



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

The worst thing you can do to people is to take away their opportunity for complexity.

—Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng

Biography of Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng

Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng was born in 1934 in Trondheim, but grew up in Lom. The family's house was close to the river Bøvra, and it is here that his love for rivers and waterfalls was built. He spent the summers at the farm Sætereng with his uncles and grandmother. As a boy he often wandered around in the Jotunheimen Mountains together with his father, and he developed an almost religious fascination with its magnificent scenery. His interest in music was also developed in his childhood under his father's supervision.

After he graduated in 1955, he was educated and worked as an air mechanic at the Norwegian Air Force and he served as a sergeant and air mechanic at Gardermoen airport. He used his leisure time reading Sartre, Kafka and Lao Tze—his interest in philosophy was developing.

In 1958, he began his philosophical studies at the University of Oslo. Kvaløy Setreng was strongly in-

spired by the work of Peter Wessel Zapffe, Arne Naess and others. Under the supervision of Naess, he obtained his master's degree in philosophy in 1966, with a thesis entitled *Musikk-kritikk og kommunikasjon* ("Reflections on music and communication"). His subsidiary subjects were mathematical logic and political science. Music—especially jazz—remained an important element throughout his life. Besides being a student, he lectured in logic and history of philosophy both at the University of Oslo and in several cities along the Norwegian west coast. Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng was also a highly skilled draftsman and he has illustrated several books.

The young Norwegian philosopher did not want to limit himself to the study of Western philosophy and its specific ways of reasoning. As time went by, he became more and more committed to nature and environmental protection. He felt that much of the thinking of contem-

porary philosophers remained too close to the prevailing world views that reigned in the industrial growth society.

In 1967, Kvaløy Setreng moved to New York. He had received a five-year PhD scholarship in philosophy. The meeting with the metropolis turned out to change his philosophical direction entirely. For Sigmund, this manmade symbol of human greatness and progress felt like an encounter with something genuinely hostile to humans. He was especially concerned about raising his children in these harsh urban surroundings, which would be in huge contrast to his own childhood and upbringing in rural Norway.

He decided to return back to his home country, where he became a researcher for four years at the Department of Zoology at the University of Oslo. Here he continued to develop and further deepen his environmental thinking. His cooperation with biologist Ivar Myrnes, amongst others, contributed to adding a more ecological perspective to the environmental debate. Kvaløy Setreng initiated the formation of the *Ecophilosophy Group*. The group took its point of departure in an identification with all life and in seeking justice “not only for humans, but also for animals, plants and minerals.” Gradually, an inner circle of devoted environmentally concerned ecologists had formed, of which also Arne Naess was a part. Kvaløy Setreng effectively became the key person in this new Ecophilosophy Group.

He gradually came to the realization that it was necessary to develop a practical form of eco-politics—different from pseudo-environmentalism—as a natural consequence of the ecophilosophy he was developing. He was influenced both by Peter Wessel Zapffe’s concept of *biosofi* (“biosophy”), the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead and the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whom he called Europe’s first ecophilosopher. At the request of Naess, Kvaløy Setreng organized a “Nature and humans” seminar, mainly for students in philosophy. Concerned about industrialism’s impact on the environment, the socially engaged group took a unique and radical position in the socio-political landscape of Norway. “What we stand for may seem

archconservative and at the same time extremely radical,” Kvaløy Setreng stated. “We will therefore strike in both directions, and we will be attacked from all sides.”

The necessity to not only philosophize, but also go into action was the impetus to start, in 1969, the *Samarbeidsgruppene for natur- og miljøvern* (“the Cooperating groups for nature and environmental conservation”), abbreviated as “(snm)” —between round brackets, in which Kvaløy Setreng became a key player. (snm)’s policies were built on nonviolence principles, influenced by Gandhi’s thinking. The group was specifically eager to protect rivers from hydro-development, and in 1970 (snm) decided to take action to seek to protect the endangered Mardøla River. Its waterfall ranked fourth among the world’s highest waterfalls. In the summer of 1970 the name Mardøla came on the front page of many Norwegian newspapers. A camp was set up in front of the construction road, and the non-violent action lasted for several weeks. In August, a demonstration evolved into a dramatic civil disobedience sit-in with more than 150 protesters blocking the construction site. In the end the demonstrators left voluntarily or, as in the case of Kvaløy Setreng and Naess, were carried away by the police. Even though Mardalsfossen, the waterfall in the river, was regulated, the debate on the conservation of river systems glared up because of this action.

In the spring of 1969, Kvaløy Setreng travelled together with Johan Galtung and Arne Naess by car for nearly three weeks from Oslo to the Gandhi Institute and peace conference in Varanasi, India. From that time onwards, Kvaløy Setreng has travelled regularly to India, Nepal and Bhutan to conduct research and to carry out activities in development cooperation. During a four-month stay in Rolwaling, Nepal, he became an adopted member of three different Sherpa clans and received the name *Tsering Dorjee*.

From the early 1970s, Kvaløy Setreng was strongly engaged in the fight against Norway joining the European Union. He was a member of the board of the organization “No to EU,” both at national level and in his own region. In 1973, he wrote the book

Økokrise, natur og menneske: En innføring i økofilosofi og økopolitikk (“Ecocrisis, Nature and Humans: An Introduction to Ecophilosophy and Ecopolitics”).

From his boyhood onwards, Kvaløy Setreng had been an avid mountain hiker, and in the course of his life he became an accomplished mountaineer, like his teacher and close friend Arne Naess. When it came to mountain climbing in the Himalayas, he had a different approach than the one which prevailed in most climbing circles. In 1971, together with climbing friends he went to these massifs—on a “pilgrimage” rather than a “conquest,” as they called it—to study the Sherpa society in the Rolwal-ing valley of Nepal, near the sacred mountain Tseringma. Kvaløy Setreng became so fascinated by Sherpa thinking that this became a major impetus for him to become a Buddhist. Later on in his life he would engage himself in actions to prevent the valley from being damaged by mass tourism and the encroaching industrial society.



Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng in Tibet.

PHOTO: RESURGENCE MAGAZINE/THE ECOLOGIST

In 1974, Kvaløy Setreng sailed from Norway to Iceland, as part of an expedition with two traditional Norwegian open sailing boats, in support of the Icelanders’ claim to have their 2000 kilometer fishing boundary internationally recognized. After the trip, Kvaløy Setreng was a teacher for two years at Agder Folk High school. Subsequently he became a scholar in environmental studies at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design from 1976 to 1980.

In late 1970s Kvaløy Setreng participated in new and bitter struggles to protect wild rivers. The campaign to stop the Alta River (in the very north of Norway) from being dammed became most known, also internationally. In 1981 the police crashed down on the non-violent campaigners and soon after the hydroelectric development could take place without further hindrance.

In the same year, Sigmund took over the family farm called *Sætereng* and he also moved there. His work still encompassed travel to several countries, working on numerous projects. For many years he lectured on ecophilosophy at the University of Karlstad in Sweden and often communicated his thoughts and ideas at international meetings and conferences.

In Kvaløy Setreng’s ecophilosophy there is a major Buddhist influence. This type of thinking is not easily transferable to non-oriental ways of understanding. This communication failure between the continents was a theme that drew much of Kvaløy Setreng’s interest. He was offered the position of professor both at the University of Oslo and the University of Tromsø, but he rejected it. He wished to run the farm *Sætereng* and continue his academic activity as much as possible with the farm as his basis.

In his thinking, the two opposing concepts of “complexity” and “complication” are of key importance. Life always takes its own course, it never repeats itself and is always complex. Machines, by contrast, are complicated, problematic—yet they are never anything other than what they were before. Nature is complex; it is qualitatively diverse and is a stream of events that never repeats itself. It is fundamentally different from any machine

structure, because machines are man-made. A basic characteristic of machines is that *we* can start and control them, and it is precisely that element of the world that we have control of. We may think that we can regulate nature in a similar fashion, but it would be better to take its endless changeability into account.

In more recent years Kvaløy Setreng would emphasize that, in the long run, only the *livsnødvendighetsamfunnet* (“life necessities society”) would be viable—that is, a society characterized by solidarity, autonomous small communities and the production of only the necessities of life. The opposite would be the competitive industrial society that we now have, characterized by individual competition and steady economic and industrial growth. Kvaløy Setreng presented many of his thoughts in his 1976 book *Økokrise, natur og menneske* (“Ecocrisis, Nature and Humans”). In numerous lectures and publications he warned strongly against the ecological havoc he believed would be brought about through unlimited free trade.

In 1976 an international network of politicians and researchers established the European Network for Ecological Reflection and Action (ECOROPA) in Geneva of which Kvaløy Setreng was an active member from the start. Ecoropa has closely monitored European environmental policies and legislations, the Rio-Process on Sustainable Development, and also issues such as climate

change, forests, agriculture, new technologies and the environmental and social impacts of trade agreements.

In 1994, the year that the majority of people of Norway voted to stay out of the EU, Kvaløy Setreng published the booklet *Naturens nei—Om EU, frihandel og økologisk kaos* (“Nature’s No: About the European Union, Free Trade and Ecological Chaos”). More than two decades later, this small booklet is still relevant.

During the first decade of the 2000s, Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng was strongly engaged in the public debate on climate and environment, while he also conducted research on subjects such as the nature of musical improvisation at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Kvaløy Setreng constantly tried to develop his ecophilosophy further, while he simultaneously kept working on the farm. In 2001 he published the book *Mangfold og tid* (“Diversity and Time”). Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng died on May 27, 2014, 79 years of age, after a prolonged illness.



Sigmund and Kirsten Kvaløy Setreng.

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Peter Wessel Zapffe and the Mountains

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