

ARNE NAESS

Earth Family

An Interview with Vandana Shiva on Arne Naess

BY JAN VAN BOECKEL

VANDANA SHIVA: I think I first met Arne in Norway. For five years I have been a visiting professor at the Centre for Development and Environment, at the same university where Arne is now, after he resigned his professorship of philosophy. He is now affiliated to this environmental center at the university. But intellectually and philosophically, of course I met Arne earlier through his writings. I've read him and been very inspired by his writings. We've shared a lot, because he feels extremely close to India, to Gandhi's thought. Particularly to the political philosophy of the idea of direct action as the highest level of democratic assertion by people. Over the years we constantly interacted, both personally and philosophically.

I remember a particular evening Arne had invited me and my son for a dinner. This was very soon after he

had broken his back, while sliding down from his mountain hut, and yet Arne could not be made to sit still. He was always jumping around, entertaining my little boy, who was at that time about ten, eleven years old.

What has always impressed me very deeply about Arne is the combination of innocence with extreme brilliance of the mind. Usually you get intelligent people becoming partly arrogant, partly self-centered. They just lose the spirit of freedom in themselves, as a person. Arne has always maintained it. He is *so* child-like in his enjoyment of *every* moment of life!

One can't at all see that Arne carries the burden of a background of wealth. Just like he doesn't carry the burden of intelligence. He has shed that totally. He has adopted simplicity as a way of life. I once went to his

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PHOTO ABOVE: JØRN MOEN

place and he was going to serve something cold, but he didn't go to the fridge. He just keeps all his drinks out in the snow, in the ice; that's his refrigerator. Another time I didn't have the time to go up to his house to see him and he offered to come down. Arne at his age, offered to come down! And he uses the public transport. He came down by the subway, and then I walked him back to the train. To him this wasn't inconvenient.

The environmental movement has been absorbed into becoming a cosmetic term. I believe the deep ecology conceptualization that Arne has brought into the environmental movement is really to save it from being dissipated through co-option, from being dissipated through shallowness, to remind it of its deep philosophical roots.

In my view the most significant part of deep ecology is to place human beings within the context of a family of other species, an Earth family. And then, to wind down our demands on the ecosphere, recognizing that we are just one among many species. It is a perversion to assume that the only species with rights on this planet is the human. All life has rights to survival, including the plants around us and even the atoms in the soil. Now the very simple idea of being part of an Earth family changes everything. For example, you can't assume any more that a chemical technology that totally wipes out the life in the soil is a smart technology. Our ideas of science and of technology start to undergo a major shift. That is the grounding of deep ecology. It is not a new idea. It is the basis on which sustainable civilizations have evolved.

Indian civilization rests on the idea that we are all an Earth family. We have a saying in one of our ancient Upanishads that "Every part of creation has a right to live to its full potential." And: "No one species has the

right to encroach on the ecological space of other species." Now these sound as very modern concepts, but they are there, in our writings of 5,000 years ago.

These underpinnings of deep ecology are very simple and yet an extremely far reaching idea. That's precisely what is meant by intrinsic value. A cow is valuable not just because it produces milk for us. Its value cannot be determined purely in terms of its function. Similarly trees, rivers and all the elements of nature have intrinsic value. And that value is a reflection of their own self-organizing capacity.

Rural India inspires me constantly. It is an India where there is such a generosity of space and of spirit. This generosity shrinks when we define other species as being of value according to how they meet human needs. Which puts only two options for our relationships with other species. One is dispensability. If they are not useful, push them to extinction. And if we do not understand that a whole ecological chain is maintained by this one species, then we declare a death sentence for it. But in fact in our shortsightedness we are declaring a death sentence for our own conditions for life. The second option is: even those species that are found of value, we manipulate, distort and mutilate them. And then, it is not a surprise that we get the Mad Cow Disease and other epidemics. These are consequences of our treating life as if it has no intrinsic worth, no intrinsic organization and no intrinsic intelligence.

It's quite fascinating that the period we are going through right now, a period of economic globalization, has been projected as opening up societies. The phrase always used is: opening up India, opening up the markets, opening up whatever. However, this so-called opening

Dr. Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist and anti-globalization author. Shiva, currently based in Delhi, has authored more than twenty books. Trained as a physicist, she later shifted to inter-disciplinary research in science, technology and environmental policy. Dr. Shiva has contributed in fundamental ways to changing the practice and paradigms of agriculture and food. She has argued for the wisdom of many traditional practices. Vandana Shiva is active in the global solidarity movement known as the alter-globalization movement. She received the Right Livelihood Award in 1993, and numerous other prizes. 30 years ago Dr. Shiva started the Biodiversity Conservation and Seed Saving movement "Navdanya" which through its science and practice has shown that humanity prospers when we align our lives with nature. In 2016 she received the Biodiversity conservation prize for Biodiversity from the Convention on Biodiversity.

up is actually a closing down. Because it's based on reducing human beings to consuming today in the here and now, which means fulfillment is equated with consumerism. Consumerism in this moment, without thought of the future, without thought of other species, without thought of other people is defined as human liberation.

The real opening up, in my view, comes from enlarging the capacity of the self. And that comes from self-realization, it comes from going inwards to be able to go outwards. By going inwards, by recognizing what you are and who you are, you can have a responsible relationship with the world, with nature, with others of the human family and others in the Earth family. If you just go outwards without going inwards, all you get is aggression, violence, domination, injustice and inequality. Because there is no anchor, there's no bearing, there's no way of figuring out what the consequences are of what you do. Self-realization is the first step towards compassion. It's a precondition for non-violent living.

Arne's work has been deeply inspired by Gandhi, both in his philosophy as well as in his action. As far as the action is concerned, it's clearly Gandhi's concept of *satyāgraha*, of non-violent non-cooperation and direct action, that has made Arne such a pioneer.

The first time I heard about Arne was in relationship to this dam that was being built up in northern Norway. Where he had chained himself or sat at the bottom of the dam site and done direct action to block the dam. This action was very directly inspired by Gandhi.

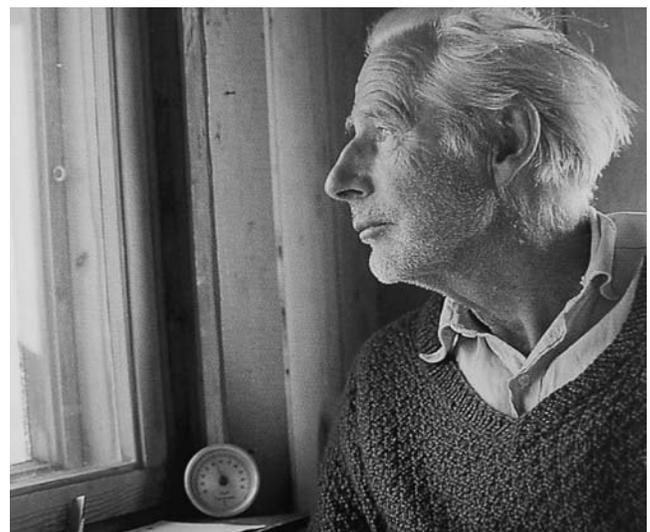
His philosophy of deep ecology is rooted in the concept of the wider self, as inclusive of the other. The dominant categories of thinking, particularly as they've gone out from Europe in the last few hundred years, have constructed the self as separate from the other, which includes nature, which includes other species, which includes other human beings. And not just separate, but engaged in an antagonistic relationship. The self and the other are always at war.

The violent relationship of people with nature is another expression of the externalizing of the other and putting the other in an oppositional perspective. That narrow

sense of self basically creates the imperative that the expansion of the self means annihilation of the other. Therefore we get more environmental destruction, more intolerance of diversity, and more rise of fundamentalism, racism, and xenophobia. These are all part of a certain construction of the self. The wider sense of self includes the other. "I" and the "other" together make the self. "One" cannot exist without the "other". All and everything exists in this eternal relationship. There is a beautiful phrase in Indian philosophy, which says: "I am thou."

There is no separation. That is also what Mahatma Gandhi communicated. He said: "If you are in doubt about whether you are doing the right thing or the wrong thing, just bring to your mind the face of the least privileged person you know, the most marginalized individual you have ever come across. Judge the consequences of your actions according to what it will do to him or her. If your action will hurt that person, then don't take that step. And if your action is going to benefit the least privileged person, then, yes, do that action." That is a way of including the other in the self. That's also at the root of deep ecology. In deep ecology, the least privileged is the most threatened and should be defended.

Very often Gandhi's discussions would focus on the human context. But behind it was always a very deep ecological concept. I believe Gandhi was a deep ecologist.



Arne looking out of his window at Tvergastein. PHOTO: JOHAN BRUN

The only place where you have had really deep conservation, is where the conservation is so much part of your own life, so much part of your self-preservation. Not a preservation out of fear, arising from a narrow self, threatened by losing out to something else, but coming out of the generosity and compassion of the embrace, that includes all others.

The Chipko movement, which really has been my inspiration for joining the environmental movement, for dedicating my life to the protection of nature, was triggered by severe logging in the Himalaya. This logging resulted in landslides, in rivers and streams drying up, in scarcity of water and fuel wood. The women of the villages came out in hundreds and thousands and started to embrace the trees, which is where the word 'Chipko' comes from, it means: to embrace. They said: "You'll have to kill us, before you kill the tree, because the trees are our life." In the Chipko movement the forest was being protected as part of the sense of self of the rural communities of the Himalaya. Not as something separate from your life, but as part of your life.

In my own valley, where we stopped strip mining, the women of the villages embraced the mountain and said: "These mountains are our mothers. They give us water, they give us life, we will not allow them to be mined."

Poverty is the creation of a worldview that has pitted people against nature. That worldview has defined scarcity as the condition of nature, and has then tried to create technologies that are supposed to compensate for the scarcity. But the reality is that these technologies actually create scarcity because they destroy the environment, they destroy ecosystems, and they actually leave people poorer.

I work with the poorest communities in India, and most of the time the solution to their poverty is an ecological solution. The solution to the survival of the small farmer of India today is the enrichment of the farming system with biodiversity. It is being able to use native seeds for which you don't have to buy chemical pesticides and herbicides. Industrial agriculture is pushing thousands of farmers to suicide in India as they get deep into debt to buy chemicals and drill tube wells.

The deep ecology solution to human poverty, debt and suicide is being able to use seeds which don't need irrigation, so that you don't have to wait until you have enough rupees in your pocket to be able to drill a tube through which you can pump ground water out. Deep ecological solutions are the only viable solutions to ensuring that every person on this planet has enough food, has enough water, has adequate shelter, has dignity. The only real solution to poverty is to embrace the right to life of all on this planet, all humans and all species.

The problem of Western civilization has been a very mechanistic thinking about the world, about nature, about how societies organize themselves. In my view, deep ecology should mean that you go out of that kind of mechanistic thinking, in which you measure the state of the environment purely in terms of numbers of human beings.

Modern science has made it look like the only way to know reality is through reductionism, through taking apart, chopping up, analyzing, shredding the parts that cannot be measured, treating only the measurable parts as real. The moment you chop reality up, the relations disappear. And the most important element of the reality, the relationship, is no more there. You cannot ever measure relations. You can only measure objects, between which relations occur.

The ability, to perceive directly, to know through direct connection, has also been called intuition. But it is more than intuition. It is another way of knowing. It is a way of knowing in which your relationship, your connection with other species, with the plant, with the soil, with a cow, with a sheep, is so intimate, so deep, that there is instant communication. The ecosystem speaks to you as a whole, it is a pattern that could never be communicated through dissection. But it is the soundest base of knowing the world. This is what Arne refers to, when he's talking of pattern recognition through direct perception. In India, philosophy has not been seen as a process of analyzing. Philosophy is called *darshan*, which means: to see. And I think this is what Arne is referring to, when he talks about Gestalt thinking, of being able to see directly in the whole.