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An Exploration of Institution: Its Relationship to the Deep Ecology Movement & Ecosophy

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About the author: *Melissa Nelson* recently completed her studies in global ecology and ecophilosophy at the University of Santa Cruz in California. There she met Arne Naess and travelled with him to the wild areas of Baja. She and her partner Colin Farish have created and perform a multimedia show which conveys the urgent need to change our relationships with Nature so that they will be harmonious ones.

The basic principles of the deep ecology movement have emerged out of an intuitive understanding. They reflect an understanding that looks inward and listens to a perception that says, "We are all of us (living and nonliving beings) from the same source; we have equal intrinsic value, and we are intricately interrelated."

In this essay I will explore intuitive understanding, especially in relation to a set of deep ecology platform principles, so that we can indicate more precisely what we mean by "intuition" and make sure our use of this elusive concept does not lead to self-deception.

What is intuition? What is insight? These terms direct us to look within; 'in'—sight and 'in'—tuition refer to an inward understanding. What can we have an "inward" understanding of? To have only one particular thing in mind is to be fragmented. We need an understanding of the whole inward process. That is, it must comprise (bring together) thought, feeling, dreams, desires, fears, memories, motivations, etc. and how they affect our bodies and our actions in our daily lives.

Arne Naess' articulation of his Ecosophy T as the basis for his support of the deep ecology movement was partly inspired by his interest in Spinoza's philosophy. For Spinoza, the highest knowledge, is direct, intuitive understanding. Within this intuitive process, "the subject/object distinction disappears, actually, one goes beyond all conceptual knowledge" (Sessions, 239) and, "experiences the union that the mind has with the whole of nature" (Naess quoting Spinoza). According to Naess, this union happens through intuition of singular beings (personal communication, Spring 1991). "Only at this level is there understanding; all lesser forms of 'knowing' consists of increasingly inadequate ideas based on the imagination" (Sessions, 239).

Intuitive understanding removes the dualism between the subject and object, or the observer and the observed. That dualism asserts itself through our mental conditionings; these conditionings (fear, desire, anger, greed, pleasure, etc.) construct the illusory self. Such conditionings, if ignored, can result in feeling isolated from the rest of the world. Dominated by our ego, we may feel that "no one understands me" or "I'm the only one to whom this happens," when in fact, our deep cultural conditionings guarantee that practically *everyone* experiences these same human problems. This sense of separation creates many conflicts in our fragmented lives (contradictory feelings, competition, guilt, etc.). And these divisive, self-enclosing activities are reflected socially as exploitation of the earth, racism, sexism, classism, and other destructive manifestations of separatism,

generally, and of anthropocentrism in particular.

There is a risk in discussing intuition in this intellectual manner because "thought can very quickly get caught in self-deception" (David Bohm, 105). As we reveal some of intuition's main characteristics, we can easily end up with knowledge that is not based on an intuitive understanding *at all*. So, in Spinoza's view, our attempts to go deeper have left us shallower than ever.

Knowledge, in its most general sense, is the information one has acquired through time and is stored in memory, much like knowledge stored in books. But our minds are not as orderly as libraries. We have selective memory that exaggerates some points and entirely negates others. Memory is a pool of conditioned reactions that functions like reflexes and imposes the past onto the present. The ego finds security in the past (the known), which *is* knowledge. Knowledge as the past cannot exist simultaneously with the unknown newness of the present. Obviously, knowledge enriches our lives; but it impedes intuition.

Arne Naess' term "Self-realization" refers to the realization of a deepened, expansive, holistic self that can identify intuitively with the beings we inhabit this planet with. Naess emphasizes identification with others, regardless of their narrow "usefulness," because he feels that "to identify only with one's striving ego is shallow and unsatisfying, and so is identifying with certain humans or certain organizations" (pers. comm., Spring 1991). This philosophical approach is Western in the sense that it values some positive aspect of the self—the expanded Self. But Naess is adamant about distinguishing this expanded Self (with a capital 'S') from the ego-driven selfishness of the traditional Western self. The Eastern approach to this concept of ultimate unity emphasizes the negative aspect: when the self is not, all is, yet that all paradoxically exists as the unlimited potential of the void or emptiness (*sunyata*).

Exploring the nature of the self is stimulating, but it *can* lead to just more theories that perpetuate an outward looking intellect rather than an inward looking consciousness. Self-deception is insidious, as Naess points out, because even "all this talk about inwardness and consciousness may lead to new kinds of anthropocentrism."

Witnessing natural processes can reveal the underlying unity of matter. We see clouds turn into rain, rain into rivers which flow into the sea, from which water eventually forms clouds again. Many quantum physicists assert that there is a sea of emptiness that gives rise to a thinly woven matrix of subatomic/wave-like particles that is the foundation of all that exists. In time, a single carbon atom can journey through trees, squirrels, soils, and streams. These physical cycles show us that there really isn't any static, isolated entity—we all participate in this immense pool of matter. The physical world shows us that we are, at root, one. But is there an equally, if not more important, relationship amongst subtle layers of consciousness? Is it possible that this more subtle layer may be related to the same source of matter? Is it possible that consciousness is joined interactively the way matter is? The implications of this possibility are great because, if it is so, we not only participate in the forming of the physical world but also in its "ecology of consciousness." The responsibility we have as conscious beings is, in this case, awesome. After all, it implies that we wage war and torture simply by default.

Only intuitive insight can reveal to us the deeper layers of our being, which is consciousness itself, and infinite depths beyond that. Supporters of the deep ecology movement who are seriously interested in discovering nature's depths will not only listen to their intuitions about the interconnectedness and intrinsic worth of nature's forms, but also to the interrelatedness and intrinsic worth of consciousness itself.

Matter and consciousness may emerge out of the same source. The relationship between mind and matter poses ancient questions, which have led to many theories. The theoretical physicist David Bohm has proposed that consciousness and matter may actually be the

same substance in different energy states—one more subtle, the other more tangible to the senses: consciousness may be in an implicate or invisible state and matter may be in its manifested, explicate state (Weber, 25).

The five senses can perceive matter; the content of our consciousness (images, hopes, worries, etc.) can be partially perceived by thought. But that content includes the illusory self that conditioned thought has created! Thought *creates* situations and then says it's only *observing* them (David Bohm, pers. comm., Fall 1990). To say, "I'm looking at my thoughts," is misleading, because there is no separate entity objectively doing the observing. There is an awareness, an acknowledgement, an action, but it does not arise out of a mental decision by the self. It's more of a visual acknowledgement. It is proprioceptive, a self-awareness devoid of ego. To say "I objectively observed a deer" is also inaccurate. We constantly participate in many interacting energy fields. The deer might not see me, but she might smell me and she might respond by moving in a particular direction. I might not even have spotted the deer, had it not been for a fly that landed on my leg and distracted me from my reading! Many factors interact in sequence and simultaneously to evoke different responses and perceptions.

Intuition and insight seem subtle enough to perceive consciousness itself. When we feel the natural flow of intuition we sense matter and consciousness in an undivided movement. When we deeply see that we have created the illusion of a separate psychological self, and that this "self," this thought-constructed ego, wants to capture things that are beyond it (such as insight, truth, love), we naturally become alert and more coherent and can let intuition and other subtle energies come through our minds and act. Now there is no separate "subject" trying to act upon an "object"; there is just one unitary phenomenon. It is this type of communion with other creatures and with natural processes and cycles themselves that has inspired many supporters of the deep ecology movement.

John Muir, for example, felt intuitively that there is a unity in nature; "...the whole wilderness is unity and interrelation..." (Sessions & Devall, 110). Muir felt this communion in his encounters with the Sierra mountains. Muir's attempts to communicate this insight to others went through many changes until he finally realized that "true wilderness is pathless." He may have discovered that intuitive participation with nature is always new and whole and cannot be recreated for another; thus, there's no particular "path." "There are paths that can be followed, and there is a path that cannot—it is not a path, it is the wilderness" (Snyder, 157). One must experience this "pathlessness" to understand the deep lessons of the wilderness. On the more subtle level of consciousness, too, we have no map or path. We alone are responsible for exploring (through insight) the deeper levels of being. J. Krishnamurti stated this well in a 1929 speech when he abdicated his role as the world teacher Maitreya:

"Truth is a pathless land."

His concern was to educate people to the living, spontaneous quality of truth, but truth's dynamic nature means that there can't be a static path to it. "The actuality of things cannot be confined within so linear an image as a road or path" (Snyder, 150).

If we are to live "as if nature mattered," then we must be aware of all the subtleties and complexities of the mind and of matter and of their relationship to one another. We must be wary of thought lest we deceive ourselves by interpreting acquired knowledge or hidden desires as intuitive understanding. There is no authority to turn to on these matters; we are on our own in them. As Robinson Jeffers austere puts it, "the cold passion for truth hunts in no pack" (66).

Deep ecology movement writers address some of these vital issues, but have not discussed intuition at length, or explicitly examined in detail the relationship between nature's forms and consciousness. Naess' deep ecological total view "is predicated upon

the idea of asking progressively deeper questions about the ecological relationships of which we are a part" (Fox, 92). The depths of life are infinite and we must continue to question and look still deeper into the nature of nature, which encompasses far more than is revealed by just "thinking" about our relationship to the manifest world.

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