

A black and white photograph of Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng, an older man with glasses, looking towards the right. He is in a rugged, mountainous landscape with rocky terrain and dense vegetation. A dark horizontal bar is overlaid on the top left of the image, containing the text 'SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG' in white, uppercase letters.

SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng and his Ecophilosophy

An Introduction BY BJØRN TORDSSON

Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng's life's work was characterized by an all-encompassing activism and his commitment concerned nothing less than to contribute to a development of society that fends off an increasingly serious ecological crisis and degradation of human life and central values.

A more complex and demanding mission in life can hardly be imagined. It took him all over the world. To communities in remote parts of the world and to meetings with leading figures in world politics. To grassroots work in action groups and to TV studios. To nonviolent actions in Gandhi's spirit and to seminars at leading universities. To organizational work he carried out tirelessly—locally, regionally, nationally and internation-

ally. And not least to a steadily deepened and extended reflection and philosophy on the characteristics, constraints and opportunities of struggle. This shaped Sigmund into an almost improbably diverse human being.

But Setreng never stood in the way of his message. He shared his rich experiences, but his attention was always geared towards the case and never towards his own person—despite his person being the stuff of myth formation. He was not focused on his own self-importance and was completely uninterested in personal career.

Setreng was *popular* in the truest sense of the word—a representative in our time, with roots in rural Norway, of the counter-cultural intellectual legacy.

At the time when Setreng embarked on his life's

TRANSLATED BY FRØYDIS KVALØY AND DAG TORDSSON | Reference to original publication: Tordsson, B. (2014). Innledning. In I. Dansberg, B. Tordsson, O. Henke, & A. Tellnes (Eds.), *Elvetid* (pp. 12–19). Nord-Torpa, Norway: Naturveiviser AS. Permission for publication on OpenAirPhilosophy was generously granted by Naturveiviser and by Bjørn Tordsson.

PHOTO ABOVE: OLOF HENKE

mission, very few had heard about ecology, let alone a globally comprehensive eco-crisis. With few exceptions, “environmental conservation” was a matter for those particularly interested. Since then a lot has happened. An international environmental movement—of which Setreng was a steadfast inspirer—has pushed those in power to take questions about “limits to growth” and “sustainability” more seriously.

At least at the surface, that is. For the prevailing



Self-portrait by Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng, entitled *The ecophilosopher*

policies have mainly been to address environmental problems without such a move having practical consequences for society as such: for how we work, structure our institutions and organizations, make decisions and distribute power, arrange our economic life, raise children and youth, conduct research and develop ways of understanding, and shape our personal life patterns. Even the UN Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* of 1987, which described the challenges of the environmental crisis tolerably well, concluded that the remedy is continued economic growth. And increased environmental control.

Parts of the environmental movement saluted the Brundtland Report as an international breakthrough. Not Setreng. He analyzed it in detail, highlighted its open and hidden assumptions, and viewed it as a magnificent example of precisely the thinking that leads to steadily recurring crises. The worldwide system crises are a result of living in the middle of a crisis system. We cannot cure the disease with more of that which caused it. It scarcely helps with higher factory chimneys, more efficient treatment plants, better environmental monitoring and more stringent control, as long as “the Advanced Competitive-Industrial Dignity Society (ACID),” what Setreng called it, constantly envelopes new areas of life under its might. For this means continued philosophy of growth, quantifying lunacy, technocracy, power/bureaucracy pyramids, a growing control apparatus, calculation- and regulatory eagerness. Such instruments and arrangements lock us into a practice and an approach which obstructs the creating, interacting and improvising forces that can get us out of the rut.

Bjørn Stefan Tordsson, born in 1953 in Sweden, has studied philosophy, ethnology and literature. After a short period as a folks singer, he has since 1978 been professionally working as a guide and teacher in traditional Scandinavian *friluftsliv* (“life in the outdoors”) and as an author in related topics. Since 1988 he has been employed at Outdoor Studies at Telemark University College in Norway. Besides of practical handbooks on different forms of *friluftsliv*, he wrote his Master degree on *Friluftsliv* and Pedagogy, and his PhD thesis within Historical Sociology on the development of the *friluftsliv*-tradition in Norway, its different ideologies and their significance for the society. In his academically writing, he has introduced classical cultural and societal theory in the study of *friluftsliv*, but also the other way around: meeting with nature can throw light upon fundamental questions relevant for the study of man, culture and society. He has also done research on Children and nature out from eco-psychological and phenomenological perspectives. As a devoted sailor he also builds and repairs traditional Scandinavian wooden boats.

Since then, the world has time and again witnessed the powerlessness of modern environmental policy: problems increase, victories are few and often superficial. We are facing comprehensive climate change but lack effective international climate agreements. Regulation of the world economy strengthens the rich countries' dominance. Free trade spreads foreign species that destroy local ecological systems. The so-called "green revolution" made the Earth's poor farmers economically dependent on the West's large enterprises. Biotechnology and genetic engineering break up species' borders and regulatory mechanisms. Globalization and tourism transform the world into a playground for the rich, but bind the majority of the Earth's people to their country of origin, while the social and ecological ground disappears under their feet.

It is of little consolation that Setreng was right. But this also means that his analyses and personal example demonstrate its relevance. Setreng did not doubt that a fundamental change must come, sooner or later. The question is how. Setreng wrote in 1970 that we can avoid a "crash landing" and contribute to a "smooth transition" into another community with a new relationship with nature. Squandered time makes this task more challenging today.

Either way, it is engaging in the struggle that gives life its meaning. Gandhi taught Setreng that our responsibility is limited to our direct sphere of influence. The future does not belong to us. But what is ours is the *road* we choose to take. Therefore, the road itself is our goal. And we should follow Gandhi's challenge to live as if the change we want to see has already happened.

SETRENG TERMED HIS philosophy as a thinking and action process without beginning or end. Unlike many other philosophers, he was an opponent to the construction of systems that can be applied regardless of context and time. Moreover, Setreng never wrote *books*. He called his publications in book format "fragments."

Økokrise, natur og menneske ("Eco-crisis, Nature and Man," 1976), later revised and expanded in sev-

eral editions, serves as an outline of his philosophy. The publication *Fra mangfold til enfold* ("From Diversity to Simplicity," 1998), unites ecological system theory with philosophy and social analysis. The publication *Naturens nei. Om EU, frihandel og økologisk kaos* ("Nature's No. About EU, Free Trade and Ecological Chaos") was hotly debated and ridiculed in large circles, but is now considered a visionary classic. A further development of his eco-philosophy came in 2001 with the book *Mangfold og tid* ("Diversity and Time"). I would also like to draw attention to the Festschrift *Grønn pepper i turbinene* ("Green Pepper in the Turbines"), with 16 contributions about the environmental crisis and ways to get out of it—written in honor of Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng.

THERE IS ONE TOPIC about which Setreng steadily deepened his views, namely *diversity*. He distinguished between two fundamentally different forms: complexity and complication.

Complexity is nature's way of being—an endless complex self-regulating organic interplay, always changing, moving towards something new, in rhythmic balance but never static. Each ecosystem has its own interaction forms between animals, plants, microorganisms, soil and climate. Nature develops diversity, and diversity gives strength and vitality: the ability to change without tearing the fabric of life. There is an interaction between many players, which is not governed by one overriding center, and where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. System ecology perspectives are underlying factors, but Sigmund finds the same characteristics in traditional cultures that are close to nature. And in humans themselves, if they are allowed to develop their abilities through versatile work in interaction with nature, and within the framework of a locally bound cultural community.

Complication is the diversity illustrated by machines. It can be understood through its interchangeable parts, and it can be described with mathematical precision. We can manage and control it, because the

machine is its own equal; it can indeed break, but will not transform into something other than what it has been. The machine must have a single control center. The machine is not complex, but complicated.

Setreng emphasized that crises arise because we confuse complexity with complication. If we treat complex nature as if it were a machine, “unexpected” crises will always emerge, not only because we do not understand the interaction between its “parts” well enough. Complex nature is above all a series of events that never repeats itself in quite the same way, and that never strives towards *static* conditions—as the misleading term “ecological equilibrium” suggests.

Setreng spoke of our Advanced Competition-Industrial Digit Society (ACID), which treats nature, society and humans as if these were all about machines. This system has economic growth as its goal, is driven by competition at all levels, is based on applied science, and its basic method is quantification. The result is that growth in terms of GDP increases (in the West), as well as welfare measured in consumption, but the superficial diversity morphs into neuroses and experiences of powerlessness and a sense of emptiness. Meanwhile, the Earth’s cultural and natural diversity drastically reduces. The fabric of life starts to crack.

Setreng’s descriptions, as rendered thus far, fall into a familiar pattern: nature constitutes an initial order that deserves humble respect, but modern Western civilization implies something deeply problematic. Continuous growth is impossible because the Earth has limited “resources.” Some people would reject Setreng’s argument and state that he really was nothing but a nature romanticist. But such people would ignore his truly original ecophilosophical contribution which revealed the dynamics between complexity and complication.

His analysis helps us to clarify how the current crises interlink, and why we must seek alternative paths in order to resolve them. For if we continue to reduce our natural diversity, the result will be unexpected reactions to which we then most likely will respond by replacing complexity with ever more new mechanisms

that are characterized by control.

Here is a simple example. If we create monocultures, such as vast corn fields, nature reacts with “plagues,” viruses, bacteria, fungal diseases et cetera. In response, we then try to control nature through chemical fertilization, by spraying poisonous pesticides, by plant “breeding,” genetic engineering, irrigation, and so on. When nature then again “responds” with “unforeseeable consequences” and “side effects,” the control systems by consequence must grow in scope, power and complication.

Setreng describes how systems become heavier and slower, how more and more research specialists are trained who lack overview, and how bureaucracy spreads. Increasingly drastic measures are needed to achieve effects; nevertheless what kind of effects exactly will occur becomes ever more uncertain. Healthy parts are drawn into a sick system, with the result that complication increasingly replaces the complexity that gives strength and vitality. This is the pattern that Setreng has identified and highlighted in most areas of life.

ACID contains a strong tendency to grasp ever more rigid and complicated control over nature and over human and social life. Setreng’s term for this control is “Servoglobe.” For some this is a dream of an all-encompassing pyramid-like power, control and calculation machine, securing its grip on every expression of life—for Setreng it is a terrifying vision. Consequently, he suggested, complex ecological, cultural and social diversity become flat-planed and standardized, a vibrant democracy becomes hollow, and the system transforms humans in its image: we become one-dimensional and vulnerable to changes. We lack self-realization in everyday work and are led to seek the meaning of life—or distracted from even posing that question—in an increasingly commercialized, leisure time empty of access to nature and culture: “the amusement park effect.”

And here we find a third form of diversity, which Setreng called *pseudo-complexity*: this is an artificial stage-like reality that mimics natural complexity, but

essentially is a form of complication. Original natural and cultural distinctiveness is tracked down, marketed and turned into attractions in a growing tourist market. Or an entirely synthetic “reality” with strong effects providing a surface semblance of richness and variety is being made, as compensation for uniformity and lack of deeper meaning in everyday life.

Servoglobe efforts are based on the notion that nature, society, humans and the future can be quantified, calculated and estimated, so that one can predict the effect of one or the other measure. But because nature, society and people are constantly changing, this is impossible and efforts will in the long run only deepen the crisis. For that reason, Setreng not only argued against the EU, WTO and similar pyramid-like bodies and their politics, but also against similar organs within the environmental movement that try to develop pyramidal norm systems to remedy the ecological crisis. In a similar vein, he spoke out against environmental thinkers who talk of “spaceship Earth,” that “we” must manage and control better than we have done so far. He also took issue with a growing crowd of environmental bureaucrats, contract researchers and specialists who try to make *calculations* about nature’s carrying capacity and thresholds of tolerance, in order to produce technical-bureaucratic equations for steering society.

Instead he found that the solution would be to find ways of living that embrace nature’s complexity and its endless changes, and to create local communities that are, to the greatest possible extent, self-sufficient and autonomous, on basis of their specific ecological and social conditions. Setreng calls this “the necessity of life community” where work—and not recreational time—is at the center. (Like thinkers such as Marx, Tolstoy and Gandhi, Setreng believed that humans shall not be liberated *from* work but *to* meaningful, comprehensive and all-encompassing work.)

The Life Necessity Society is not a far-fetched utopia. Sigmund found living examples of such communities all over the world, and also in Norway’s rural areas.

All of them are constantly facing the threat of ACID. Unfairly, Sigmund has been portrayed as a nostalgic who wants to bring us back to the past. His point is that we must learn from ways of living, both in the past and in the present, which have demonstrated their vitality. Societies that have managed to create a rich culture in places where natural resources are notably scarce and vulnerable—such as the Sherpa communities—are therefore of particular interest. Likewise, we must understand why former pyramidal societies have resulted in ecological and social breakdown. But Setreng basically refuses to be perceived as an idea-architect, describing how a future society should behave. His mission is to understand—and confront—the forces in today’s society that cause the crises we are experiencing.

This also requires an approach that challenges the West’s dominant philosophy. Sigmund draws a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, the West’s view that static *space* is the basic quality of life and, on the other, the emphasis that living cultures—particularly Buddhist philosophy—put on the dynamic of *time*. He doesn’t talk about mechanical clock time but about



Setreng’s backpack. PHOTO FROM THE BOOK *ELVETID*

perceived time: the process, the change, the flow of time, “the duration” (Henri Bergson). Setreng has not only used this perspective in natural philosophy, but also in his analysis (for example) of different practices in constructing houses in various parts of the world, and in discussions about differences between classical music and improvised jazz. One of Setreng’s talents is drawing unexpected parallels between different spheres of life in order to find common patterns.

Improvisation is one of Setreng’s key concepts. For him it is the ability to be creative in constantly changing situations—and thereby to allow oneself to change. In his philosophy Sigmund constantly revisits what he calls “the only really vital and urgent problem: What does it mean to be human?” By asking this question he quotes Peter Wessel Zapffe, Norway’s first eco-philosopher, and Setreng’s close friend and inspirer. In Setreng’s answer, we find the perspectives previously outlined: we are not limited, definable individuals but relational and diverse; we can hold several personalities, we are in constant change, and this is reflected in our ability to improvise. We are “unfixed” (Zapffe), and any statement which is held to contain knowledge of what a human being *is*, will limit us, for “existence precedes essence” (Jean-Paul Sartre).

Such process thinking is most clearly expressed in Buddhism. For long periods of time Setreng lived amongst Sherpa communities, where he is recognized as a lama, Tsering Dorji, which is yet another side of his diversified personality. But Setreng rejects the notion that the individual must first “find himself” before he or she can act in a meaningful way in the world. It is through selfless action that we find ourselves. We must “let ourselves be carried away by the current if we are to learn swimming,” we must dare to enter (immerse ourselves) into conflicts, and let what we stand for be expressed in our lives. Then we will be freed from our *esprit serieuse* and repressed worries. Setreng’s own example of how he conducted his life manifests how a real and deep commitment can bring forth good humor, creativity and joyfulness as well.

The texts that he wrote reflect Setreng’s multifaceted relationship with Arne Naess, and the differences between the latter’s ecosophy and Setreng’s eco-philosophy. Though they have much in common, Naess was often presented as the leader of the non-violent-actions of which in practice Sigmund was the key organizer. The two certainly influenced and inspired each other in profound ways, but there are also considerable tensions between their different philosophies and world-views. According to Setreng, Naess’s Spinoza-inspired philosophy did not constitute a clear break from the thinking that characterizes Western philosophy, and by extension its science and practice.



Setreng at an action to prevent the storage of poison in the Dovrefjell mountains, 1992. PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION

But both were indebted to Gandhi's teachings about active non-violent struggle and communication, not only as a tactic in conflicts but, as Gandhi would put it, "a means of seeking Truth." For above all, Setreng was best known for being an activist. Mardøla, Alta and numerous other rivers were dammed, but the actions to prevent this from happening became the model for succeeding environmental movements and other alternative movements worldwide. Sigmund and the movements he inspired have also achieved other successes. Norway did not join the EU. It was possible to win over the political-economic establishment for this cause; moreover, the campaign created self-confidence in rural Norway and afforded alternative movements to deepen their learning from practical experience. The Alta river struggle strengthened the Sami people's self-regard and commanded a whole new policy with respect to the Sami. And the fight against "globalization" in favor of international solidarity is upheld up to this day.

Carrying out a non-violent campaign in line with Gandhi's philosophy is something different and encompasses more than following this or that strategy

to achieve a desired result that is limited to a specific conflict. The action *itself* is a form of communication. It is a way of bringing forth "activeness" and manifesting central values; it is about "seeking the core of the conflict" (Gandhi), engaging in dialogue; about building bridges of personal trust across the conflict lines. Ultimately it concerns the effort of recruiting your opponent to take part in the struggle on your side.

AS WILL BE REFLECTED on this website, Setreng was far more than an academic philosopher. His drawings are expressive of the humorous and ingenious artist behind them. He was a filmmaker, a mountain farmer, a biologist, a music theorist, an architecture theorist, a jazz connoisseur, an improvisational researcher, a pedagogue, a Bergson and Zapffe interpreter, an aircraft mechanic, a motorcycle enthusiast, a mountaineer, and a social anthropologist. To live is to change, to acknowledge and to develop all one's talents. "The road itself is the goal," as Sigmund quoted Gandhi, moreover, "one should act without claiming the fruit of one's action."