

SELF-REALIZATION AND SOCIETY

ARNE NAESS and HELENA NORBERG-HODGE

All living beings have a potential for self-realization.

One of the key-concepts in the philosophy of Arne Naess is self-realization. Understanding what this means and the context that nurtures it, gives us profound insight into the nature of deep ecology.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, who has been absorbing the gentle Buddhist philosophy of rural Ladakh over many years, self-realization emerges as a critical ingredient in her recipe for thriving societies.

Satish Kumar and Julia Ponsonby held a conversation with them.

Satish:

What is self-realization?

Arne:

It is the realization of the deeper and broader self. It is identification with or seeing something of yourself in others: being joyful when others are, sorrowful when you see others sorrowful. Your feelings are somehow adapted to the others with whom you identify. For example, you have identification with your mother, father and siblings, in the sense that you help them as you would help yourself. This identification can extend wider than your family: for example, to your friends, your neighbours and your country. It can extend to the whole of humanity. It does not stop there either. You can identify yourself with pets, with other animals, with plants and other natural elements. Through identification with others you find self-realization. The term includes personal and community self-realization.

Helena:

I find Buddhist philosophy a very useful system here. It teaches that the self does not have absolute boundaries. We are not separate or disconnected entities: everything in the universe exists in relationship. Everything has a living, flowing connection with everything else. Of course, that does not mean that there is no self in a relative sense. Buddhism is not a nihilistic philosophy. It emphasizes the inter-relatedness of everything. We are not isolated entities.

Many Western philosophers have thought of non-Western cultures as lacking a sense of individualism which they think is necessary for progress and higher consciousness. But Buddhist societies have developed a very high level of

consciousness and yet they have retained a deep sense of community and connectedness, which has helped them to be fulfilled and self-realized.

Arne:

Very often deep ecology is thought to undermine the value of the individual, but that is a misunderstanding. We constantly talk about each and every single living being. In stressing the greater context and interrelationships we never for a moment give up the relations between A and B, but nor do we give up the idea that A and B play a particular role in the scheme as a whole.

Helena:

This relates very much to the dynamic relationship between diversity and unity. In today's mass society, young people are growing up fearful of expanding their deeper and broader selves. The tragedy of the modern age is that in the name of individualism, what's being promoted is, in fact, a mass culture where people are fearful of developing their unique characteristics. The insecurity that many children now feel is due to a lack of connection with other people. This generates an emotional insecurity and a fear of being themselves.

Arne:

In the individualistic and utilitarian thinking of Western industrial countries, the terms self-expression and self-interest are used for what I call ego-realization.

Julia:

Arne, does your notion of "self-digging" have any bearing on this process?

Arne:

Yes, self-digging means not to develop the depth and broadness of the self, but digging down to ego-fulfilment as opposed to self-realization. You develop a cult of your own self-seeking, "I am fond of this, I would like to have that. . .". You have a reputation, a social image which enhances the feeling of yourself as somebody who does not need anybody else. It is said that some mountaineers are self-digging. They go to the top of the mountain for their reputation. They want all the name, fame and cake for themselves, often at the expense of others! Ultimately you cut out identification with others to such an extent that you are left alone. As somebody once said: "I'm going to be the richest in the graveyard."

Julia:

Is the concept of self-realization applicable to other beings?

Arne:

I see pigs in the East who run around, free, following - or realizing their particular interests. In the West, their potentialities are cut down through being put in confined space in factory farms. The term self-realization is eminently applicable to all beings. But if you go down to insects and ecosystems, there is a wide area where it is more or less up to you whether you use the term or not. It's just a word; you shouldn't burden it with too much extension, but it is useful for beings other than humans certainly for dogs, cats and so on. If I see a flower withering away without water, without flowering, something is unrealized there.

Satish:

What are the appropriate conditions in which self-realization can happen?

Arne:

A community based on deep ecology is certainly conducive to self-realization. I like the word "community" rather than "society". Society is a term which is ambivalent because it may not mean companionship, it may not include ecology and lifestyle. In Norway we had very strong communities. There you had this identity; these inter-relationships were very important. Community has a concrete meaning; society sounds rather conceptual and abstract.

Helena:

In Ladakh, when small communities were really in charge of their lives, responsible for their own natural resources and not at the mercy of an urban or further-removed élite, they were empowered and secure.

Progressively, rural communities have been marginalized. People may be living rurally, may know each other and have these internalized relationships, but because they have been made to feel insecure, they lose power and self-respect. Individuals become intolerant and out of that intolerance grows a rejection of your own self-realization and that of others.

Arne:

Another important condition for self-realization is that all little boys and girls have access to nature where they can do what they like. Where they have trees, flowers, water and everything, so that they can establish a wide identification with nature.

That is very relevant to deep ecology. If people have their upbringing close to nature, they will be close to the source of great happiness which is the ground for self-realization.

There is a role for central governments too. For instance, in the relations between Alaska and the United States, it was Washington that made Alaskans keep a lot of nature free from development. So you have to have a certain amount of government structure- you cannot avoid it. It's an illusion to imagine that we can go straight to some kind of utopia with millions of small communities and no governmental structures. We have to have a structure of government to support music, the sciences, the arts and all that. You need more than local communities. I'm being realistic.

I'm an optimist about the twenty- second century. But I don't see any hope for the twenty-first century - though if there were, I would be very glad. We are going in the direction of a strong international market, stronger than today. What we can do is to sabotage this structure individually and locally and try to establish local communities that are more or less independent. But in terms of power, sheer power, we don't have a chance in the short term.

Nevertheless, we must protect what is left of local culture against the onslaught which is there all the time. The transition to a more locally-based culture would be easier if there were fewer people on this planet. If we were to be ten thousand million people, the problems would be tremendous. We also need to strengthen what I call inter-local as opposed to international relations. For example, certain localities in Norway may join with certain localities in Africa learning from them and offering support through difficult times.

In the next century, I hope that many people who at present live in cities will continue to live there, because there is simply not room enough to have everybody dotted about in small communities. But cities must be livable. Architecture and planning are very important. We need to have neighbourhoods with trees, greenery and wildlifr, without which there is no chance of self-realization.

Helena:

If you look at the cities of today - per capita consumption goes up very dramatically when compared with rural living. Villages and small towns can use trees for shading, more sun for heating, and recycle their waste much more easily. The end result is that they destroy less wilderness and have a lower impact on the natural world. So I think we actually need to start encouraging ruralization. I find it

worrying that the Chinese government is planning to urbanize 400 million people who presently live in villages.

I'm not advocating eliminating all cities, but allowing the big cities to come to an optimal relationship with the natural world. We have to estimate the optimum number of inhabitants in a city in terms of how to recycle waste etc. without becoming too polluting and dependent on a big global infrastructure. Some say over a million would be out of the question and argue that around 500,000 is the optimum.

Satish:

You have described the conditions that optimize self-realization. How do we go from here to there?

Arne:

One factor is education. In Norway there is a movement to encourage people to stay where they are and live on what their neighbourhood can offer. We try to have schools that foster this perspective. From the age of six children learn what constitutes the local and global and what is in between, so they get a sense of the possibilities. Then, when they are eighteen years old, they can stay in their local community or go to some centre for further studies. It is true that in the countryside deep ecology is more easily possible, because it means that you have people in nature - seeing the mountains, the sea, the forest, and so on. You have the possibility of a variety of small jobs: a little hunting, a little farming, a little fishing, a little literary work. There would be some trade so people were not living off, say, only potatoes, and life would be made easier by telephones, for calling doctors, etc.

If you present people with the possibilities of self-realization, it's much bigger than the attraction of cities. In California there are artists established in localities who were told "You are so good, you must go to New York!" They went to the city and got "lost". They no longer had the opportunity to be the big fish in the small pond.

Helena:

It isn't just that people want to leave their area of birth; they are succumbing to economic pressures and job opportunities. This links in with the degree of specialization that is being encouraged in schools and universities. I think we have to encourage a level of local diversification which can only happen if there is also a certain degree of de-specialization within the education system. The diversification of the local economy should be very much in tune with local natural resources. Economic diversity will encourage an increase in biodiversity; so in some areas where you only grow potatoes, you might find that there could be some other crops

which would also grow in those conditions. What we've found with the industrial era is that we have had monoculture everywhere and that has been very destructive in biological as well as cultural and economic terms.

Arne:

Diversity in every aspect of our existence should be a norm, whether it is biodiversity, cultural diversity or economic diversity. Diversity of ideas is also very important. If we thought that there is one correct idea, one absolute truth, one right way to sustainability, then we might end up creating a kind of eco-fascism. It is only through multiplicity, plurality, diversity and inclusivity that we can find self-realization.

There is no one final definition of self-realization. Everyone will find their own meaning in this word. Through deep questioning we come to deep ecology and through deep ecology we come to self-realization, but all this means nothing. It remains a kind of theory. It is through practice that we find realization. As each one of us has our own body, we have our own "realization".

From [Resurgence: Jan 1997](#)

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