



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

Let the Rivers Flow

An interview of Sigmund Kvaløy BY SATISH KUMAR

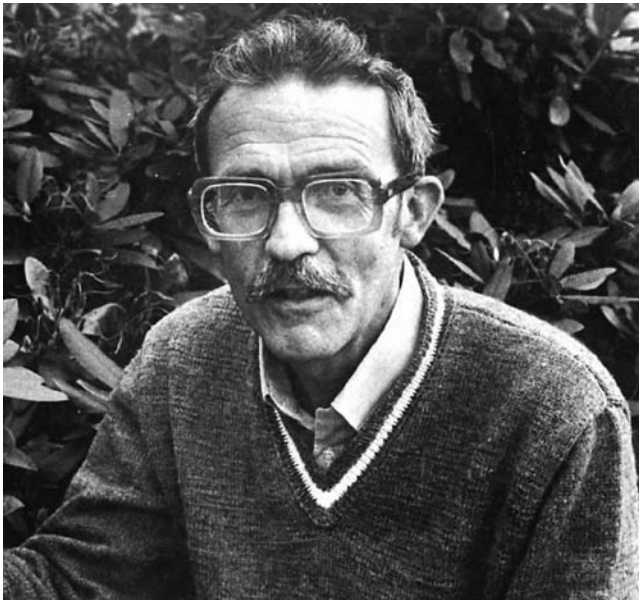
SATISH KUMAR: Every activist has a story of his or her involvement in action. You are an eco-activist and an ecophilosopher. How did the ecophilosophy movement in Norway originate?

SIGMUND KVALØY: The origin of it goes back quite a few years. We were a group of Nature lovers and mountain climbers who used to have meetings at the Norwegian Mountaineering School. We started discussing what was happening to our environment and to our rural and small town communities, i.e. to Norway. First and foremost there are fantastic pressures on our rivers—the vital nerves of almost all Norwegian localities. Norway is a mountain and river country, almost more than any other country in the world. But these rivers have been taken away one after the other. It was impossible to stop it through parliamentary means because most politicians

are committed to the total industrialization of our country. For a number of years little Norway had been the biggest producer of aluminum in Europe and per head of population we have more electric power than any other country. Since 1966 almost twice as much as the No. 2 in the world statistics, which is Canada. And we have kept this position for all these years. And yet our politicians kept crying—they still do—that if we don't use more rivers we will have a power crisis next year: by which they mean that we will not have the possibility of expanding into new aluminum industry, new artificial fertilizer industry, new wood pulp industry and new metal processing industry. You see, the Norwegian economy is totally based on power consuming export industry and because of that it is extremely vulnerable. We are completely dependent on the world market. Against this background in 1965, 1966 we started our discussions seriously.

How did you personally get involved?

After I finished my graduate work in philosophy—producing a dissertation on communication theory and electronic music—I was given a scholarship to go to New York to study at Columbia University—something far removed from our troubled world: the aesthetics of computer music!—I had a wife and two small daughters at home and we were expecting our third child. My wife luckily enough stayed behind, because she wanted to have the child in Norway. So I went to New York in the autumn. My family was planning to follow me at Christmas time. I spent a few weeks in New York trying to find out if it would be possible to stay and raise children there. I had to sign a contract to stay there to study at least 5 years in order to keep the



Sigmund Kvaløy, 1983. PHOTO: RESURGENCE

scholarship. And 5 years is a decisive part of a young child's life. I had been to New York several times before as a tourist and I had enjoyed it;—among other things, I am a jazz lover! This time I discovered an entirely different city environment—that of the ordinary low-income New Yorker. I went everywhere to look for a place where we could live on a modest scholarship. Either the places were beyond my reach or they were slum-like, offering the bottom of human and environmental degradation. After only a few weeks I reached the decision that it would be immoral to bring small children to the heart of Manhattan to raise them there. And in my situation I couldn't see how I could contribute anything toward the betterment of the New York environment. It was a very hard decision but I gave back the scholarship and I went back home, deeply disturbed by what I had seen. I thought, how can I use this experience? The answer was to go in earnest into environmental activism because the end point of Norway is New York. Suddenly, to be preoccupied with the aesthetics of computers seemed pure madness. That really got me started.

Then a year later there was a second big push. That winter my wife had the idea that we must go to Italy on the coast with a cheap package tour, and stay a couple of weeks there, in order to get some warmth. And we went with the children. We lived in a hotel. It was one of a 1,000 hotels looking exactly the same. The hotels formed a wall of tourist establishments like a barrier between the beach and Italy itself, they lined the whole coast of the Adriatic sea from horizon to horizon. The beach was straight like a ruler and this blue Mediterranean Sea was so polluted that we didn't dare to swim

A former monk and long-term peace and environment activist, Satish Kumar has been quietly setting the global agenda for change for over 50 years. He was the editor of *Resurgence & Ecologist magazine* for 43 years and the founder of Schumacher College in South Devon where he is still a Visiting Fellow. When he was only nine years old, Satish Kumar renounced the world and joined the wandering brotherhood of Jain monks. At the age of eighteen, he left the monastic order and became a campaigner for land reform, working to turn Gandhi's vision of a peaceful world into reality. Fired by the example of Bertrand Russell, he undertook an 8,000 mile peace pilgrimage, walking without any money, through deserts, mountains, storms and snow to deliver packets of 'peace tea' to the leaders of the four nuclear powers. Satish is the author of five books. His autobiography, *No Destination*, first published by Green Books in 1978, has sold over 50,000 copies.

in it. It was early in the season and each hotel had a lot of metal frames standing on the beach where they would later put up sun parasols. Each frame was like a black cross. It was the graveyard of the world where everything that is culture, everything that is real humanity, warmth and creativity is gone, what's left are the crosses—the coordinates of a mechanically measured world. On this white beach, a 100 meters wide, white sand, from horizon to horizon, 10,000 crosses and that is where we stayed for two weeks, not meeting any Italians. That experience turned me into an ecologist.

Was there any particular action of the government which pushed you into action?

Yes, there was. A lot of ecologists had been fighting hard against a large river damming project in a western fjord: the Aurland Valley project, tunneling away the river from one of the most beautiful valleys in western Norway. Thousands and thousands of people went into this because they loved this valley for its beauty, its fertility and its fishery. Nothing happened at all. That's when I sat down and wrote a letter to 30 persons that I thought had had enough of conventional “parliamen-

tary” methods. Most of them came, and we formed a new group. Our first plan was to stage a non-violent direct action in the middle of that valley in exactly the spot where they were going to build a big power station, where a little river, called Green river joins the main Aurland river. We knew the construction work would take several years and that would give us time to build up a positive action. That is an action where you not only sit down and protest, but you build an alternative society right on the spot. Everybody who comes can see what you want as the alternative. We wanted to build a small farm there, have cows and sheep, goats and so forth. But when some of us went to the valley, and met the farmers, it turned out that they were for this power project, because they had been convinced through the propaganda that they would get good jobs, that industry would come in and lots of money would flow into their local economy. Now, thirteen years later, all of them know that the promises were false. All the electricity goes to Oslo, and locally nothing has happened. But at that time they didn't want to listen to us. And you can't do such an action if you are not part of the local community.



Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng at Mardøla action camp.
PHOTO: ELINOR FILM

But later we got to know about the plans to take away the largest waterfall in Northern Europe and the third largest in the world, the Mardøla waterfall. This was the last river to be taken away from the Eikesdal valley, which is further north but still in southern Norway. They had had two big hydropower projects earlier and all of that power went into one of the largest aluminum industries of Europe and now they were going to take the last river of which this beautiful and fantastic waterfall was a part. Because there had already been two big hydro projects in this valley the local farmers knew that the promises of jobs were false. They had been promised compensation money and irrigation systems and roads and a local high school for their kids and even electrical tramcars from one farm to the other! Nothing had come of it. They had lost one of the best salmon fisheries of Norway and the compensation in money amounted to one small salmon per farm every year. So they were ready for action. In July 1970 we staged the first large scale Gandhian non-violent direct action in Norway. For 3 weeks we had a tent camp that blocked the construction scheme. It became a sensation—especially our methods of chaining ourselves to the rocks so the police could not move us. It was all over the newspapers; even in *Der Spiegel*, the *New York Times* and so forth. There was a large film made about it—originally planned for television, but it showed how the Norwegian parliament was in the pocket of the American international aluminum producers so it was too hot for TV. But it has been shown in movie houses all over Norway and to environmental activist groups in other countries. A lot of new people rallied to the movement, especially young people. It was a wonder to hear how many young participants said that the action camp became like a home to them and that for the first time in their lives they had experienced meaning, because they were together with people who were fighting to preserve life, democratic rights and real social values and forgetting themselves for that cause. They felt themselves becoming part of something greater and they cared for one another. We

had a very terrible camp site, high up in the mountains amidst an enormous collection of boulders and sometimes the wind blew down the tents and it was raining and finally snowing. But the worse the weather, the better the spirit!

What was the result?

The result was that we were arrested and they took this river too. The positive result was that it was the start of the modern ecopolitical movement of Norway. In the course of two years it became the strongest ecomovement of any country, I believe. A similar action happened two years ago in Alta in the far north of Norway. In this case, we were fighting with the Same nation (Laplanders) to protect the last unspoiled large river through their old land. Alta was patterned on the Mardøla action, but on a much larger scale and we were able to endure much longer and finally the government had to hire a big steamer with 600 policemen and send them all to North Norway to remove us. It was the first direct action under purely arctic conditions, down to -40° below zero and we had hundreds of people stay there week after week and again we had this fantastic spirit of caring for each other. That is why we didn't have a single incidence of anyone getting badly hurt. Outside observers thought that was a miracle, since we were staying out in the snow for week after week in the middle of the arctic winter. It was dark all day too. We had to go by torches. And we had to keep food and firewood enough for everybody. We managed it. We didn't budge at all. We were very happy to see lots of people from other countries coming to join. And there was a truly fantastic international solidarity campaign that was led by Martha Kremer of ECOROPA. Finally 600 policemen had to come. We used the same techniques as in Mardøla. We had chained ourselves to Mother Earth with heavy steel chains—we had such big chains that we thought they wouldn't be able to cut them. We had several big tents with line after line of people all chained to the rocks. We had to have big stoves going to keep the “chain gang” from freezing to death. When

the police finally came they had their special engineering team that had trained especially for this. They used asbestos sheets in order not to hurt our bodies. They covered our faces with police shields to protect us from the shower of sparks. They brought in big tractors with generators and long cables to power their flywheel cutters and to floodlight the camp. So they were able to destroy the chains in the end. This was the most dramatic of a series of actions in Alta, spanning several years and involving thousands of people. Even so, the non-violence principles were not broken.

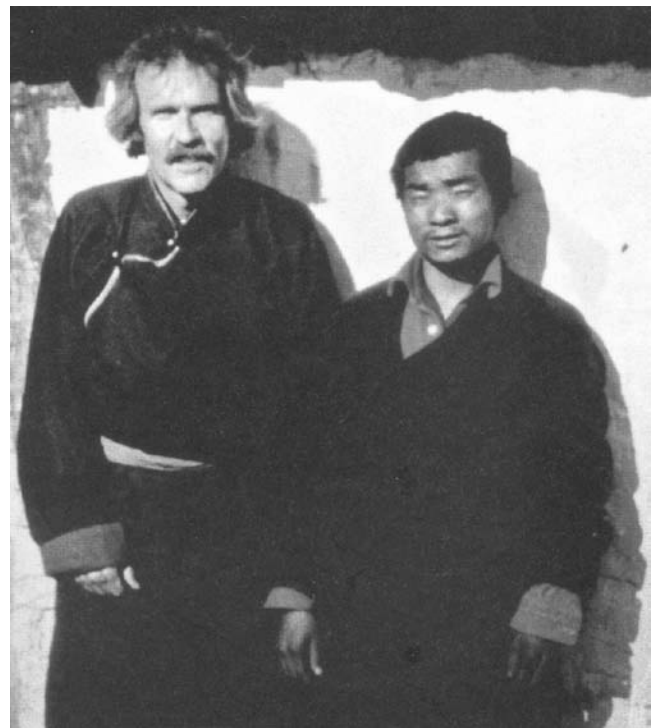
Going back to the ecophilosophy group, what kind of ideas did you develop?

At first I have to state, and this is very basic to the whole thing, that from the very start this was not to be a purely theoretical, academic group. All the people who were a part of the ecophilosophy group had to be part of some activist group. The strongest inspiration for that method was Mahatma Gandhi. On that basis we studied and discussed his actions. Regarding action and his whole approach I had myself read and I kept on reading Gandhi's own commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* which he made in prison, which I think is an excellent book and for a long time should be a primary guidance. And what hit me really strongly is the thread that goes through the Gita: the norm of selfless action. You should act, you should be at the center of the conflict fighting for truth, for life values, but refrain from hankering after the fruit. This is very strange to the European mindset, and I had to stop and think about it for a long time. I didn't really understand it at all until I was in the middle of the Mardøla action up in the mountains. I think you have to get yourself involved like that for some time before you really understand what Gandhi means. It is very difficult for Europeans to understand, because all our lives we are trained to be goal directed. Everything we do is serving as means so that we can reap the fruit. People asked us: "Why are you sitting out here in the mountains? Whatever you do, the government will take the river anyway." So

I quoted Gandhi, from the Gita, I said, if you manage to follow this rule of life you will be invulnerable. We have to do what is right from one moment to the next moment. The goal is the road, the road is the goal. Those are not different at all. It is a way of living.

Am I right to say that your ecophilosophy is Gandhian?

We had this notion that we have to be free to look everywhere for ideas that we can mix together in new ways. I think that something which really became a common denominator to the central part of the group is some strange mixture of elements from Gandhian metaphysics, Buddhism, general systems theory and even the dialectical materialist part of Marxism. Then you get into trouble, because people from all sides start saying you can't mix it like that, it is not possible. Anyway we have to have a philosophy which is not confined to intellectual exercises like academic philosophy.



Setreng (Tsering Dorjee) with his ritual Nepalese son, Ngawang Thembu. PHOTO FROM THE BOOK *ELVETID*

An ecophilosophy means a new grasp of yourself, your fellow human beings and the world. It has to do with both logical thinking and experience. It must influence your sensitivity, your feelings and your intuition which has been looked down upon in western philosophy. For a brief spell—in the early part of this century—there was a relief, brought forth by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whom I regard as Europe's first ecophilosopher. To some extent he was followed by Whitehead and William James, but they were lone birds, really. Mechanistic thinking has been the general scheme. Now it's the task of ecophilosophy to carry on where Bergson led the way. A world in eco-crisis will give the solid public motivation that Bergson lacked.

What is the key to ecophilosophy?

We use two words: “complex” and “complicated.” To us a machine is “complicated”, whereas “life” is “complex”. A human being is very complex and needs a complex environment to develop. But if you look closely you will see that most people do not differentiate between the complexity which you find in a human being or in a natural environment and the intricate pattern of a machine. People use theory based on machine analysis. This is the very basis of the Western way of thinking, it is the basis of industrialization, of engineering, of our scientific enterprise, and of the way we manage society and our schools as well—it is so difficult to uproot this thinking.

Simple logic, mathematics, classification and quantification can describe a machine completely. If you couldn't describe it in these terms then there would be something wrong with the machine. Another characteristic with a machine structure is that it can repeat itself. You can turn it back to the starting point and it will do exactly the same thing again. If it doesn't there is something wrong. It is the same with even the most intricate electronic computers. If you can't make them repeat themselves there is something seriously wrong with them. Another thing about machine structure is that even though it is extremely complicated it must have one and only one governing center. You can't have

a conflict between two different governing centers, not even in the most advanced computer. Another point, in a machine every part has to have one and only one, easily definable identity, readily separable from every other part. All the small parts the machine consists, of have to stay unchanged permanently or something is terribly wrong. If you take these points one after the other and then apply them to “life” you see a very different picture.

If you have a living system, a large entity consisting of many different processes intermingling with each other and finally with everything on the global system. Everything is dependent on everything else. As time passes, there won't be any definite boundary separating each part from the others. And it won't be possible for you to ever find a central place where everything is governed from. The system as a whole governs itself. If you start looking for governing centers you will find many of them and there is often a conflict between them. But this is basic to life. It is always there even in the single human being: heart and head. You break out of the system; you do something unprecedented, you



Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng with in the background his farm.
PHOTO FROM THE BOOK *ELVETID*

are creative. If a computer did that you have to scrap it or send it to be repaired. You will never find a life system that repeats itself.

We repeat ourselves by reproducing, but there is never an exact reproduction. We are always moving on to something different, a variation. The leap may be very tiny. Because life goes in new directions and finds new channels, all the time something dies and is replaced by new life. So what is essential to life would be disastrous to a machine. A machine is static in time. It constitutes no process, i.e. nothing is produced—comes into being. A mechanical entity is no river, because what happens leads nowhere, has no direction. It's a sad fact, with seriously negative consequences that even today—in the midst of eco-social crisis—our children do not learn in their schools to make this distinction! The clearest point, however, if you want to counter the argument that it is possible to create machine intelligence is about multiple government of a system. You can't have two or more conflicting governing centers even in an advanced robot. And life, the conflicting centers process, is not only adjusting to new conditions, it is also creating those new conditions and that is the big point made by James Lovelock. He does not, however, make the “conflicting centers point.” Gaia is actively experimenting how she, with her multiple sub-systems, can do it and changing her own environment. So Gaia is “complex.” While the computer is complicated.

We chose the word complication because in common speech we often use this word about something which gives us a little stress. When we meet a problem where we really have to work, we often say: “this is a complicated problem” or “this was a terrible complication.” While complex is often used with a softer meaning. So we reserve complexity for nature and complication for the machine.

The great trouble with industrial society is that it is governed in a manner where people try to solve complexity through complication. You try to treat man,

society and the natural environment as if they were complicated machines and when you do that you will get an escalation of troubles. If you use purely scientific methods as ordinarily defined you have to treat life as if it were complicated. This relates to the philosophical ideas within the European tradition. With the rise of mechanistic philosophy, Galileo, René Descartes, Isaac Newton, John Locke, David Hume and so forth. You get a division between primary, secondary and tertiary qualities. The primary qualities are the mechanical qualities, length, breadth, height, mass and speed, the basic parameters that constitute all of physics. To call them primary was important with the advent of the mechanistic worldview and industrialization as the panacea for all social troubles. Within that world view where you want to manipulate things grandly and efficiently those are the objective qualities that you can test and measure with no interference by subjective perception. The secondary qualities are the sensual qualities, like taste, color, sound, musical qualities, and so forth that people experience. A scientific instrument doesn't record the human experience but instead of that a set of (presumably related) mechanical primary qualities, wavelengths and movement of molecules and so forth. Direct human sensual experience is not objective and so is relegated to second place. Even worse, the tertiary or the axiological qualities, those are the qualities of feeling, of aesthetic taste, the sense of good and bad, beautiful and ugly and all those things. Those are the really essential things that govern human life but they were relegated to third place. You can't speak objectively about them, they change from person to person so are completely unreliable. That's how we got this big division. Speaking in ecophilosophical terms: in order to understand what goes on in a complex system we have to discard this philosophical division. Then we have to go into the so-called secondary and tertiary qualities, accepting them as basic.