nanny, my favourite person,” Arne said. “I loved her so very much. I have never forgiven my mother for taking Mina away from me.” And he added: “Since they took Mina away from me, I have always been very cautious about getting too close to people, because I was afraid of losing these people again, as I had lost Mina.”

I felt ecstatic when I heard these words from him. I vividly remembered the first time I heard Arne’s voice in a recorded radio interview³ in the United States; Arne was also talking there about his mother dismissing Mina because Arne’s mother was afraid that this woman might love him too much! And later, about the special relationship that he developed with the mountain *Hallingskarvet*, which he considered his surrogate father. I remembered asking myself then: Why did he associate the mountain with his father (who had died when Arne was just an infant), instead of with his mother (given the difficult relationship that he had always had with her)? What are the features in the mountain that make him connect it with the masculine figure?” I addressed Arne and told him that *montaña* (mountain) is a feminine word in Spanish. “Does Norwegian also have grammatical gender for nouns?” I asked, suddenly realizing the lack of gender in English nouns. “Yes, it does,” Arne and Kit-Fai replied.

Then I asked him if he wouldn’t mind telling me about the features that he found in his relationship with the mountain that took him to associate it with the father figure, instead of with the mother one. “Oh, well, Arne said, my father died when I was one year old. And I never felt loved.” Arne’s cheeks flushed slightly. He was thinking; he was briefly gone. Soon he smiled again and added: “That’s why I had such odd relationships with the humans around me... The mountain represented my father for me as well as my mother...” He told us that since the first contact that he ever had with *Hallingskarvet* (his mountain) when he was four years old, he always felt an enormous attraction toward it. The mountain seemed to him an enormous giant who was regarding him warmly and inviting him to come to it. He felt, he explained, as if the mountain was assuring him that NOTHING was going to happen to him; as if the mountain was encouraging him to approach it without fear. Arne, then, sat back, his eyes fixed on us. Such a powerful experience that has forcefully resisted forgetfulness, I thought.

I addressed Arne again and told him that through my readings of his work, I had become fascinated by the combination in him of the solitary mountaineer and the gregarious group leader. Arne is for me a paradoxical figure who enjoys an unusually empathetic (mystic?)

relationship with nature, together with an also unusual personal commitment to promote social awareness in relation to ecological issues among others, both through writings and through active participation in social pro-environmental activities. I told him how exceptional I thought it, his sharp emphasis in the personal responsibility of the individual toward the group. I mentioned the last point in the deep ecology platform, that calls for the responsibility to take the personal commitment with the environment to society⁴ (in the way that best suits each individual); and his explanation about Self-realization (with capital S) where Arne, following Gandhi, denies the possibility of individual improvement, if disconnected or separated from the improvement of others. (David Rothenberg wrote in the Introduction to *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* that Naess doesn't understand a wisdom that doesn't continue into action, or an action that is not wise, and I think that this is a very accurate and beautiful description of Arne's thought.)⁵ In a very quick answer, Arne returned to tell us about the mountain and the profound feeling of welcoming and acceptance that he received from it and learned from it.

As he does so many times in his writings or when he is interviewed, he is answering my questions "vaguely." He provides some guidelines and they are always *very* open guidelines. In relationship to the diverse possibilities that people have to support the deep ecology movement, Arne says: "the frontier is long." I felt that he was also inviting me to take that sentence as a *keystone* for interpreting his answers. And then, I must continue *my way*. I thought of Arne's favourite Sanskrit expression, *Sva marga*, to talk about the individual's personal path (which Arne would mention a few minutes later). Arne writes about this in his most recent book,⁶ where he says that he is *very* aware that every person has his/her own path to walk. "*Sva marga*: Everyone his/her own path!" he emphasized, while intensely looking at us.

Kit-Fai had left the room for a few minutes but she returned with two new books. One was the original book *Life's Philosophy* (the most recent book of Arne's) in Norwegian, and the other was its English version. Kit-Fai seemed surprised when I told her that I had already read it, and she quickly asked me what I thought of it. I answered that I loved it. (I think that *Life's Philosophy* is a great document in dismissing the accusations of misanthropy toward deep ecology.⁷ I personally interpret it as a *song* to life. And, using David Rothenberg's words, I think of this book as one of Arne's most obvious "yearnings toward poetry.")⁸

Kit-Fai explained to us how difficult it had been for them to find a publisher, because its subject, feelings, was considered unpopular in Europe by many publishers. She mentioned how extraordinarily popular the book had become in Norway, selling 150,000 copies. And she also told us about the harsh criticism that the book received in a review from a very famous philosopher from Copenhagen.⁹ This review, Kit-Fai said, appeared with the title: *Could Thousands of Norwegians Be Wrong?* And she added that the critic had presented the book as a collection of banalities, hinting that it might indicate Arne's age-related mental decline: a radical *departure* from Naess's work. (Without saying anything aloud, I thought: "departure? Do those people think that Naess has ever *landed*? From philosophy, to math, to astronomy; from behaviourism to empiricism to skepticism; from semantics to environmental studies—Naess departs constantly because his life and his work is an endless questioning, an endless tasting of life.) Kit-Fai and Arne had been very pleased, however, with the book's reception in the United States. Mark (the only American in this meeting) didn't seem surprised and mentioned the impressive success of books such as Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*.

Arne seemed to have stayed *away* from this part of the conversation, but he tuned back in when Mark started talking. He had been quiet in his chair while making something similar to stretching movements with his neck in an amusing way... Arne's *distance* as well as his *interesting* neck movements took me, for a few seconds, very far away to the Spanish academic circles I had joined so many times. I thought of how different the circumstances would have probably been if a meeting like this would have happened over there: not only would everyone have dressed up (Kit-Fai and Arne were completely casual), but it would also have been very unexpected that somebody (in a similar case, a professor who had written dozens of books and hundreds of articles and who was internationally well known), suddenly starts to play with his neck, courteously revealing to everybody else that he doesn't have much interest in that part of the conversation... But I was aware that I was not in what I would have called a *common* situation, nor with a *common* person, and I appreciated the multiple shocking features (for me) of the event as they instantly helped me to realize how special it was.

So, as I mentioned, Mark's intervention re-captured Arne's attention. Arne kept his intense eyes fixed at Mark while slightly leaning forward from his chair, indicating with his physical position a genuine disposition to listen. At one point when Mark was talking about the increasing academic and popular interest in America toward feelings

and emotional issues, Arne sat back, almost jumping in his chair, and started saying aloud: “There is not *one* human activity that can be separated from feelings. Not even math . . .” He was saying this emphatically, his wildly gesturing arms indicating how intensely he felt about *feelings*. The intervention, reminded me of Arne’s description in *Life’s Philosophy* about his amazement when he found out about infinite numbers; and I mentioned it. He jumped again in his seat and began moving his arms portentously while saying: “Oh, yes, yes: infinite numbers! There are always more and more . . . always infinite numbers!” His gestures amused us and they offered us another opportunity to witness for a moment another profound experience in Arne’s life: it is as if we could physically feel how strongly the recognition of the infinity of numbers had impacted him. We could certainly tell that personal experience, *deep experience* had played a crucial role in Arne Naess’s learning process. (Does it not play such a role for all of us?)

Sometimes in my quiet monologues I represent Arne as an embodied thinker, as a philosopher with a body, in the sense that although his mind’s work is as good as the best, he never takes it too seriously, so he frequently leaves works unwrapped, unconcluded, and happily jumps into something else because he feels that he has to. Arne has commented about the way he works that, when he starts working on a new subject or issue, it is not at all because he considers the previous one sufficiently clear. He allows his instinct, his desire to guide him. “Living rather than functioning,” I could put it this way, using his own words to explain why he resigned his position as the chair of the philosophy department when he did it.¹⁰ One of my master’s degrees is in philosophy and I remember making fun with my friends of the great, systematic modern philosophers, as we drew them with huge heads and insignificant bodies. We had the feeling that those philosophers had spent most of their lives alone *in* and *with* their minds, working on those super-complex systems, that were then given to us (students of philosophies) to see what we could get out of them. At that time our principal achievements were *large headaches*. Naess doesn’t finish his system, nor does he try to present it like that, nor claim to have done so (and this is also a good source of headaches for his readers). Many of his critics complain about ambiguity and missing final answers. But, as a good skeptic, Naess’s works are not ‘finished’ works because he doesn’t consider that he has the final (and correct) word on anything. George Sessions, quoting Naess, writes that, “for Naess, there should be ‘no definite world view in the future’.”¹¹ He just has to move on to a different project when he feels so, when he *experiences* the urge to go in a new direction. Again, *sva marga*.

Our conversation continued. I was focused on *experiencing* this time with Naess. I told him about the importance that the family has had theoretically and practically in my father's life, and about the strong influence of my parents in mine. I told him that my father has spent years studying families and orienting them, and that for him, the family is like the roots of any well-founded plant. Because of his research and personal influence, I have always related personal strength (both mental and emotional) to the amount of love one perceives in the early period of human life. I was going to continue but Arne moved abruptly in his chair, came closer to me and interrupted me with a question: "Is your father a happy person?"

I was both stunned and delighted by his question. For me, this question is an example of Arne's consistency in balancing theory and practice, a subject so well presented in one of George Sessions' articles.¹² From Arne's skeptical perspective, it doesn't really matter what your theory might be (mine or my father's, in this case). It doesn't matter to him either from which ideology, philosophy, or religion you come when he sets level one in the Apron diagram.¹³ Even more, here, he invites a plurality as broad as possible to join on that level. This *attitude* might all have been grounded on that first work of his youth when he looked for what people, other than philosophers, understood as truth;¹⁴ and, perhaps, it was also reinforced by his study of the concept of democracy in a UNESCO project (which was never published: perhaps because it was too true).¹⁵ Again, it might just be that everything is about feelings, or better, that nothing can be without them. It is about *your* experience (every human act is experience). But feelings should not be identified in Arne's thought with weakness as it could be from some perspectives. They inevitably accompany us: we can't avoid them!

So, Arne doesn't check my father's theory; he is interested in what he might have accomplished in his life: "Is he happy?" It made me think of a Taoist friend of ours who, talking about spiritual paths, says that you must test the veracity of truth claims and go with what works best for you.

"You said that you never felt loved," I continued after the *digression* into my family. "So, if the family grounding didn't work in your case, where would you say that your mental flexibility and your amicability, when dealing with criticisms, come from?" Before Arne had a chance to reply, Mark interjected negative examples from recently read biographies of Newton and Darwin; how their staunch defensiveness of theories, late in life, blinded and weakened them, both intellectually and

emotionally. Arne commented that he has never defended himself. He said that his view when somebody attacks him is to think of it as a preliminary. (I loved this athletic metaphor!) And then, he started talking about freedom. Arne said that he discerned very early in life that freedom was probably the unique gift to humans. “So, why waste your precious freedom with superficialities, when there are so many interesting things on which to spend it?” Arne added that he no longer invests in any project that is not interesting and rewarding for him. He told us that he was once with a woman who said to him: “I want to have two children. And if you oppose me, I’ll leave you.” “I should have left,” Arne said, “because I knew that I had no capacity as a father. But I was not then mature enough for that. In fact, I always spent much more time with my students than with my children.” Kit-Fai was smiling as she mentioned how much Arne had matured over the years. We all smiled and I remembered Fons Elders’ comment comparing Arne’s thought and personality with those of Ayer, saying that Arne’s thought revealed a much stronger coherence than that of Ayer’s, but that Ayer’s character revealed much more maturity than did Naess’s.¹⁶

Mark picked up the cartoon book again. Arne appears in one of the drawings screaming in a classroom while seated in a desk. He explained that he wasn’t screaming. Immediately, he opened his mouth wide and emitted a loud, lasting guttural sound. We were very amused. When he stopped, he told us that he could do that sound for long periods of time, and that he would do it to avoid having to listen in school. He didn’t want to listen! So he would provoke the teachers to correct and punish him by dismissing him from the classroom. Naess considers essential, he told us, a change in education. The minds of the children are constantly being tamed; children are not allowed to experience by themselves... Today’s education doesn’t provide children with enough spontaneous experience, Arne said. Returning to his experience with the mountain, Arne considered his youth fortunate for being fatherless. His mother would always say to him what he *must* do, but then she would never prohibit any activity. So he was able to experience the mountain much earlier than he would have been in normal conditions (if his father would have been in charge, he seemed to imply), and much more intensely.

Suddenly, Arne moved forward toward Mark and asked him: “and, what are you doing?” And as if it were necessary, he explained: “I mean, what do you do in your life?” Mark smiled as he told him about his background, and of his keen interest in epistemology. Arne nodded as he intensely listened to him; after a couple of minutes of conversation on Mark’s interests Arne said: “You look very strong.”

Then he leaned forward and placed his bent arm on the table in front of him, in the typical gesture of one preparing for an arm wrestling match! Kit-Fai scrambled for the camera.

As I looked at the competition between the two of them, so many anecdotes that I have read about Arne's intense physical exercise periods, came to my mind. I especially remembered Warwick Fox saying that *discussions with Naess were always punctuated by periods of physical activity*.¹⁷ And I valued the fact that I had also been able to witness this aspect of his personality in such a brief interview.

Kit-Fai started a conversation that took us back, one more time, to Arne's mountain. She told us about her first experiences going to Arne's hut (his small cabin, named Tvergastein): how frustrating! She used to expect, when they were going to the mountain, that it was planned as an opportunity to spend time together. "But, she said, as soon as Arne would get there, he would go out and I would stay alone most of the time." It took her years to adjust to it and realize that Arne was going to the mountain to be with the mountain, Kit-Fai said. Arne intervened and said: "I was not going out: I was going *in*, into the mountain!" And he smiled while looking at the ceiling. Mark then told him about a conversation that we had with the biologist and Gaia theorist Stephan Harding at Schumacher College in England, a few weeks earlier. Harding described an ecstatic experience cutting wood with Arne on Arne's mountain. It was a deep experience where he suddenly felt completely connected to the mountain, the trees, the cutting and to Arne. It was exhilarating, Harding had said. Arne nodded strongly acknowledging the special, quasi-religious experiences that he has in Nature. But confirmation was enough. He didn't add anything; he just kept intensely looking at us and we felt as if, at the same time, he was again very far away.

One of the books on top of the table was on Gandhi. Arne talked about the profound influence of Gandhi in his life. He said that he learned from Gandhi how to deal with criticisms. He mentioned, for instance, the strong effect that Gandhi's peaceful March of the Salt had had on him. I had read about it in *Life's Philosophy*, so I had a pretty decent idea of the event. I asked Arne if he had ever met Gandhi and he answered, "Yes." Kit-Fai immediately corrected him: "No, you didn't!" Then Arne explained: "Well... you know... I have had, myself, so many conversations with him in my mind... He feels so real to me!" We understood. I knew very well what he meant. This visit was my first experience with Arne Naess in person, but as it went, I also had a

strange feeling of familiarity. My many imaginary conversations with Arne could lead me to the same sentiment!

Kit-Fai, politely, let us know that our time with them was at its end. She needed to feed Arne and attend to other friends' commitments. She invited us to return the following day, but we had to decline because our return flight was scheduled for an early departure. Oslo was just a trip to meet Arne Naess and we had done it. We were very grateful. Arne said good-bye to us with a *powerful* hug, and asked me to give his greetings to Spain. And as our plane flew over the yellow and orange Spanish lands, I sent them all over the place.

In my *luggage* I still have thousands of questions to ask Arne Naess: questions begging for *final answers*. But circumstances with Arne permitted only a small bag: the bag with my personal experiences, my personalized answers. Arne has encouraged me, now personally, to use my *intuition* (a key term in Arne's thought) and to let it work its way through my thoughts, through my life. It really seemed to me like an ambitious and challenging educational goal. I imagined a slogan: "Arne Naess: No more recipes; meals at your own risk." Thank you, Arne!

Notes

¹ For some insights into of Naess's personality and character, you may check Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*, 1st ed. (Totnes, Devon: Resurgence, 1995). pp. 81–91. See also Naess, Arne, Ingemund Gullvåg, and Jon Wetlesen. *In Sceptical Wonder: Inquiries into the Philosophy of Arne Naess on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget; Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Columbia University Press [distributor], 1982. And: Rothenberg, David, and Arne Naess. *Is It Painful to Think?: Conversations with Arne Naess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

² This is my personal translation of the book, which is written in Norwegian. I don't have bibliographical information about it.

³ The program I listened to was on New Dimensions Radio. It was within the series, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, done in the 1990s.

⁴ The deep ecology platform, point eight. There are a few versions of the Platform; see for example, Alan R. Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1995), pp. 49–53.

⁵ Arne Naess, David Rothenberg, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle : Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 1.

⁶ Arne Naess, *Life's Philosophy : Reason & Feeling in a Deeper World* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

⁷ I have never found in Naess's writings anything that could be accused of misanthropic—quite the opposite. Nor I have seen anybody quoting Naess in regard to it. Those accusations have appeared as a general characterization of deep ecology, or as a response to radical comments on the issue of population made by people other than Naess.

⁸ David Rothenberg, "No World But In Things" in Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg, *Beneath the Surface : Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). p. 156

⁹ To the best of my knowledge, the name of this critic was never mentioned in our conversation.

¹⁰ Warwick Fox, op. cit. p.81.

¹¹ George Sessions, "Arne Naess' Conception of Being a Philosopher", *The Trumpeter* (1996).

¹² George Sessions, "The Union of Theory and Practice in Arne Naess", in Alan R. Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement : An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1995), pp. 54-66.

¹³ The Apron Diagram is a graphic representation of the four levels that constitute the deep ecology movement Level one is the ideological and religious level that welcomes the most diverse religious and philosophies. Supporters of the deep ecology movement, people who agree on the eight points of the deep ecology platform, may have their foundations in any ideological system. For more information on the Apron Diagram or the Platform, see: Alan R. Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, op. cit. pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ Arne Naess, *Truth as conceived by those who are not professional philosophers* (Det Norske Vitenskaps Akademi I Oslo, Skrifter II, Hist.-Filos. Klasse, 1938, No.4, Oslo 1938). David Rothenberg has a conversation with Naess on this issue in his book *Is It Painful to Think? : Conversations with Arne Naess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 48-50.

¹⁵ Naess describes this project in detail in his conversation with David Rothenberg in *Is It Painful to Think? : Conversations with Arne Naess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 117-119.

¹⁶ A. J. Ayer, Fons Elders and ed, *Reflexive Water : The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974). p. 276-278.

¹⁷ Warwick Fox, op. cit. p. 83.