

Deep Ecology Education: Learning from its Vaisnava Roots

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Abstract

Deep ecology arises from the personal intuition that one's self is part of the world's environmental wholeness. This awareness may be constructed upon scientific foundations but it is more commonly thought a spiritual concept. Deep ecology pedagogy emerges from its three-step process of ecological Self-realization. This paper traces the roots of the ecological Self through the work of deep ecology's founder, Arne Naess, and his studies of Gandhian philosophy to its foundations in Gandhi's Vaisnava religion. These foundations include the Vaisnava goal of Self-realization, and the scriptural three steps of Lord Vishnu and His Vamana avatar. Vaisnava ethics such as humility, non-harming, non-possession, simple living, and devotional service helped inspire the Gandhian political economy of permanence called sarvodaya, which still influences thinking in the environment and peace movements.

Résumé

L'écologisme radical découle d'une intuition personnelle voulant qu'un individu fasse partie de l'ensemble du monde environnemental. Cette prise de conscience peut se développer à partir de bases scientifiques, mais est plus communément considérée comme un concept spirituel. La pédagogie écologiste radicale découle de son processus en trois étapes consistant en la réalisation personnelle écologique. Ce texte élucide les origines de l'écologie intrinsèque par le biais du travail du fondateur de l'écologisme radical, Arne Naess, et de ses études sur la philosophie ghandienne depuis ses bases dans la religion Vaisnava de Gandhi. Ces bases comprennent le but Vaisnava de la réalisation personnelle et les trois étapes bibliques du dieu Vishnou et son avatar Vamana. Les éléments de l'éthique de Vaisnava, tels que l'humilité, la non violence, la non possession, la vie simple et la piété ont aidé à inspirer la politique économique ghandienne de durabilité appelée sarvodaya, qui influence encore la pensée dans les mouvements environnementaux et pacifiques.

Keywords: deep ecology; Vaisnavism; Self-realization; Gandhi; sarvodaya; environmental education

Introduction

Deep ecology arises from the personal intuition that humans are part of a larger symbiotic, organic wholeness that some call Nature, some the Earth system or biosphere, and others "Gaia" (Margulis, 1998). Rabindranath

Tagore (2004), Nobel Prize winning author and proponent of “planetary citizenship,” often ranked first among India’s modern educational theorists, conceived this “world as a living thing, intimately close to my life, permeated by the subtle touch of kinship, which enhances the value of my own being” (p. 99; cf. Taneja & Taneja, 2004). Building respect for the planet and respect for the future into practical environmental education involves helping learners realize a personal responsibility for their habitat (Haigh, 2004). “When a child actually feels ... ‘I am one with the trees, birds, earth, all the children of the world...’ it becomes even more vital to protect ... their rights and survival” (Alister, 2001, p. 2). This is deep ecology.

Deep ecology became established, formally, from the early 1970s by Arne Naess, a European academic philosopher who highlighted the division between “shallow ecology,” which puts human welfare first, and “deep ecology,” which emphasizes the integrity of all life (Naess, 1973). With George Sessions, Naess forged a political platform for the deep ecology movement, which recognized that the Earth’s life support system is being degraded by short-sighted human actions (Naess & Sessions, 1985). Similar ideas prompted recognition of the United Nations’ Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). Sustainable development is about living *as though the future mattered* (Devall, 1988). UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2001) argues that: “The greatest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that sounds abstract—sustainable development—and turn it into reality for all the world’s people” (p. 2). Deep ecology is about making the environment and the future a personal concern. Hence, it is one of the philosophies that compete for the soul of the Decade (cf. Calder & Clugston, 2005; Tilbury & Podger, 2004).

Deep ecology sees the environmental crisis as a symptom of an anthropocentric delusion that imagines the world to be merely a resource for human use (Seed, 2005). It regards developing a deep personal bond with Nature as the most important goal for both the individual and society. A key concept is ecological Self-realization, which provides the way and a goal for deep ecological (and possibly all) education.

The “ecological Self,” one of the most central and difficult concepts in deep ecology, emerges from Naess’s experience of the wilderness and from his early academic life, which was devoted to the exploration of the philosophies of Spinoza and Mahatma Gandhi (Naess, 1965; Naess, 1974; Matthews, 1991; Harding, 1997). Western academics have tended to focus on the link between Naess’s ideas and those of Spinoza, which form part of our European tradition (e.g., Matthews, 1991). However, the concept of Self-realization emerges from India’s Vedanta philosophies and the source is Gandhi (Naess, 1987; Jacobsen, 1996; Hiriyanna, 1949/1996). Gandhi described himself as a Vedantin (Gandhi, 1950). He emerged from a Vaisnava (devotees of Lords Vishnu) community in Gujarat. This paper proposes that exploring these Vaisnava roots reveals new depths to the concept of ecological Self-realization, and highlights links between deep ecological education and Gandhi’s Vaisnava background.

Deep Ecology Education: Ecological Self-Realization

Deep ecology education may be conceived of as a process of personal maturation. Its pedagogical framework is the three-step process of Ecological Self-realization. This involves three Kuhn-style conceptual revolutions, each a transformation of self-consciousness (Kuhn, 1970; Naess, 1987). Each step may be linked, metaphorically, to human experience (cf. Haigh, 2002).

The process begins in childhood, when the individual self recognizes its personal autonomy and individual will, including—as any parent of a “terrible two-year old” may know—the will to contradict. Later, in adolescence, this self redefines itself in terms of a place in a human society. This may be a social group such as family, peer group, nation, and eventually, hopefully, the whole of humanity. In this process, the “I-self” becomes subsumed within a larger “we-Self” (Coward, 2000). This is the intuition that underpins eco-socialism but which Naess shrugs away as shallow ecology (Naess, 1973). Finally, in maturity, there comes recognition of the ecological Self, where the self is redefined in terms of a role and a place within the community of all life (Seed, Macy, Fleming, & Naess, 1988).

Theologian Anna Primavesi (2000) refines the three levels as the “Selfscape,” which lies within the personal boundary; “Socialscape,” that includes all social interactions; and “Earthscape,” extending to the limits of the global system. Stern and Dietz (1994) restate the same as mundane human values. “Egoistic” environmental values predispose people to protect environmental attributes that affect them personally. “Altruistic” values express concern for environment in terms of its impact on the welfare of human society—cf. shallow or socialist ecology. “Biospheric” environmental values concern the whole biosphere and all life, a position sometimes called antihuman, elitist, and occult (Guha, 1997; Kah & Kah, 1999). However, a major survey of environmental attitudes confirms the existence of these three levels in college students, where “concerns about the harmful consequences of environmental damage form three correlated clusters, which represent harmful consequences for self, other people, and plants and animals” (Schultz, 2001, pp. 10-11).

The three steps carry the self from “ego” to “eco,” and toward treating Nature with “the same reverence you would extend to your own being” (Wilber, 1996, p. 204). Achieving ecological Self-consciousness has important lifestyle implications. “We just wouldn’t do certain things that damage the planet, just as you wouldn’t cut off your own finger” (Zimmerman & Atkisson, 1989, p. 24). Each step contains the realization that a human is not alone or self-sufficient and, ultimately, that humans are merely a recent addition to a much larger, respectably ancient, organic wholeness (Lovelock, 2006). Each step moves the ego further from the centre and into becoming a smaller fraction of something much greater (cf. Drengson, 2001). Each step diminishes the amount of the universe that is external to the s/Self. This shift

runs parallel to science's removal of our planet, from the imagined centre of our Universe just a few hundred years ago, to its current position near one of many million minor stars in a run-of-the-mill galaxy. Of course, science also demonstrates that human survival depends upon a myriad of other creatures, both macro- and microscopic, some of which have long played a more important role in the global environment (Margulis, 1998). As a scientific addendum, Lynn Margulis proposes that all creatures are equally evolved as proven by their survival through near four billion years of evolution (Margulis & Sagan, 2002).

Gandhi advises: "All living beings are members one of another" (Gandhi, 1884-1946, p. 218). Vaisnavas believe that material creation is part of the substance of Godhead and that God permeates everything and everyone. Vaisnavas also believe in metempsychosis (i.e., reincarnation). Each living being contains an eternal soul or "jiva," a spark from the Divine, which migrates endlessly through different material forms and bodies until, finally, it achieves liberation into the spiritual realm and returns to Godhead (Prabhupada, 1989). Hence Vaisnavas, including Gandhi, like the later deep ecologists, believe that the world is sacred and that all species have the same right to life as humanity (Seed et al., 1988).

The Primeval Three Steps

Gandhi's works include a major purport (1926) on the *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, the great teaching of God incarnated as Lord Krishna. A related scripture, the *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* 11, 2, v. 45-55, describes the three levels of a devotee. The lowest worships God only in images. The second sees God in all human souls, but the highest experiences God's pervasion of all creation. Certainly, the number three has many associations: the Christian Trinity; the Hindu Trimurti; the triune Mother Goddess of the Celts; the unities of mind, body, and spirit; past, present, and future; Heaven, Hell, and Earth; and the stages of the Sun. However, for Vaisnavas, three steps have special meaning. Lord Vishnu's most dramatic appearance in those most ancient scriptures, the *Rg Veda*, involves three steps—His *trivikrama* (Soifer, 1991, pp. 17-25).

Rg Veda 1, Hymn 22, v. 17-18 proclaims:

17. *Through all this world strode Vishnu; thrice His foot He planted, and the whole was gathered in His footprint's dust.*
18. *Vishnu, the Guardian, He whom none deceiveth, made three steps; thence forth establishing His high decrees.*

Rg Veda 1, Hymn 154, v. 2 continues:

2. *For this mighty deed is Vishnu lauded... He within whose three wide - extended paces measured out the places where all living creatures have their habitation.*

Rg Veda 1, Hymn 155, v. 4-5:

4. *We praise the great power of the Mighty One, the preserver, mild, bounteous, benign, He who strode, with three paces, over the realms of Earth for freedom and for life.*
5. *A mortal who sees the light of first two steps is amazed, but His third step goes where none dare approach, not even the birds that fly with wings.*

Lord Vishnu Trivikrama is worshipped, for example, during the *acamana* (water-sipping ritual) for the Gayatri Mantra and when the Sun transits to the constellation Capricorn (e.g., *Skanda Purana* 42, v. 10-16). However, His three steps are more commonly celebrated through His Vamana incarnation (Soifer, 1991). While the *Rg Veda* may date from the centuries before 1200 BCE, the Puranas emerge from oral traditions recorded during the millennium or so after 300 CE. These Puranas offer 28 very similar versions of the story of Vamana. Here, Lord Vishnu incarnates as a dwarf Brahmin to restore order at a time when King Bali had become too powerful and displaced the Demi-Gods (Soifer, 1991). Vamana approaches the King to request space for a fire sacrifice, enough for three paces, and Bali agrees. With his first step, Vamana-Vishnu expands to cover the Earth and with his second, the whole Universe. The third he completes on the last place remaining to Bali—his head (*Srimad Bhagavata Purana* 8, 19, 16, v. 24-27). This third step, which claims the King's mind, may have the greatest significance for deep ecological education.

Self-Realization in Vaisnavism

Self-realization is the goal of Vaisnavism. Of course, the Self sought is far deeper than that of deep ecology. Vaisnavas strive to reconnect their self with the supreme Self and thus return to Godhead, the primordial consciousness and ultimate source of all creation (Prabhupada, 1989). Gandhi's life goals were "to realize God, to realize self and to realize Truth ... three expressions for the same development" (cited in Naess, 1974, p. 34). Gandhi (1950) directed many prayers to a personal deity, Lord Vishnu incarnated as Lord Rama, but he declared himself a supporter of the impersonal philosophy of Advaita Vedanta.

Vedanta means the final knowledge and arises from the *Upanisads*. These 108 texts provide a conclusion to the *Vedas*, which are the bedrock of all Hindu belief. Advaita means that the self and Self are "not two." The Advaita Vedanta philosophical system proposes that the absolute reality of the universe is an eternal, unchanging, formless consciousness, which is veiled from our understanding by our entanglement in our bodies and transient physical materiality (Sharma, 2004). Its goal for life is to reconnect with this ultimate reality. Hence, for Gandhi (1950), God's is Brahman, which "neither does, nor causes to be done. It does not govern. It is bliss and by this all is sustained" (p. 37). Gandhi saw the goal of life "to be merged in Brahman" (p. 37) by living

a perfect life, like that of Lord Rama, and so breaking free of the cycle of birth and rebirth.

So, while ecological Self-realization strives for self-identifications with all beings, because, truly, one's identity and theirs is the same, Vedanta aspires to reconnect with the oneness of all creation, especially its primal cause (Jacobsen, 1996; Nikhilananda, 1947). Vaisnavism, not least the influential Acintya Bhedabheda School of Vedanta, conceives the world as a manifestation of the personality of God (Tapasyananda, 1990). Everything is made of the substance of God, and everything alive contains an element of the Supreme Spirit. So, achieving Self-realization involves de-coupling the individual spirit from its false attachment to a material self, and reawakening its consciousness of the higher Self.

The Path of Karma

Traditionally, there are three paths to Self-realization: knowledge (*jnana*), involving renunciation of materiality; devotion (*bhakti*), involving complete surrender to Godhead; and action (*karma*), where selfless, dutiful action in the world, coupled with complete detachment from its outcome, becomes a sacrifice that purifies the soul (Gandhi, 1926). Gandhi, Tagore, and indeed most Vedanta educational theorists commend the path of karma. Gandhi developed this discipline through handicrafts and learning productive skills, and Gandhi's disciples, notably Vinoba Bhave, developed it through community service (Kumar, 1986).

Today, everyone is familiar with the popular New Age concept of karma. In fact, while the theory of karma is subtle, ancient, and esoteric (cf. Vivekananda, 1989), it still may be summarized as *what goes around comes around*. Karma is accumulated by "fruitive," that is self-promoting actions, both positive and negative (Prabhupada, 1989). Positive karma leads to enjoyable consequences in the future, and negative karma to the reverse. However, to escape the future and go back to Godhead, all karma must be exhausted. Karma yoga, as commended by Lord Krishna in the *Srimad Bhagavadgita* 2, v. 39-41 and 5, v. 2-7, and demonstrated by Lord Rama in the *Ramayana* epic, involves actions performed as duty, without attachment to the consequences, and completed as an act of worship. Such actions accumulate no karma and set the devotee on a path leading back to God.

Hence, Gandhi believed that: "Education does not mean a knowledge of letters ... it means knowledge of duty... True education lies in serving others..." (cited in Rajput, 1998, p. 2). He added that: "in serving the neighbour, one ... serves the world" noting that "...a person's every act has a beneficial or harmful influence on the world" (Gandhi, 1884-1946, p. 218). Gandhi's goal was to avoid the accumulation of karma by replacing self-serving action with Self-conscious service to Godhead.

J. C. Kumarappa (1945), a follower of Gandhi, in his pioneering book, *The Economy of Permanence*, describes the evolution of society. He calls his most advanced and spiritual stage an Economy of Service. This is modelled on the selfless relationship between parent and child. “The mother bird will scour the jungle and risk its life in defending the young from its enemies. It functions neither for its present need nor for its personal future requirement, but projects its activities into ... generations to come, without looking for any reward” (p. 9). Today, environmental education and its new bud, education for sustainable development, have begun to struggle with notions of permanence and intergenerational justice but writers seem unaware that such already ideas underpin the foundations of deep ecology.

However, Vaisnavas see service as a mode of education. The *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, verses 61-65, in common with some Christian doctrines, argue that a devotee should not worry about the world, because God has His own plans. Instead they should work, because service to the world is also service to Godhead and puts His creatures in learning situations where they may appreciate God’s protection (Tyagisananda, 1978). Here, service is a way of developing humility, a highly regarded virtue for humans seeking release from the ego-Self and to return to Godhead. Schweig (2002) names humility an ethical core of Bengali Vaisnavism, while noting that the importance of dutiful service in the world is typically subsumed to intense devotional service to Lord Krishna (cf. Dasa, 1992). Nevertheless, once again, these underpinnings hint at the secular ethic later developed by deep ecology. Fred Besthorn’s (2001) deep ecological approach to social work, for example, steers very close to the Gandhian. Witness also the deep ecology call to *tread lightly upon the Earth* and *leave the smallest possible ecological footprint*. Vandana Shiva (2004) interprets the *Isa Upanishad* as follows: “Take only what you need that is set aside for you. Do not take anything else for you know to whom it belongs” (p. 133).

Sarvodaya

Gandhi (1926) translates the *Srimad Bhagavadgita* 14, 7, as advocating “freedom from pride and pretentiousness, non-violence, forgiveness ... service ... purity, steadfastness, and self-restraint” (p. 236), and he built his political philosophy from this notion on six foundations. He began with Truth, seen as synonymous with God and the goal of Vaisnava Self-realization. Second, he proposed *ahimsa*, literally non-harming. Ahimsa included the search for non-destructive solutions to social problems and contained a deep respect for the rights of non-human creatures. Vaisnavas are usually strict vegetarians. Third was *satyagraha*, literally grasping the Truth, which involves using the ethical high ground, Truth-force, in the management of human affairs, especially when this involves non-violent resistance (Naess, 1974). Such

considerations guided Gandhi's work on the elimination of social prejudice based on gender and caste. The fourth and fifth foundations were *swaraj*: literally, self-rule—a slogan from the days of India's struggle for independence, which Gandhi interprets as self-discipline and self-sufficiency, and *swadeshi*, which meant direct engagement in some form of productive manual labour (Richards, 1982). This, Gandhi hoped, would undermine the elitist notion that only lower-class people work with their hands.

However, Gandhi's culminating sixth foundation was a system of political economy called *sarvodaya* (uplift of all), which, unusually for its time, sought sustainability not growth (Doctor, 1967). *Sarvodaya* emphasizes sustainable local production, not long-distance trade. It lauds simple living, not the accumulation of material wealth. It emphasizes small-scale enterprise, so reducing the scope for employer-employee antagonism and initiating the "small is beautiful" ideas later developed by Schumacher (1973), whose legacy, Schumacher College, is now part of the UK's first government-sponsored Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Education for Sustainable Development. Ultimately, Gandhi and his followers built *sarvodaya* into a new educational system, *Nai Talim*, founded in work-based and inquiry-based learning (Rajput, 1998).

Gandhi's dream of "village republics" sought to remove the possibility of oppression from distant administrations and bureaucracies, although attachment to the local can breed both parochialism and xenophobia (cf. Gottschalk, 2001; Haigh, 2005). However, such ideas resonate with Western thinking on bioregionalism and environmentalist campaigns against the fuel-wasting, pollution-generating, and hence unsustainable long-distance transport of goods and foodstuffs (Berry, 1999).

Of course, *sarvodaya* has a spiritual orientation. *Sarvodaya* sought to replace private possession because it establishes attachment to the material world and so hinders Self-realization. Its replacement was a system of communal trusteeship that aimed to help communities live sustainably within their local habitat. Naess (1974) noted: "Gandhi's utopia is one of the few that shows ecological balance, and today his rejection of the Western World's material abundance and waste is accepted by progressives of the ecological movement" (p. 10).

After Gandhi's death, India's *sarvodaya* and *Nai Talim* educational ideas touched the lives of millions and a Buddhist version continues in Sri Lanka (Macy, 1991; Kantowsky, 1980). However, it was launched into times dominated by an economic theology of endless growth in an infinite and inexhaustible world, and times before society bumped into its limits to growth and began to worry about human-driven destructive environmental change (Loy, 2000; Korten, 2000). So, the approach was overwhelmed by the final blooming of the corporate extractive economy and the attractions of its glittering prizes (Berry, 1999). *Sarvodaya* may have been ethically and morally apt, but it was too far ahead of its time (Mehta, 1997). Perhaps, today, its time has come?

Discussion

Deep ecology, like the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014, is about “living as though the future mattered” and, against all protests, about learning to live in harmony within an environment imperilled by the sum of all human actions (cf. Devall & Sessions, 1985; Calder & Clugston, 2005; Kah & Kah, 1999; UNESCO, 2004). Securing the future implies a change in the way in which humans live, think, and value their lives and place in the world. Deep ecology suggests that the first step towards this is gaining the Self-realization that they are, in fact, one with (or an engaged part of) Nature, their life support system. Only this realization will allow them to recognize, as Annan (2004) proposes, that “[every] individual ... has an obligation and an interest in changing outlooks through education and by example, thereby helping to end thoughtless or deliberate waste and destruction” (p. 1).

Deep ecology has already absorbed much from its Vaisnava roots and there may be more to learn. Like the larger movement for education for sustainable development, deep ecology lays emphasis on the personal and the spiritual. Like the Vaisnava devotee, the deep ecologist is constantly concerned with self-improvement and striving towards greater Self-realization (e.g., Satsvarupa dasa, 1994). However, the focus of the Vaisnava search is the God-within rather than the Environment-without, while Vaisnavas are ambivalent about action in the material external world. The material world may be the Earthly body of God and a vehicle for remembrance of divine pastimes; however, true reality is spiritual and transcends the earthly plane and so worship is the sole motivation for environmental action (Dasa, 1994).

By contrast, secular deep ecology looks outwards. Deep ecologists are more likely to be concerned about their ecological footprint in the world than the intensity of their personal feelings towards God or Nature. However, its literature is packed with descriptions of epiphanies, often experienced in wilderness locations, like Naess’s own experience at the crossed stones of Tvergastein (cf. Harding, 1997; Naess, 1987). Ecological Self-realization, especially its wilderness “rite of passage” element, has been criticized for promoting a masculine way of knowing (Zimmerman, 1994). However, deep ecologists also work at environmental conservation and even the restitution of Nature in damaged habitats, a process which has been linked with the feminine concept of midwifery (Haigh, 2002).

John Davis (1998) warns against a deep ecological tendency towards a personalized ecological concern that hides the unity of “ego and eco.” However, this approach is true to deep ecology’s Vaisnava roots, where an adherent is guided to build a relationship with God such as servant, friend, parent, or ultimately, lover (cf. Prabhupada, 1988; *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* 3, 25, v. 38). Joanna Macy (1991) builds from a Buddhist tradition, but she

urges readers to see the world as lover as well as self, and to turn away from exploitation, maltreatment, and abuse.

Deep ecology has profound spiritual and psychological foundations. Deborah Winter's (1996) three steps towards ecological self-awareness are: first, conceptual and cognitive, second, perceptual and sensory, and finally, spiritual. Earlier, Edward O. Wilson (1984) introduced the concept of biophilia, expressing our innate attachment to Nature which later, Theodore Roszak (1992) styled our *ecological unconscious*, an awareness of our greater Self that is within us and may be awakened. Eshana provides a more formal link to a vast specialist literature on the self created by academic psychology, especially the constructionist self that links the ecological Self to the constructivist theory beloved of science educators (Bragg, 1996).

Conclusion

Deep ecology has roots in several spiritual traditions, but Vaisnavism is among the deepest. Vaisnavism, through Gandhi and Naess, has lent deep ecology its doctrine of the three pedagogical steps towards ecological Self-realization. Exploring these ideas through the steps of Lord Vishnu and His Vamana avatara, and the associated Vaisnava theories of the World and Self-realization, lends deep ecology new depths, insights, and motivations. In Vaisnavism, the striving for personal perfection, which is Self-realization, may take many forms and not all are directly beneficial to the wider World. However, Vaisnavism's emphasis on the development of a personal ethic, which involves humility, simple living, non-harming, non-possession, and the deep concern for personal uplift through service, albeit to God rather than Nature, are all goals that deep ecologists recognize. The two traditions share the ability to conceive the material world as a Spiritual construct, a focus on learning, and the deep belief that everything is should be "personal," albeit for different reasons. They share the aspiration to simple living and high thoughts, to thinking generally and acting personally. Upon such Vaisnava foundations, Gandhi added his practical *sarvodaya* system, which concerned local production, harmonious living with the environment, egalitarian non-possession, and concepts of local empowerment now promoted through the bioregional lobby.

Finally, it could be argued that deep ecology has absorbed some of the spiritual essence of Vaisnavism while Naess, like Gandhi and many other Vaisnava reformers, have tried to leave its millennia of accumulated theological complexity behind (cf. Ahmed, 2005). However, this paper suggests that the intellectual seams that were mined for the origination of deep ecology, both the Gandhian and deeper Vaisnava layers, contain much more of value to deep ecology, to environmental education, and to the new movement of education for sustainable development.

Notes on Contributor

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