

ARNE NAESS

# My Relationship with Arne Naess

BY BILL DEVALL

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Arne Naess was my teacher, in the Buddhist meaning of that term. He guided me.

I discovered Arne Naess while cruising through academic journals in the library of Humboldt State University, Arcata, California in 1975. I participated in Earth Day, 1970, but as I became more deeply involved in conservation activism during the early 1970s, I was more and more dissatisfied with the utilitarian philosophical writings underlying conservation activism. I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, but I wanted more. I found what I was looking for in an essay by Naess in an interdisciplinary academic journal that Naess founded in Norway: *Inquiry*. Naess's essay was based on a talk he gave at an international conference held in Bucharest in 1972. In the essay, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," Naess

contrasted the shallow ecology movement which is concerned with pollution and resource depletion and the deep ecology movement which is concerned with diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness.

I began to correspond with Naess at the University of Oslo. Naess responded to my typed letters with handwritten notes written on small pieces of paper. In later years I would send him e-mails, and his wife, Kit-Fai, would respond to me via e-mail. During the years that Alan Drengson and I were editing *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, especially *Volume X, Deep Ecology of Wisdom*, we had extensive email exchanges. We discussed explorations on the unities of nature and cultures based on revising various versions of Naess's essays as his ideas evolved based on his continuing reflections on various topics. We met face to face in Aus-

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tralia when we attended conferences on environmental philosophy and political activism.

Naess became my teacher. When I told him I was depressed because the green movement was always on the defensive, never achieving significant political victories, he reminded me that all great social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, have many years of defeat before significant victories. When I complained about the complexity of living in industrialized societies, he gave me the koan “simple in means, rich in ends.”

I enjoyed listening to Naess talk in person. His quiet voice and his ability to reflect on his own experiences provided insights upon which I reflected. One time when Naess and I were traveling on an overnight train in Australia going from one academic conference to another, I asked him about his life in Norway during the Nazi occupation of World War II. Hitler kept about 500,000 troops in Norway throughout the war because he thought the allies would invade Europe through Norway. Naess said he wanted to be part of the Resistance, but friends convinced him to remain on the faculty of the University of Oslo. He was in close contact with members of the Resistance, and he said that a few times, arms passed through his office at the university. The Resistance in Norway provided the allies with information on troop movements and other German activities in Norway.

After the war ended, Naess was asked to lead a group of Norwegians who were given the task of bringing together Norwegians who had been tortured during the war with Norwegians who had tortured them. The goal was to bring about reconciliation. Naess was very interested in nonviolent direct action and espe-

cially in Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence in the progress of society.

From the early 1970s through the 1990s Naess constantly sought to develop and clarify the bases of the deep ecology movement. While camping together with philosopher George Sessions in the California desert, he wrote a “platform” for the deep ecology movement. Naess suggested that many people coming from different religious and philosophical traditions could generally agree with the statements in the “platform,” and when they realized their common agreements they could work together for social change.

Naess asserted that he was not a philosopher, but he lived philosophy. He acted in the world and reflected on his actions in the world and actions of other people and nature. He demonstrated his approach through his actions at Tvergastein in the mountains of southern Norway. He wrote about his long relationship with the mountain in his essay “An Example of a Place: Tvergastein.” He describes his intimate relationship with plants, animals, snow, and the simplicity of writing inside the hut he built on the mountain. He used minimal amounts of wood to stay warm. He developed his own ecosophy while living in the hut over the course of many years. He called his philosophy *Ecosophy T* after the name of the place that became his Place. He travelled the world encouraging other people to develop their own ecosophies because diversity and deep questioning were major aspects of his teaching. He knew that thinking is difficult.

I was deeply involved in activism concerning the protection of old growth forests in the Northwest region of the United States, and I was constantly helping

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Bill Devall (1938–2009) was trained as a sociologist. He was also a practicing Buddhist who linked Buddhist principles and practices to environmental thought and practices. Inspired by the early work of Arne Naess and the poetry of Gary Snyder, Devall co-wrote the book *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (1985) with George Sessions that became a classic text of deep ecology. Devall devoted his life to protecting nature in the classroom and in the socio-political realm. He was a founding member of the North Coast Environmental Center in Arcata, California and was locally active to protect the beaches, forests, and natural species of northern California. Devall’s books *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (1988) and *Living Richly in an Age of Limits* (1993) were further elaborations on the philosophy and practices of deep ecology. With Alan Drengson, he co-edited *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess* (2008).

activists ask deeper questions about Place and protection of Place based on nonviolent principles. Naess encouraged me to develop my own ecosophy. Working with the koan he had given me, I developed an expression of my ecosophy in my book *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (1988).

Naess continued his talks and travels through the 1990s. He said he was an optimist for the 22nd century. He was especially interested in talking with young people, encouraging them to move beyond shallow environmentalism to ask deeper philosophical questions. Many college students he met were particularly depressed about climate change and the failure of national lead-

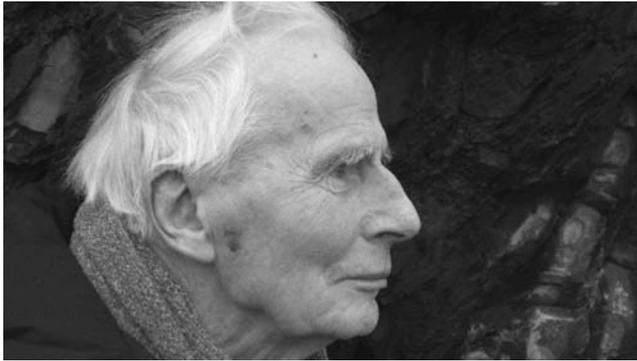


PHOTO: PETTER MEJLÆNDER

ers. Naess encouraged young people to become leaders in the peace, social justice, and green movements of the 21st century. He said that all people have the “intuition of deep ecology,” and spending time outdoors helps to bring forth what Rachel Carson called a “sense of wonder” that sustains and enriches our lives.

Many of the central ideas he developed as an environmental philosopher are included in the anthology of his writings, *Ecology of Wisdom*, edited by Alan Drengson and myself (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008).

Naess encouraged dialogue and wide experience. When Alan Drengson and I worked on *The Selected Works of Arne Naess, Volume X* (Springer 2005) I had the opportunity to reread many of his writings and to ask him questions to clarify my understanding. Naess continued to rethink and rewrite essays based on his dialog with other people and his wide experiences.

In my estimation, Naess was one of the great philosophers of the 20th century, and in a Buddhist sense he was an amazing teacher. He was my teacher, and each time I reread one of his essays I again rethink my own ecosophy and political activism.



Walking down the mountain from Tvergastein.

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