THE KINSHIP OF VEDĀNTA, GANDHI, AND DEEP ECOLOGY

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The environmental philosophy or movement known as deep ecology is a hugely popular form of environmental thinking that informs a large number of environmental movements worldwide, at least in its moderate form. It is often said to have a spiritual quality. Self-identified deep ecologists are found in a great variety of countries: in addition to the Norwegian founder of deep ecology, Arne Naess, one might mention Bill Devall, George Sessions, Michael Zimmerman, Dave Foreman, Joanna Macy, Gary Snyder, and Doug Tompkins in the United States; Alan Dregson and David Orton in Canada; Yuichi Inoe in Japan; Pat Fleming in England; John Seed, Freya Mathews, and Warwick Fox in Australia; and to a certain degree Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam and France and Sunderal Bahuguna in India. Virtually all of the so-called "radical" environmental groups such as Earth First!, Greenpeace, Sea Shepherds, and many animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) identify with deep ecology, but it has also had a strong influence on many other environmental groups worldwide. Moreover, deep ecology has had a broad impact on the green movement by providing a principled platform for Green

parties, political ecologists, and professional environmentalists, as well as an ethics for ecovillages. Thomas Berry had a very favorable view of deep ecology.

Core principles of deep ecology include the concept of biological equality, a radically interconnected conception of self—called the Deep Ecological Self, and the process of self-realization. If these concepts sound Vedāntic, I aim to demonstrate that is because they are—although this point has not been commonly recognized. What I want to highlight is that many of the movements mentioned above owe significant foundational ideas to Mahatma Gandhi. Specifically, I want to make clear that this global form of environmentalism is in many ways an application of Gandhi's Vedāntic ethic to environmental challenges. Moreover, this consideration leads to a distinctive understanding of the close relationship between social justice and environmentalism.

In formulating his own ideas, the founder of deep ecology, Arne Naess, drew heavily on the teachings of Gandhi, who in turn based his ideas largely on the teachings available in Vedānta texts. The term "Vedānta" means literally "the culmination of the Vedas," and it is specifically based on the early Sanskrit scriptures of the Upanishads, Brahma Sūtras, and Bhagavad Gītā texts which have played a central role in Hindu thought. If one looks through Gandhi's journal entries in the ninety volumes of his collected works,[1] one quickly sees that Gandhi read and reread Vedāntic texts during his long stays in jail—especially the *Brihadāranyaka* and *Chāndogya Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*—and that these were the texts he quoted most frequently in his speeches, letters, and sermons. Although Gandhi believed all religions are valid paths to truth, he wrote in 1925: "I must say in all humility that Hinduism, as I know it, entirely satisfies my soul and fills my whole being, and I find solace in the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads."[2] Importantly, he was drawn to Vedāntic teachings regarding the unified nature of reality and the self. Exemplary expression of this position can be found in such passages as *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, verse (2.5.14-15):

> "This self (*ātman*) is *brahman*; it is the Whole. This very self is the lord and ruler of all beings. As all the spokes are fastened to the hub and rim of a wheel, so to one's self (*ātman*) are fastened all beings, all the gods, all the worlds, all the breaths, and all other selves (*ātman*)."[3]

Or perhaps stated more succinctly in verse 3.5.1: "The self within all is this self of yours."

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[1] *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1988).

[2] *The Spectator*, November 30, 1929, p. 22.

[3] Translations of the Upanishads are drawn from the translation of Patrick Olivelle, *Upanishads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

These and many other such verses give voice to the overall theme of the Upanishads, which is ontological unity—the belief that everything is radically interconnected. The Upanishadic view of reality recognizes the simultaneity of unity and diversity, since the world of multiplicity is understood to be an expansive and ongoing expression of infinite unity. Comprehension that all life is interconnected has clear implications for views of the self. The central assertion of Vedāntic literature is that our essential self—the *ātman*—is nondifferent from the totality of all reality that is *Brahman*. This is prominently expressed in celebrated concise "great sayings" (*māhavākyas*): such as "I am Brahman" (*aham brahmāsmi*), and "You are That!" (*tat tvam asi*). The ultimate self, then, according to Vedānta is not an autonomous unit operating independent of and in competition with other beings, but rather is part of this larger, deeper, interrelated network of being. On a down- to-earth level, this means that our kin are not only fellow human beings, but all other kinds of beings as well. The human predicament, according to the Upanishads, however, is one of ignorance and false identity. Instead of identifying with the *ātman*, the essential self connected to All, we identify with the much more narrow and constricted ego self (*ahamkāra*), which regards itself as separate from all others. This is the root of all our ills. The primary aim of the Upanishads is to bring about a shift in identity from the illusory ego self to the true self, which is non-different from the All. Many Vedāntic thinkers, including Gandhi, have called this process "self-realization."

These are the ideas Gandhi inherited from his immersion in Vedāntic literature, and from which he drew as he gave expression to their ethical implications in the form of social justice and compassionate nonviolence. He identifies his life-goal in the introduction to his own commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā: "What I want to achieve—what I have been struggling and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization." Gandhi made it clear that the self he refers to here is not the autonomous ego self, but rather the radically interconnected self of Vedānta. His goal was to identify with all life: "The ocean is composed of drops of water; each drop is an entity and yet it is part of a whole; 'the one and the many.' In this ocean of life, we are little drops. My doctrine means that I must identify myself with all life, with everything that lives, that I must share the majesty of life in the presence of God. The sum-total of this life is God."[4] This is all-inclusive identification is "self-realization."

The ethical life for Gandhi, then, does not depend upon dutiful moral sacrifice, but rather on one's capacity for empathetically *identifying* with other

[4] This statement was initially published by Gandhi in *India's Case for Swaraj* (1932), p. 245, but is also cited by Warwick Fox, "Transpersonal Ecology and the Varieties of Identification" in *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), p. 146.

beings. One does violence toward other beings when one sees them as "radically other." The ethical life, therefore, depends upon the cultivation of our insight into the true nature of reality and self. Issues pertaining to equality and social justice are all rooted in the non-dual vision of Vedānta for Gandhi, who wrote: "I believe in *advaita* (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. . . . The rockbottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of nonviolence is belief in the essential oneness of all life."[5] This Vedāntic notion of self led Gandhi to his life-long commitment to all-inclusive love: "I believe in the absolute oneness of God and, therefore, of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through reflection. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul, nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous."[6] The true test of the all-embracing vision of the Vedāntic self is that great compassion must even include one's own enemies: "It is not non-violence if we merely love those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those who hate us."[7] Animated by these ideas, Gandhi's life work focused on fighting the inequality and social injustice inherent in both colonialism and the caste system.

Importantly, however, Gandhi's ethic—based on the non-dual vision of Vedānta—does not stop at the boundary of the human. Seemingly aware of the resistance to Darwin's teachings in the Tennessee Scopes Monkey trial of 1925, he wrote: "My ethics not only permit me to claim, but require me to own kinship with *not merely the ape*, but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake and the scorpion."[8] Gandhi was well known for not allowing trees to be cut or snakes to be harmed in his ashram. The identification with all life leads to an ever-expanding ethics, taking more and more into its ever-widening circle of compassion until it finally includes the Whole. Gandhi writes,

> My religion embraces all life. I want to realize brotherhood or identity not merely with beings called human, but I want to realize identity with all life, even with such things as crawl upon the earth. I want, if I don't give you a shock, to realize identity with even the crawling things upon earth, because we claim descent from the same God, and that being so all life in whatever form it appears must be essentially one.[9]

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[5] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers* (Lusanne: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1958), p. 118.

[6] Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, September 25, 1924, p. 84

[7] Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, p. 86.

[8] Gandhi, *Young India*, August 7, 1926, p. 244.

[9] Ibid., April 4, 1929, p. 107.

With this last statement Gandhi has moved beyond what is now called in environmental philosophy "anthropocentrism," the belief that humans are somehow separate from and superior to all other life forms. As many are aware, we are facing an unprecedented environmental crisis today involving increasingly massive extinctions. Many have come to understand this as part of a larger spiritual crisis very much related to our sense of self.[10] Gandhi's articulation of a radically interconnected conception of self and all-inclusive compassionate care gained the attention of a young Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, who went on to articulate what was to become the highly popular form of ecological philosophy and activism know as Deep Ecology.

In a widely circulated and influential article published in 1973 and titled "Self Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," Arne Naess, who came under the spell of and published two books on Gandhi's thought, wrote: "We underestimate ourselves. I emphasize self. We tend to confuse it with the narrow ego. Human nature is such that with sufficient all-sided maturity we cannot avoid 'identifying' ourselves with all living beings."[11] Like his teacher Gandhi, Naess maintained that many of the problems we face today—especially those related to the environmental crisis—have a great deal to do with a flawed sense of self. Via Gandhi, Naess connects his thinking on the true nature of the self with the Bhagavad Gītā, most specifically verse 6.29: "The yogi sees all beings with an equal eye: He sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self."[12] Here are the roots of what were to become two of the pillars of Naess' Deep Ecology: biological or biospherical egalitarianism and the concept of the ecological self. Similar to Gandhi, Naess defined the process of "self-realization"—a term he took directly from Gandhi—as: "the broadening and deepening of *self identification*," and claimed: "Because of an inescapable process of *identification* with others, with growing maturity, the self is widened and deepened."[13] Here is an understanding of self-realization as a process of identification with ever widening circles of inclusive compassion until one has identified with All. To the extent that one sees rigid boundaries, one falls short of deep ecological consciousness. Deep ecologist Bill Devall writes: "The self is not an entity or a separate thing, it is an opening to discovering what some call the Absolute or in Sanskrit, *ātman*. Awakening the self beyond the barbed wire fence the ego has constructed engages

[10] This means that "drivers" of the environmental crisis are not just measurable things such as the burning of fossil fuels and the spewing of toxins into our air, soil, and water, but also conceptual factors such as our conceptions of self.

[11] Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 13.

[12] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p, 195.

[13] Naess, "Self-Realization" in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 13 (italics added).

us in the world, in the grounding of being-in-the-world."[14] Deep ecologist and poet Gary Snyder states the matter crisply, saying there is "no self-realization without the whole self, and the whole self is the whole thing."[15] Although Naess grounded his philosophy in the relational science of ecology, especially John Muir's ecological maxim "everything hangs together,"[16] he follows Gandhi's ethic quite closely as is evident in these words: "Through the wider Self every living being is connected intimately, and from this intimacy follows the capacity of *identification* and as its consequences, the practice of non-violence."[17]

At the level of practical environmental action, self-realization—the process of identifying with all beings—involves recognizing another's interests as one's own. Identifying with wider systems of nature leads to the realization that environmental destruction is tantamount to self-destruction. Once again following the direction laid out by Gandhi, Naess maintains that the degree to which we identify our self with the Whole, is the degree to which we will engage in the preservation of the world and its many beings, not out of some self-sacrificing altruism, but rather out of self-defense: "Defending Nature. . . . We are engaged in self-defense."[18] It is in this sense that Naess asserted: "Academically speaking, what I suggest is the supremacy of environmental ontology and realism (i.e., realizing the interconnectedness of all beings) over environmental ethics as a means of invigorating the environmental movement."[19] Thus, as we discover our "ecological self" we will joyfully interact with and defend that with which we identify. The well-known Australian rainforest activist and deep ecologist John Seed says: "I am protecting the rainforest develops into 'I am a part of the rainforest protecting myself."[20] Environmental defense, then, appears as enlightened self-interest (as long as we understand the self here akin to the Vedāntic one). Seen in this light, conservation is a matter of self-defense, springing from a deep existential impulse. Naess writes: "The requisite care flows naturally if the 'self' is widened and deepened so that protection of Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves."[21]

I pause for a moment to consider just what kind of Vedānta is it that Gandhi promoted. I raise this question because there are many schools of Vedānta; not understanding this has led to some serious misunderstandings. Although it is numerically a minority school, Shankarācharya's Advaita Vedānta is a well-

[14] Bill Devall, "The Ecological Self" in *The Deep Ecology Movement,* p. 104.
[15] Gary Snyder, "Re-Inhabitation" in *The Deep Ecology Movement* p. 71.
[16] Naess, "Self-Realization" in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 19.
[17] Ibid., p. 23 (italics added).
[18] Ibid., p. 21.
[19] Ibid., p. 26.
[20] Dewall, "The Ecological Self" in *The Deep Ecology Movement* p. 107.
[21] Naess, "Self-Realization" in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 26.

known school of Vedānta that maintains that the true self is completely disassociated from the phenomenal world, which is ultimately declared to be unreal. One of the tragedies in western understandings and representations of Hinduism is that through the politics of colonial scholarship, the complex and varied schools that make up Vedāntic thought were largely reduced to the singularity of Shankara's Advaita Vedānta, which holds the world to be an illusion. This has led to mistaken assumptions about the kind of Vedāntic thinking Gandhi passed on to Naess. Although Gandhi makes it clear in his own writings that his personal religious roots are in the Vaishnava schools of Vedānta, which hold the world to be real as expressed in the central Vaishnava theological text the Bhagavad Gītā, many have assumed that all Vedānta philosophical schools follow Shankara's negative assessment of the world. In his generally insightful study of Arne Naess, for example, the deep ecologist Warwick Fox unfortunately writes:

> In choosing Gandhi as his exemplar of the philosophy of self-realization, Naess is referring to someone who located himself within his native Indian religious tradition, but who nevertheless went against the grain of that tradition in the extent to which he endorsed the reality of the phenomenal or empirical world. . . . Following the great Indian philosopher Shankara, the dominant traditional Indian metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta impugns the reality status of the empirical world.[22]

Fox concludes that Gandhi stood "Hindu philosophy" on its head—partially under the influence of Christianity—and that Naess followed this upside-down version of Vedānta. The Vedāntic philosophical traditions, however, are much more complex and varied than Fox assumes. After understanding that the numerically dominant Vaishnava schools of Vedānta actually embrace the reality of the world, the whole problem Fox struggles with disappears and there is no need for his wild explanations or head-scratching acrobatics. Schools of Vedāntic were readily available to Gandhi within the Vaishnava culture of Western India in which he was raised that fully affirm the sacrality of the world with all its myriad beings.

In closing, one final point is worth mentioning regarding Naess's attraction to and use of Gandhi's Vedāntic approach to being in the world. Naess was keen to emphasize that deep ecology not only aims for compassionate environmental protection, but also for spiritual enrichment. He highlights the fact that the process of self-realization or identification with all beings not only yields an

[22] Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 108-09.

expanded sense of Self and healthier world for all, but also an enhanced and profound joy. One's capacity for loving joy, according to Naess, is increased to the degree one identifies with a world of beings beyond the limited ego. Joy is a blessed experience for Naess. "Joy is," he maintains, "a feature of the *indivisible*. . . . In a sense self-realization involves experiences of the infinitely rich joyful aspect of reality."[23] Here, then, is a solid foundation for a form of sustainable environmental activism that is well grounded in Gandhi's Vedāntic teachings and has already spread throughout every inhabited continent on Earth. After reading Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment titled "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home," I was struck by its seemingly deep ecological nature. In this document Pope Francis articulates what he calls ecological conversion as a process of spiritual maturity understood in these terms: "The human person grows more, matures more, and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with *all creatures*" (175).[24] Here is apt expression of the deep ecological notion of "self-realization." Could it be that Gandhi's Vedāntic notions have now found their way into the thinking of our current august pope?

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[23] Naess, "Self-Realization" in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 27 (italics added).

[24] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, section 242. The text of this encyclical is available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.