

MAHATMA GANDHI AND DEEP ECOLOGY

By Nick Gier

Read scholarly version at www.NickGier.com/GandhiDeepEcology.pdf

My family now comprises all living beings.

--Mahatma Gandhi

During his life-time Gandhi did not speak directly to ecological issues as we now know them. Like many Indians whom I know, Gandhi appeared to lack an appreciation for wilderness that matched his sensitivity about the treatment of domestic animals.

One of Gandhi's most powerful ecological lectures was to a disciple who had collected too many *nim* leaves to condition his carding-bow. Gandhi scolded him: "This is violence. We should pluck the required number of leaves, but you broke off the whole twig, which is wasteful and wrong."

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is famous for coining the term "deep ecology," which means a radical approach—going to the root causes—of environmental problems. Naess praised Gandhi for giving environmental philosophy a "rock-bottom foundation" with the technique of non-violence and a "belief in the essential oneness of all life."

In contrast to instrumental views of nature in which the value of non-human things is determined in terms of human use—a shallow rather than deep approach—Naess assumed that all natural beings have intrinsic value. Things that have intrinsic value are those which are ends in themselves not just merely means to another's end. Human beings also have intrinsic value, so if there is a conflict between them and nature, Naess maintains that natural resources may be used as means "only where it is necessary to satisfy vital ends."

Even though we are allowed to do this, we should be mindful of ancient hunting and agricultural traditions. The native hunter's respect for an animal killed for subsistence is shown in rituals where the animal's spirit is propitiated in a sincere manner. Buddhist farmers also give offerings to the souls of insects that they have killed in their harvests or by their use of insecticides. For the offense of taking the whole twig, Gandhi insisted that the cotton spinner apologize to the *nim* tree.

One of Gandhi's most famous sayings is "the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." Gandhi's ashrams as well as those all over the world are models for sustainability and a commitment to simple spiritual lives that take little from nature.

Naess maintains that in addition to learning about the unity of all things from Gandhi, he also "made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence, and what has sometimes been called biospherical egalitarianism."

It is important to understand what self-realization means in the context of environmental ethics. The Mirror of Dharma is one of the most striking images in the Buddhist tradition. When we approach enlightenment, the mirror starts reflecting our true selves, which are our Buddha natures. The apostle Paul would call the Buddha nature the “Christ in me.”

For a Buddhism that respects the individual reality of the self and things in the world, I would rather see my own individual self and all the things that relate to my world in the Mirror of Dharma. In this way I can try to be made mindful of what I need to do to make all those relations right and good. It will certainly not be the same set of specific imperatives as for other people.

The prism analogy is another way to express the self-world relationship. White light, symbolizing the Godhead, is refracted through a prism to produce a rainbow of colors—reflecting the rich diversity of the myriad things in the cosmos. In some Hindu and Buddhist schools the prism refers to ignorance of the real ground of all beings, and when the prism of ignorance is taken away, we have nothing but the undifferentiated white light of true reality.

Keeping Gandhi's affirmation of the individual foremost in mind, I prefer a revised prism analogy. Instead of one prism standing for ignorance, there are as many prisms as there are individuals. Each prism self would refract the white light of reality and each would produce a fully differentiated world, one in which each self is preserved in her/his own individuality and integrity. In order to make the prism selves truly unique we would conceive of them as flawed slightly so that the world is refracted differently for every single self.

For a robust environment ethic that synthesizes the wisdom of Asian and Euro-America, we must always balance visions of holistic unity with a focus on individual agency and integrity. Without the former there can be no reason to value nature, and without the latter there would be no basis for environmental activism.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read chapters from his book *The Virtue of Non-Violence: from Gautama to Gandhi* at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/vnv.htm