

Much of our conventional education is learning "about" nature. We study nature as something separate from us and as an object which is useful to us. We seem to consider ourselves either masters of nature or, if more enlightened, then stewards of nature. We study nature because we wish to know our servant or our protectorate in order to make best use of nature for a prolonged period.

When human beings consider themselves to be the masters of the earth and have dominion over it they are more likely to abuse it and exploit it. Therefore, the environmentalists take a step in the right direction by considering themselves as stewards of the earth. Stewardship entails responsibility. In such a view of the environment people are more likely to conserve and care. However, both these views are anthropocentric. From both these points of view human beings are a superior species, having a higher status. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess has named such a human centred relationship with the natural environment as "shallow ecology".

According to Arne Naess human beings are a part and parcel of the natural world as any other species. No doubt human beings have their own outstanding faculties and qualities. They have their own highly developed senses, intelligence, consciousness and ability to communicate. But then other species too have their own particular, specific and unique qualities, which humans do not possess. Each and every species upon this earth, humans and other than humans, contribute in their own specific way, for the totality of existence, which evolves, unfolds and maintains its

continuity. Therefore, all life, human and non-human, irrespective of their particular qualification, have intrinsic value. As all humans are born equal, irrespective of their class, status, education and wealth and as they have the right to life irrespective of their usefulness to society; in the same way all species have intrinsic value irrespective of their usefulness to humankind. Arnie Naess calls it "deep ecology".

From this perspective human beings are not masters or stewards of nature but they are friends of nature. The word friendship can be used in two ways; firstly, we consider those whom we know, as friends because we are acquainted with them, we go out with them, we spend some time together and support each other in time of need. But then there is another meaning of friendship; when we feel unconditional empathy and offer our affection without expecting anything in return, then we are in a state of friendship. In this second meaning of the word friendship is a sense of mutuality and reciprocity. When we are able to identify ourselves with the other, without any sense of superiority or inferiority, then we create a condition of friendship. That was the vision of the founders of the environmental organisation Friends of the Earth.

Friendship is the purest and noblest kind of relationship. In Buddhist language it is called metta. The Buddha throughout his life advocated his disciples to practice metta, i.e. friendship, with all sentient beings. The Buddha himself was called Maitreya which means Friend; not master, not prophet, not guru, just Friend. Friendship is the foundation upon which Buddhism is built. Friendship underpins the notion of non-

violence and compassion. We will never harm or exploit or damage or denigrate someone who is our friend. We will receive the gifts given to us by our friends with thanks and gratitude. We will return our own gifts to our friends. Everything we receive from nature is a gift; whether it is food, water, sunshine or anything else; everything is a gift. This is the symbiotic relationship which equips us with humility, wonder and reverence. Nature is not there to be plundered or exploited rather it is there to be cherished and celebrated. I call it "Reverential Ecology".

The moment we accept that all life has intrinsic value we begin to experience a profound feeling of reverence towards all life and begin to experience the beauty, the integrity, the exuberance, the generosity and the economy which holds the entire web of life together. In place of controlling, owning or possessing we begin to participate in the process of the intricately woven web of life. We are no longer masters or stewards of the earth rather we are participants and co-creators of the earth. Of course, humans have their special place in the scheme of the universe, but so do the flowers, fruit, fungi, worms, butterflies, oceans, mountains and all micro and macro organisms.

When we view existence with such an expanded consciousness then it is possible to open our eyes and learn "from" nature rather than learn "about" nature. Nature is the greatest teacher. The Buddha learnt the reality of interdependence from a tree. While sitting under a tree and observing how everything was dependent upon everything else he was enlightened. Fruit came from flower, flower from

branches, branches and leaves grow from the trunk, the trunk from the soil, the soil is nourished by the rain, the rain is held by the clouds, clouds are formed out of the sea, the sea receives the waters of the rivers and is held by the earth, the sea nourishes the earth and earth the sea and so it goes on. The Buddha's realisation of interdependence was perhaps the beginning of deep ecology and reverential ecology.

We don't need to go very far to learn from nature. Wherever we look with open eyes and a generous heart we will find nature as teacher. Look at the honeybee; we can learn the lessons of transformation from the humble bee. It takes a little nectar from here, a little nectar from there, but never too much from anywhere. Never ever has a flower complained that a honeybee has taken too much nectar away. In fact the flowers are grateful to the bee for helping them to pollinate. When the bee has taken nectar it does not waste; it transforms the nectar into sweet, delicious, healing honey. If human beings learnt to design their systems on the lines of the honeybee there would be no depletion, no waste and no pollution.

Science writer, Janine Benyus, calls it "biomimicary"; having observed the beauty, resilience and intricacy of spider silk and seashells she says, " Why don't we humans observe nature and design our technology and tools like nature does?" If we follow the patterns of nature there would be neither shortage, nor scarcity of anything, rather there will always be abundance. How wonderful it is to observe that the nature designed seed has so much potential. From a tiny apple pip comes the seedling, from the seedling the plant,

from the plant the tree, from the tree the apple fruit with many more pips within to produce many more trees for many more years. The leaves of the tree fall on the ground, decompose and become the nutrient to the tree and to the soil. Abundance all around. Nature knows no scarcity, because it knows no waste.

Such deep observation and deep experience is essential in order to get deep insights in the workings of nature. Here great science, great art and great spirituality converge. Scientists, artists, poets and mystics have found deep inspiration from close identification with nature. Nature identification is possible only when we are able to let go of our separation. To learn from nature we need to be in nature.

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