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The Spiritual Foundations of Ecopsychology

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Abstract

People turn to nature for healing, for solitude, for spiritual renewal. Ecopsychology offers practices for such healing, but apart from some involved in the field, ecopsychology's spiritual foundations are rarely recognized. In people's minds spirituality can remain the domain of established religions or ancient wisdom traditions, not a psychology. This paper will explore the claim for a spiritual basis to ecopsychology.

Drawing closely on the author's own experience within the field of ecopsychology and Buddhism, the paper will first look at definitions of the term spiritual and then see how theories and practices of ecopsychology fit within these definitions. Suggestions will also be made as to how holding such a spiritual view can cause a shadow aspect of ecopsychology to arise.

Introduction

Physically, morally, and emotionally we are woven into the web of life with old-growth redwoods and rainforests and dying lakes and polluted rivers. We need them, not simply as a matter of intelligent resource management, but for the good of our souls. (Roszak, 1997).

We all wish to find authenticity in our lives. We wish to be able to live a real life of meaning and depth, to know who we are and our what our place is within the world that we find ourselves. These are not small questions arising out of idle conversations with friends, but doubts that sit in our mind to surface from time to time. Spiritual thought seeks to offer answers to these questions.

Spirituality, though, is a very personal issue. Even within a single faith tradition, different people might interpret a given philosophy in different ways. As one's experience of a faith deepens through practice, so an earlier realization makes way for new insights. This does not invalidate earlier understandings, but rather confirms the varied and changing experience of the spirit.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate whether all spiritual and religious traditions lead to the same goal, I would like to suggest that there is something that runs through all our lives. What this is I shall call spiritual. It is something that if we ignore, deny or forget leads to a disconnection in the way that we act towards ourselves, and the world around us. I suggest that the body of thought called ecopsychology has arisen because of our forgetting or ignoring this spiritual aspect of ourselves. In the same way that aspects of Buddhist practice can be taken into a therapeutic setting with no reference being made to their origin, ecopsychology practices are used in therapeutic settings with great benefit. However, I believe that at its deepest level, ecopsychology is a spiritual practice. This paper will first explore the meaning of spiritual, but at this stage I would like to suggest that this meaning is about connection and the implications of connection, namely love and compassion.

Ecopsychology has arisen out of a paradoxical connection and alienation from the natural world. The connection causes us to feel deep pain as we hear about and experience the environmental destruction happening to our Earth, that which is our home and to which we are deeply connected. The alienation also causes us pain, but pain from following a path that is unknowingly searching for connection. Unsure where to look, we fill our lives with destructive consumption, trying to numb the pain of unrecognized alienation.

Within this paper I have first looked at some of the causes that have given rise to the field of ecopsychology. From there I have moved on to define the field and then look at what brought me to ecopsychology through my questioning of Buddhism as it was developing in the West. I have then looked at definitions of the word spiritual so that a context is set for demonstrating ecopsychology's spiritual roots. Finally I look at two aspects of ecopsychology in practice and how they illustrate its spiritual connections, before commenting on a shadow aspect of seeing the spiritual in nature.

Setting the scene

One of the iconic images of the twentieth century was taken by astronauts of the Apollo 8 lunar orbiter as it circled above the moon. Looking across the vast darkness of space they saw a blue globe rise over the lunar horizon. This small ball was their home, the place from which I write this. We call that tiny globe, Earth.

On a clear day as I stand outside my house, I am blessed with views across to the Black Mountains of South Wales. The sky is big here, a wonderful view for when the mind is feeling dull; it brightens and uplifts. On a cloudless night the sky is filled with stars. The Milky Way etches its path across the blackness and the flashing lights of aircraft on their way to America is all that appears to move. At such times I am looking out on the same vastness as those astronauts on the Apollo mission. Like other beings living on this planet, I am fortunate in not needing the protection of the walls of a spacecraft to enjoy this view. There are no barriers to prevent me from feeling and sensing the world in which I live. The protection provided to us by this Earth is a thin layer of unstable gases we call the atmosphere. This protection enables us, and the

multitude of life with which we share the Earth, to live. We are protected from harmful light rays and over heating. The atmosphere, and this little ball which it protects, are all that we have in the vastness of space.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the harm that modern day life has inflicted on the Earth. Reports of climate change and the effects of the planet warming up are heard with increased frequency in our media. More recently is the talk of a looming peak in global oil production. Although no one knows quite when this will happen, and there are widely differing views, the arrival of "Peak Oil" as it has become known will see the world enter an era of the demise of the availability of abundant, cheap energy. This time is exacerbated by an increased demand for energy from the people of this planet. Increasing demands are going to be met by diminishing supplies and currently the global population appears to be engaging in little dialogue as to the consequences.

The implications of these times raise strong passions in people. Some don't appear to believe all the apparent doomsaying. For them the answer lies in progress, which is laid down as being able to solve all our problems. However the definition of progress can feel very subjective, and even more so in this time where apparent progress is the cause of so much damage to our planet. While the rest of life on earth moves through cycles of arising and decay, progress is apparently immune to this, forever moving forward, addressing and improving our needs. The human experience of life apparently does not "regress". Is this the result of a simple belief that the material aspect of our lives can only get better and that nothing stands in its way? Or, I would like to ask, are we starting to experience an existential denial of something that modern day society is very good at hiding, our own mortality and vulnerability? A natural world over which, for the most part, we thought that we had control over is now telling us otherwise.

For others, the care and concern run deep. People donate money in the hope of saving endangered species and rainforests that they themselves will never see. Others spend time writing letters to politicians and other policy makers, hoping to change a law and with that save a small part of the Earth. Others still, endure discomforts and sometimes jail in protesting to

prevent a road being built or another mega-store stamping its footprint on a piece of green land. What motivates these people to go and fight on behalf of this Earth, even in the face of at times such large odds, knowing that what they are doing might be too little too late?

My suggestion is that the environmental problems of our time have a spiritual cause, what I will refer to as a crisis of the heart. As sensing and caring beings, we care for that to which we feel close. The Earth is our home and that on which we depend for our survival. The beings that we share this home with are our larger family. However these connections have been forgotten. If this were not so, human kind would not have harmed the planet in the way that it has. The connections never go, but the passage of history, as explored by authors such as Paul Shepard (1995), has seen humanity become increasingly distant from this felt experience in our heart.

I suggest that ecopsychology is arising at this time because of this crisis of the heart. Speaking on the cause of environmental issues, John Seed suggests that the self that mainstream psychology claims to heal is a social fiction (Seed, 2006). This self, as will be discussed later while looking at the ecological self and greening of the self, is more than something encapsulated within our skin and bones. There is a world outside of our skin and bones to which we are intimately connected. It affects us, we affect it; where is the boundary? In our current times, as Seed strikingly quotes James Lovelock, it is as if the mind decides that it is the most important organ in the body and starts to mine the liver (Seed, 2006).

Based on this connection between human and the more-than-human, ecopsychology offers exercises of interaction with nature for healing ourselves and the wound within our heart. In engaging in ecopsychological practices we find ourselves reacquainted with that with which we have become alienated from. Our circle of love and care grows alongside the increasing sense of connection.

What is ecopsychology?

A concise definition of ecopsychology becomes more difficult as one starts to look more closely at the field. Moving in to explore ecopsychology, one has a sense of looking down a

microscope. That which you thought was held within defined boundaries, turns out on closer inspection to be made up of many branches each with their own richness and diversity.

Ecopsychology On-line (1997) offers definitions from people working in areas such as law, activism and psychotherapy. Each discipline has "its own methods, vocabulary and terms of reference" (Ecopsychology On-Line, 1997), but also something to offer the shared cause of "keeping our relations with the natural world sane and sustainable" (Ecopsychology On-Line, 1997). In general though, people come to ecopsychology from one of two different routes (Davis, 2005), though there are probably aspects of both in their approach to the field. The first is through environmental action and the second a felt love and bond with nature.

Looking first at environmental action, Theodore Roszak (Roszak, 1992; Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995) proposed the idea of ecopsychology coming from his experiences as an environmental activist. He felt that the environmental movement was focused too much on shame and blame of the ordinary person in their complicity towards the state of the world; recognition, love and celebration of our connection with the natural world were being ignored. A movement working towards a more fair and healthier world that comes from a place of blame and anger becomes difficult to sustain in the long run. You allow yourself only one hope; that your actions will succeed. As there is no guarantee of this, anger boils over as one becomes more frustrated with actions that fail. Eventually burnout sets in. Ultimately the resolving of the ecological problems facing this world has to include those whom one is fighting against; they are part of our environment. We share the world with them. Shame and blame fosters hurt and distrust. By opening to love and joy, we allow ourselves to embrace the world, even those whom we struggle against. The possibility for celebration for the wonder that is the world that we live in is always there, while we remained grounded in the job before us.

People also come to the field of ecopsychology for the positive experiences that they have had in nature. These experiences become something that they would like to nurture and deepen, or share with other people. They come looking for a field that will offer practices that support these experiences.

Both of these pathways to ecopsychology are grounded in the connection that we hold with nature. As a generality, for indigenous peoples ecopsychology does not exist. Their connection with nature is lived in their daily lives. For many living at this time in the West such a connection has been lost. We are living what John Seed refers to as, “the modern delusion of alienation” (Seed, 2006). As Seed explains, what we refer to as out there such as air, water and soil, is within us, moving through our bodies as we live our lives, breathing, eating and drinking (Seed, 1994). As long as the rest of the world is out there, the job of looking after the environment falls to special interest groups while everyone else just looks after themselves. Once we start to realize that this separation is a fictional myth that never existed, that we and out there are one of the same, the dynamics start to change. The saving of out there becomes a saving of the self (Seed, 1994). For those who still believe that there is a separation between self and the world in which we live, Seed suggests that you hold your breath for a few minutes (Seed, 2006).

Andy Fischer makes a similar suggestion when he says that while this might not be ecopsychology’s defining experience, the field has been born out of alienation and loss (Fischer, 2002). However, Fischer believes that ecopsychology is not about lying on the therapists couch, but that it will have to go through a process of finding its own practice. That as the process of our healing and reconnection with nature slowly unfolds, we can chart the development made and allow the field to be informed by our gradual learnings.

Looking at the etymology of ecopsychology, we find that *eco* comes from the Late Latin *oeco-* meaning household and from the Greek *oik-* that originates from *oikos* meaning house. The word *psyche* comes from the Greek *psyché* meaning soul. So ecopsychology suggests a home where our soul resides.

Our home is a place where we feel comfortable, where we can be ourselves and put aside the need to conform to ways of being as society might demand of us. So in a wider sense, ecopsychology becomes a search for that place in the world where we feel at home, namely within ourselves. As we find ourselves further from that home, the more we feel lost and suffer.

None of us wish to suffer in this way and so in bringing us home, ecopsychology also serves to reduce our unease. To this end, ecopsychological practices heal our alienation from nature, reconnecting us with that which has never left us. Hopefully from this arise answers as to how we can reverse the effects of the damage inflicted on the environment. Andy Fischer (2002) sees this as a central role of ecopsychology. He questions how psychology can bring the wounded into the counseling room, then send them back out into the social malaise that was part of reason that brought them in the first place, without actually addressing these outside problems.

A personal search

My own reason for entering into this search for ecopsychology's spiritual roots goes back to my seventeen year following of Tibetan Buddhism. Coming from a background in computing, I chose to spend a few years traveling, doing something different. I spent a lot of time in the outdoors in those years, either through places visited or simply because of sitting by the side of the road, my thumb stuck out waiting for a lift. During this time the majesty and strength of mountains humbled me with their presence. The deserts of America and Australia appeared to *hum* with a life that was above the wildlife inhabiting those places. I sensed a presence and vibrancy in those vast expanses of land that felt both energetic and benevolent. Then by the side of the road, the simple everyday life of a trail of ants brought me back to the richness of this world that exists right under our noses, but that we so often miss in the busyness of modern life.

During these travels I encountered Tibetan Buddhism and on my return home became deeply involved with a Tibetan Buddhist community. While the faith has never left me, with time I came to question what it had to say about the natural world, especially in light of the environmental problems facing the earth at this time. Buddhism taught and indeed practices care for all beings, but I was missing what I referred to then as the spirit in nature, that experience of vibrancy and presence felt on my travels. I was sensing an animation in the world outside of my window, but the philosophies that I was encountering appeared to leave it flat and lifeless. I was deriving great benefit from the Buddhist teachings, but the intimacy that I had sensed out in the world, and indeed where I was now living felt as though it was kept at bay by the teachings. One

could ask why the teachings should have to address these experiences, and my answer would be was that they felt spiritual and I was looking for a spiritual philosophy in which I could frame them. The Buddhist teachings had become very dear to me and I was wondering why they appeared to say nothing about such perceptions. Sitting in our Shrine Room, at times the world really did feel as though it was something separate. This was especially interesting given the Tibetan peoples' close connection with the land and the way that their pre-Buddhist tradition, Bön, has infused Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet they live in a land where mountains and valleys are the abodes of deities and spirits inhabit their rivers and trees.

From these experiences I drew three conclusions. The first was related to the observation that for the Tibetans their primary focus is Buddhism. Culturally they might make offerings to deities and spirits but probably because their parents used to and their parents before them. It is a societal norm, which while informing a view and way of acting in the world, probably is acted on quite blindly, with little thought. How they view the world is quite objective, and it is not something that they give too much attention to. These thoughts are in some way supported by a personal conversation that I had with my Buddhist teacher, Ven. Geshe Damchö Yönten (personal communication, October 2, 1995). On visiting his family, who lived in a remote Tibetan village, he found that they had little understanding of Buddhism and referred to their faith as a blind faith. They knew when and in front of what to prostrate, when to make offerings, and that good actions brought good results. However, all of this was because it was culturally infused into the bones of the people through the generations.

With Buddhist philosophy, and the enlightenment it promises through practice holding such prominence in the Tibetan people's lives, I concluded that their animated worldview was of less importance to them. This would mean that while their lives are enriched through living within a deep, animated world, institutionalized religion has caused them to become distant from the importance of this worldview.

The second conclusion that I drew relates to Buddhist doctrine. The basis of all Buddhist traditions is the Four Noble Truths, the first of Buddha's teachings. He taught that there is,

1. The Truth of suffering;
2. The Truth of the cause of suffering;
3. The Truth of the cessation of suffering;
4. The Truth of the path to cessation.

This second conclusion relates to how these Four Noble Truths can be misinterpreted in such a way so as to give reason for distancing oneself from the physical world. The suffering referred to here can be best described as unease or discontent. If your mind feels uncomfortable due to pain, not getting what you want, jealousy or such like, that is the suffering spoken of. This suffering arises from the erroneous way that we view the world. Through not seeing things the way that they are, we act incorrectly causing ourselves problems, called in the Sanskrit language samsara. Samsara also has a connotation of continual repetition. We are constantly making these mistakes, though the third Noble Truth offers us a way out.

Although the Buddhist teachings say that the cause of our problems is the way that we view the world, misinterpretations can place the cause of the problems as the physical world itself. With that view, the earth and its inhabitants become a pit of suffering from which we strive to escape. Teachings on compassion ensure that Buddhists do not turn into a group of heartless individuals, but the relationship with the natural world has been damaged and this feeds into the third conclusion.

Prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the West, Western culture was experiencing an increasing alienation from the natural world. Humans have developed a strong sense of their power over nature, fed in some ways by interpretations of Christianity (Seed, 1988), as well as speaking of the world as an environment to be transcended. The Western converts to Buddhism bring this ingrained and probably unconscious way of thinking to their Buddhist practice. Like the Tibetans spoken of earlier, such a way of thinking has been infused into our bones through the generations. If the teachers and students do not recognize this split and unless teachings adapt to address this issue, these views will sit in practitioners' hearts and the alienation from nature will be passed onto future generations.

It was because of the lack of intimacy with the natural world that I was experiencing from the Buddhist teachings that I started a personal search for a spirituality informed by the more-than-human world, but one that could co-exist along side my chosen spiritual path. That search brought me to ecopsychology. However, when I brought up questions with Buddhist friends relating to the conclusions that I have just discussed, some were reluctant to pursue a conversation. I sensed fear. I was questioning a doctrine with the wish to bring about greater understanding for others, and myself but this appeared to be too large a step for people. I believe that some heard a truth in what I was saying, but this clashed with what they feared would be the consequence of questioning a doctrine.

I was looking for a body of thought that could inform my Buddhist practice by bringing the natural world back into the teachings and places of worship. Founders of the world's great religions such as Buddha with his years of ascetic practice in the forests of India, and Jesus with his time in the desert, have turned to the embrace of the more-than-human world for their contemplations. Why don't we now? The split that I was experiencing pained my heart and felt like it was denying a greater truth. If the split between self and other is a myth, and this will be explored later in the paper, my quest for introducing the more-than-human world into my Buddhist practice was to make the practice more whole and with that myself as well. Once one recognizes the shared relationship with the world, you can start to learn and be informed by it, as we see for example with the wilderness rites of passage work of Foster & Little (1992). My other wish was that ecopsychology would be able to inform the reanimation of the world as I experienced it, speaking to those places that I passed through on my travels where the world felt vibrant and alive.

Searching for the meaning of spiritual

“There is a Tibetan saying that just as every valley has its own language so every teacher has his own doctrine” (Williams, 1989, p. 1). While maybe an exaggeration in itself, from my experience the word “spiritual” can have many meanings depending on whom you speak to. In searching for a spiritual basis to ecopsychology one first needs to define what one means by

spiritual. The literature from which I have sought a definition have lent towards the meaning that I am looking for, but then it is comforting to know that one has allies.

Personal thoughts on the spiritual

This search for the meaning of spiritual will also be informed by the words, albeit brief, of my Buddhist teacher. His words on this subject have influenced my thoughts on the spiritual and probably more importantly have helped in my personal practice. Once while giving some teachings, Ven. Geshe Damchö Yönten, a Tibetan Lama, said that spiritual practice is about developing a positive mind (Ven. Geshe Damchö Yönten, personal communication, November 8, 1994). In a similar vein His Holiness the Dalai Lama, another teacher from whom I have learned, has said that the purpose of religion is to generate positive qualities such as love and patience (Dalai Lama, 1997).

These sentiments I suggest are fully in keeping with the definitions that will be explored in the following pages. They arise as a result of the deepest connection that we can experience with our world, that of the dissolving of an ego based self into a felt identification and intimacy with the world and the myriad of beings that we share this planet with. The qualities of love and compassion that are so often spoken about in relation to the spiritual arise from this connection.

Spirituality and activism

Alastair McIntosh speaks of the word “spirituality” as being “hotly contested” and that, “there is a danger that when we talk about “spirituality” we enter a never-never land of fantasy that, as the existence of religious cults suggests, can be both delusory and deeply harmful” (McIntosh, 2004, p. 17).

McIntosh is a “writer, lecturer, social activist, broadcaster and campaigning academic” (McIntosh, 2005). He teaches a Masters level module in Spiritual Activism at the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh, Scotland. Of his use of the term Spiritual Activism, McIntosh says that he means,

...The spiritual underpinning of action for social and ecological justice.

It is an underpinning because it is not sufficient to think of spirituality - that which gives life - as being a mere optional “dimension” or “element”. If activism is not grounded in spirituality it cannot be sustained in the long run: we either burn out or sell out as the oil of life runs low. We need replenishment from the wellheads of life itself, and no matter what religious tradition we may or may not be coming from, this re-sourcing is ultimately a question of spirituality. (McIntosh, 2005)

McIntosh sees spirituality first as a way of knowing (McIntosh, 2004), a sense of deep conviction about how one sees the world. Following on from this knowing, one develops a way of doing and so a way of being in the world (McIntosh, 2004). As such for some cultures the questioning as to what spirituality is would seem a, "most peculiar notion" (McIntosh, 2004, p. 19). For them the realm of the spiritual is more real than the material. The doing and being of their daily life comes from their knowing. Such a search for meaning becomes a Western concern (McIntosh, 2004).

McIntosh therefore argues that spirituality is central to how we construct our worldviews, even if we claim an absence of the spiritual in our lives. By definition, through recognition of the spiritual in others, one's own ignoring of it is a statement on the spiritual. In his book “Soil and Soul” (McIntosh, 2001), McIntosh believes that one can turn your back on God, but not run away. If you do, he suggests, “we’re like two fleas on the back of a collie. One day the first turns to the second and says, ‘you know, I don’t think that I believe in the dog anymore’” (McIntosh, 2001, p. 118).

Spirituality as a relationship with an Ultimate Being

McIntosh moves on to explore the relationship that one might have with an Ultimate Being. Such a Being will probably be different for different people and cultures. In her book of Earth Prayers, Elizabeth Roberts (1991) speaks of, “the voices in this book address the “Lord,” the “Great Spirit,” “Wakan Tanka,” “Goddess” – each acknowledging the spiritual precedents of their culture” (p. xxiii). However, as we deepen our experience of prayer, Roberts (1991) says, such differences become less important. A unity between an Ultimate Being, the origin of the

Earth and ourselves is recognized, “underlying these differences in salutation is the recognition that the transcendent is not separate from creation” (Roberts & Amidon, 1991, p. xxiii). The Ultimate Being therefore becomes embodied in the form of the world around us, while at the same time maintaining its mysterious nature (Roberts & Amidon, 1991).

Father Laurence Freeman of the World Community for Christian Meditation speaks of God as, “a term for the absolute in being, meaning, truth and life” (Dalai Lama, 1997, p.152). He says that Saint John spoke of God as love, and Saint Ambrose that God was greater than anything imaginable (Dalai Lama, 1997). The mysteriousness of God is confirmed in the Christian mystical tradition where it is said that, “God can be known by love but not by thought” (Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 153). Father Laurence says that anything said about God is inadequate and can act at best as a metaphor, while Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of words that are used to describe the human experience do not have the same meaning when applied to God (Dalai Lama, 1997).

In the same book, “The Good Heart” (Dalai Lama, 1997), the Dalai Lama speaks of a conversation that he had with Father Laurence where a mystical definition of God gave, “a way of looking at God not so much in terms of a personal deity but rather as a ground of being” (Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 73). The Dalai Lama goes on to say that compassion is also a quality of such a divine ground of being (Dalai Lama, 1997).

The Ecological Self

Exploring the Dalai Lama’s words, this Ultimate Being might also be seen as a greater expression of who we are, a more universal or expansive view of *I*. Arne Naess (1986) suggests that, “we underestimate ourselves. I emphasize *self*. We tend to confuse it with the narrow ego” (p. 19). Naess posits the idea of the *ecological self* (Naess, 1986), using this term because of the more traditional way of explaining the ego’s development that just concentrates on the individual self (Naess, 1986). Speaking of the ecological self, Naess (1986) says, “the ecological self of a person is that with which this person identifies” (p. 22). He is clear that this is not a definition, but rather a sentence showing *the process of identification* (Naess, 1986) and this becomes a

central concept within Naess' thought. To illustrate this idea Naess speaks of a personal experience. While watching a chemical reaction under a microscope, a flea jumped onto the slide. Unable to save the flea, he watched for a few minutes as the flea suffered in the last minutes of its life. Naess speaks of the flea's movements being, "dreadfully expressive" (Naess, 1986, p. 22). He says that he felt "painful compassion and empathy", but that "the empathy was *not* basic. What *was* basic was the process of identification, that "I see myself in the flea"" (Naess, 1986, p. 22). Naess argues that if there were no identification with the flea, watching the flea die would have left him feeling indifferent (Naess, 1986). Through a continued process of identification the sense of self is widened and deepened, "we "see ourself in others"" (Naess, 1986, p. 20).

For some the idea of a *self* embracing all beings might be problematic or "not meaningful or possible" (Naess, 1986, p. 26). Taking as his reference the Buddhist idea that one's mind should embrace all beings, Naess suggests that, "we ask only that your *mind* embrace all living beings" (Naess, 1986, p.26). The intention of an individual's mind can then be developed to move from a narrow sense of thinking simply of one, to an openness towards all beings (Naess, 1986). Naess calls this move from a narrow to all embracing sense of self, "self-realization" (Naess, 1986). A benefit of using this term, Naess suggests, comes in a world where self-realization is usually associated with ego gratification, and religious ideas are approached with skepticism. Use of the term self-realization can allow people to feel that they are in safe territory, and at that point this new meaning can be introduced (Naess, 1986).

Robert Aitken Roshi gives another example of self-realization through a wider identification of self when speaking of an episode in Mahatma Gandhi's life:

A friend once inquired if Gandhi's aims in settling in the village and serving the villagers as best he could were purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied ... "I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk." (Aitken Roshi, 1984, p. 232)

The questioner is wondering if humanitarian work is truly possible within the context that Gandhi is working, and Gandhi all but agrees. Gandhi, though, takes the question to a deeper level, and says that it is the villagers who are serving him (Aitken Roshi, 1984). “This is not self-aggrandizement, but the way of self-realization, as Gandhi says” (Aitken Roshi, 1984, p. 232). The concerns of self vanish as a closer identification with those whom one is serving reveals one’s true nature (Aitken Roshi, 1984). “It is none other than all beings and all things...When the self is forgotten, it is recreated again and again, ever more richly, by the myriad things and beings of the universe” (Aitken Roshi, 1984, p. 232). Quoted by John Seed, Aitken Roshi vividly and poetically illustrates identification, saying, “one thinks also like the black bear, so that honey dribbles down your fur as you catch the bus to work” (Seed, 1988, p. 39).

Both Aitken Roshi and Naess point out how a narrow view of self is the cause of environmental degradation and other ills that befall us from individual to planetary level (Aitken Roshi, 1984; Naess, 1986).

The conventional view that serving others is a means for self-aggrandizement is the view that accepts exploitation of people and the environment, wars between nations, and conflicts within the family. As Yasutani Hakuun Roshi used to say, the fundamental delusion of humanity is to suppose that I am here and you are out there....

The self imposing upon the other is not only something called delusion, it is the ruination of our planet and all of its creatures. (Aitken Roshi, 1984, p. 232)

For Naess the wider identification that goes towards the development of the ecological self causes us to perceive the concerns and happiness of others as our own. This shift in self-interest causes us to experience our self-love on a more genuine level, that is a love for a wider and deeper self (Naess, 1986). Naess points out that this process of identification means that moralizing is no longer necessary. He does not doubt that we need environmental ethics as we develop the self, but that once it has matured the new wider identification will cause us to change our behavior (Naess, 1986). “You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it – unless you have succumbed to a neurosis of some kind, developed self-destruction tendencies, or

hate yourself” (Naess, 1986, p. 27). Or as Aitken Roshi (1985) says, “The practice of “being with them” converts the third person, *they, it, she, he*, into the first person, *I* and *we*” (p. 234). Gary Snyder quoted in Fisher’s “Radical Ecopsychology” speaks in a similar way saying,

If people can acknowledge their membership in the fabric of the whole, acknowledge that they are part of the habitat, part of the network, part of the web, and feel the welfare of the web is their welfare, and their welfare is the welfare of the web – in other words not to be mindlessly but mindfully one with the whole – that is an extraordinary spiritual and political step right there, and it dumps the cartridges out of the weapons. (Fisher, 2002, p.17)

The Greening of Self

Instead of the ecological self, Joanna Macy speaks of the “Greening of the Self” (Macy, 1991, p. 183). Macy quotes the Australian environmental activist John Seed as an example of the emergence of a greening of the self. Seed says, “I try to remember that it is not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking” (Macy, 1991, p. 184). Seed himself calls such a shift in the view of self from that encapsulated by skin to this wider identification as, “a spiritual change” with Macy adding that it generates, “a sense of profound interconnectedness with all life” (Macy, 1991, p. 183). Macy approaches this emerging sense of self from her background in systems theory. Examples of living systems are the human body, a coral reef and trees. Systems theory states that all living systems are holons. A holon is whole within itself, but also made up of smaller systems, these smaller systems themselves being holons. So an example of small systems within the human body would be the organs such as the heart and liver. One property of systems is emergence. By observing a holonic level within a system it is not possible to predict what properties will emerge in its interaction with the larger system of which it is part. Looking at the properties of oxygen and hydrogen in isolation, the emergence of water when these two atoms are brought together could not be predicted (Macy, 2005; Macy & Young Brown, 1998).

Systems will also look to self-regulate, trying to find balance. The Earth is one large system made up of many holonic levels all attempting to self-regulate based upon the information that feeds into them, such as temperature, food, light and air. The tragedy of our time is that we are just looking at the building blocks as though they exist as separate entities with no relationship between each other and the world in which they exist. We don't acknowledge the flow through of information between the blocks, creating relationships. The physical eye does not see the relationships, but they are physically verifiable by the interactions. As mentioned, our lack of independentness can be viscerally experienced by holding our breath. Our body as a system self-organizes as information in the form of air, food, and liquid flow through us. As we change so do the smaller systems inside of ourselves. If a cell is damaged the whole body is harmed and experiences the harm. Similarly we are part of a larger system, namely the earth, which adapts as we and other systems on it change. If part of the earth is harmed, as a part of the earth ourselves we feel that harm.

For humans some of the information that is feeding into them is the state of the environmental crises. Macy argues that once you open yourself up to your feelings of pain for the world, the grief or anger that you feel can not be laid at the feet of your “own individual skin” (Macy, 1991, p. 186). These feelings arise through suffering with the world, and would not be there if life was restricted to an isolated self (Macy, 1991). As a result of the greener, more widely identified self, one feels the pain of the world as one's own.

Non-duality

Both of these discussions of the nature of self, ecological self and the greening of self, are introducing the concept of non-duality. As our identification with the world around us widens the sense of *me* as an isolated individual self diminishes. We realize our part in something larger, a larger all-inclusive Self. Importantly this is a realization, conveying a step on from an understanding, a moving from the head to the heart, from the intellectual to the experienced. We find ourselves part of a Self that we have only been separated from through our perception; our felt experience of being in the world changes.

On our way to embodying this experience, our understanding of non-duality will deepen. Felt experience through practices that we use to cultivate a non-dual view will cause us to develop a progressively clearer sense of our goal. As these understandings change and our experience deepens, we let go of that to which we held on as being real and true and allow ourselves to dissolve into our new felt experience. Again we still find that we are living in a duality, but the coarseness of that duality has been lessened. We are starting to perceive the world in new ways. With this change in perception, our relationship with the world changes, we become more intimate with our surroundings and so our actions towards them changes.

This process that we might call a losing of the self can become quite scary. An identity that we held onto as real, as *me*, we find no longer to be true. Depending on the depth of our experience, we might start to sense that we don't exist. Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition it is said practitioners have grabbed hold of themselves out of fear as they experience for the first time the fact they are not isolated individuals that exist independently of the world around them (Pabongka Rinpoche, 1991). They hold themselves just to make sure that they are still there. We can liken this to a Dark Night of the Soul. The old self is dying giving birth to a new understanding and experience. The boundaries between yourself and the world around you start to blur.

Non-duality is not saying that you and the world that you co-exist with do not exist, but rather that we do not exist in the way that we think that we do. However, it is worth adding at this stage that the Tibetan Buddhist tradition says that a Being with a complete realization of this non-duality perceives the world in two ways simultaneously. The first, absolutely, is seeing the world as the collection of objects and beings that we experience in our daily live. The second, ultimately, is seeing the world in its non-duality.

We are not isolated, self-existent beings and neither are more-than-human lives of nature that we share the Earth with self-existent entities. With this realization the concepts, because that is what they are, of self and other go and with them the disappearance of the corresponding emotions of anger, attachment, and so forth. These have arisen adventitiously based upon our

misperceived view of the world. The concept of self and other gives rise to ideas such as *you* and *me*. From these ideas the emotions arise. However, now we can now truly let go of our habitual patterns (Trungpa Rinpoche, 2005).

As these emotions around which we have built our identity diminish so do qualities such as love and compassion grow. We now experience fully our interconnection with the world around us and that felt connection becomes the basis for the flowering of these qualities in our heart, the positive mind referred to by Ven. Geshe Damchö Yönten towards the start of this paper.

Working towards this aspiration of developing a positive mind, our interaction with the Earth becomes the basis of our spiritual practice. Indeed it is only because of non-duality, because of our interconnection and interdependent relationship with the natural world that we are able to engage in such a practice. If we were isolated individuals existing in a world of isolated entities, nothing would change, as there would be no connection enabling change to happen.

Conclusion on the relationship with an Ultimate Being

All the examples of an Ultimate Being explored above speak of something larger than the isolated narrow self that one might consider oneself to be. With each example, the small self is shown not to be isolated but part of that larger something. In each case we might reflect, as McIntosh (2004) says that, “there is more to life than just our own little egos on legs” (p. 20). The spiritual path becomes a search for that *more* (McIntosh, 2004).

The Fate of the Earth

In her talk, “The Fate of the Earth”, Sister Miriam MacGillis says of Thomas Berry, a Passionist Priest, that he would see the current ecological crises as a “crises of cosmology” (MacGillis, 1986, p.220). By cosmology they are speaking of a, “means that all people have stories wherein they describe how the universe was made...these stories reflect people's observations and conclusions about the origin and nature of the world” (MacGillis, 1986, p. 220). MacGillis suggests that if the origin story that underlies Western culture, namely the story of the Garden of Eden, causes us to see ourselves as an, “inherently destructive species” (MacGillis,

1986, p. 220), we will be inclined to fulfill that story. With the Christian origin story introducing the idea of original sin, an inherent sense of unworthiness is born into people. As has been suggested earlier in this paper with reference to the Tibetan culture, in time such beliefs become ingrained as a characteristic of the culture whether or not one follows the tradition from which the idea originated. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche puts it, the idea of unworthiness “kills any inspiration and can destroy one’s vision as well” (Trungpa Rinpoche, 2005), and suggests that original sin is unnecessary. The Buddhist tradition that Trungpa Rinpoche comes from recognizes defilements, or kleshas, that arise in our mind but also that they are superficial and cover our basic goodness, tathagatagarbha (Trungpa Rinpoche, 2005). This is not an idea plucked out of thin air, but rather comes from one’s personal experience of meditation. As one’s familiarity with basic goodness increases, so one develops a confidence in one’s own sense of self worth. There is an uplifting experience, the experience of windhorse (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1984). Windhorse is the energy of basic goodness, the ground of our being, which enables us to move forward with strength and fearlessness in working for the benefit of all. With thoughts directed more towards the benefit of others, the experience of basic goodness lessens our sense of an isolated self and we start to experience an intimacy and empathy with the world around us.

MacGillis also suggests that our culture is facing pain because we are developing new insights that do not fit with the Eden myth. A story, MacGillis claims, that is stuck and inflexible (MacGillis, 1986). The general Western perception of the Divine is of a God or Deity that transcends, or is above the world in which we live. This God has greater power and dominion over all that is apart from it (MacGillis, 1986).

The human being is seen as being uniquely connected with this Creator God. An implication of this is the human's ability also to transcend the world. The world becomes a material object over which the human has dominion (MacGillis, 1986). Australian environmental activist John Seed uses the word anthropocentrism to explain this human attitude (Seed, 1988). He describes it as “... human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute “human race” for “man” and “all other species” for “woman”” (Seed, 1988, p. 35). Seed says that this idea of the

human race being the crown of all creation is “deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness” (Seed, 1988, p. 35), and cites Genesis 9:2:

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands they are delivered. (Seed, 1988, p. 35)

Much has been written on the meaning of this story (Dowd, 1992; Swimme, 1997), but I suggest that this story fitted the time at which it was told. We all tell stories about our individual lives, and they fit our lives as we understand them at that time. However, if we recognize that the story is no more than that, a story fitting a given time and the experience of place in that time, we no longer become bound by that story and the message that it conveys. Time has moved on, our experience and view of the universe in which we live has changed and so a story reflecting these changes becomes appropriate. We can retell the story reflecting our new knowledge and experience and use that as the basis for living a life more in harmony with the world and those whom we share it with.

MacGillis contrasts our culture with the Native peoples of North America. Their origin story came from their experience of the world. Within this story their Great Spirit lived, “*inside* the universe; lived *in* the earth” (MacGillis, 1986, p. 221). Therefore for these peoples the world around them, what might be referred to as both the animate and inanimate, was infused with and related to this spirit. Their economic and ethical systems were born of this perception of the world, as were their religious practices. Within such a system a concept of ownership becomes very problematic, indeed impossible (MacGillis, 1986). With the spirit infusing the many forms on the Earth, particular powers of the spirit were transmitted through the different creatures (MacGillis, 1986).

Ironically, MacGillis points out, through the detachment that such a story produces it has enabled us to probe deeply into life and create the technology that we have become use to today (MacGillis, 1986). This story started to prove inappropriate as we delved deeper into the atom. We did not find an inert, mechanistic structure, but one that was very much alive and in process;

there was no way of measuring it (MacGillis, 1986). Going out into space we discovered of the universe its,

age and its unfolding nature...We've had to move from this ready-made, totally furnished, spatial universe, which we simply inherited to exist upon, to an understanding of the universe that is itself in process, which from the very beginning has had a deep, *spiritual interior*. This interior aspect, too, we realize has been expanding and unfolding over eons of time. (MacGillis, 1986, p. 223)

MacGillis says that we have a direct connection with our solar system and earth, and that, "It defines who we are, our crises, and our way of opening up into the future" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 223). She argues that however we see the origin of the universe, we are the first generation on the planet, "to have the story in a new context of expanding time and space" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 223).

For MacGillis the appearance of the human on our planet has meant that for the first time the earth has been able to think about itself. "The human is the being in whom the earth has become spiritually aware" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 224). She quotes Teilhard de Chardin as saying, "the human person is fifteen billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 224).

As we have delved deeper into the workings of life, we have developed extraordinary powers (MacGillis, 1986), but not the experience to handle them, "We're like adolescents" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 226). Our system of ethics cannot contain the questions arising. The old cosmology places ethics within the framework of, "human/human, or human/God, but not human/nature...We do not relate to the earth in this ethical manner" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 227). MacGillis points out that people can be involved in controversial industries, for example biotechnology, but be caring people towards family and good in the way that they conduct themselves in everyday life. The tradition in which we live our lives does not have an ethical system that allows one to judge this situation. The source of our cosmology has the earth made up of a lot of *stuffs*. The oceans of our earth, in reality a single body of water that plays a role in

the stabilization of the planet's climate as well as being a home for a myriad of life forms, are presented as places, things with names, the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian and so forth. Places and things become objects to which you can do as you please; own a sea front, swim in it, and dump things in it. The cosmology by which we are brought up does not offer a view showing how water courses through all life. With such a view all water becomes precious. It is a source of life. Such a view causes one to act in an ethical way.

MacGillis ends by speaking of the implications of this emerging new cosmology, that of the need to come home. We come home in the sense of recognizing, "our identification with the earth and with the spiritual dynamics of the universe. We are literally stars thinking about themselves" (MacGillis, 1986, p. 236). MacGillis also encourages us to recognize the community of beings with whom we share this planet (MacGillis, 1986). Thomas Berry says, "That future can exist only when we understand the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited" (Berry, 1999, p. x).

Creation Spirituality

Acknowledging the damage that the human race has committed upon the planet, Matthew Fox asks, "What would an ecological religion look like?...Can we recover a sense of the sacred?" (Fox, 1991, p. 207).

In a lecture where he tries to address these questions, Fox, A Dominican Priest, says of spirituality that it, "is the praxis of the heart, the praxis of our living in this world. It means dealing with our inner selves, and not just living on the level of our outer organizations" (Fox, 1991, p. 207). For the sake of the environment, Fox encourages us to listen to our inner self or inner house. In doing so Fox points out that his inner house is not just personal but, "the inner house of communities, the inner house of our nations, the inner house of our species" (Fox, 1991, p. 208). Therefore this inner house is part of a larger whole, what Fox calls the soul. Our body resides within this soul (Fox, 1991). So in causing damage to the planet, it is like fouling our own nest (Fox, 1991). We have forgotten the larger whole, the soul, of which we are part.

Fox explains that, “The word ecology means the study of our home” (Fox, 1991, p. 208). So ecology becomes something that we are within and is within us. Ecology pervades us.

The sacred wilderness is not something just out there, only to be found in our national parks. There is a sacred wilderness inside everyone of us and it needs our attention. We are out of touch with the sacred wilderness of our passions; that is why we see such devastation around us. (Fox, 1991, p. 208)

Fox believes, “that religious experience begins with awe and wonder - that is the first step in the spiritual journey” (Fox, 1991, p. 210). He argues that this is quite easy because of the new creation story that science has discovered. “No one can hear this story without being filled with awe and wonder” (Fox, 1991, p. 210).

For Fox the scientists are the new mystics of our time (Fox, 1991). To bring science and mysticism together creates a new cosmology. If artists were to take this emerging cosmology and dance it, create songs and ritual, Fox argues that you have the rebirth of spirituality, “based on a new vision” (Fox, 1991, p. 210).

Fox makes reference to Rabbi Heschel who says, “that there are three ways in which we humans respond to creation. The first way is to enjoy it, the second is to exploit it, and the third way is to accept it with awe” (Fox, 1991, p. 211). Fox suggests that this third way has never been practiced in the West (Fox, 1991). Scientist Brian Swimme also quotes Heschel saying that awe is the first step on the way to wisdom (Swimme, 2001). Swimme speaks of the value of just sitting and being fascinated by the creatures around. Allow ourselves to simply sit, observe and to be “moved into awe” (Swimme, 2001) as we come to sense how essential these creatures are for us. Swimme and Thomas Berry both speak of the admiration and awe that we can allow to arise as we come to reflect on the process unveiled by science that brought this universe to its present state (Swimme, 2001; Berry, 1996). Experiencing a sense of grandeur for this process and how we have shared it with all the more-than-human beings around us, we are humbled in the presence of others and a deeper feeling of care starts to arise.

The stewardship idea of God is problematic for Fox. It gives a sense of God being “out there” (Fox, 1991, p. 211) and that we are bound to Him through duty. This cosmology produces a morality that is duty bound and so breeds guilt (Fox, 1991), and ties in closely with Sister Miriam MacGillis’ thoughts on the limitations of this story of our world. Fox speaks of needing delight instead of duty. A cosmology based on stewardship also produces duality (Fox, 1991). Fox argues for the need to return to mysticism and what he calls, “the Cosmic Christ and the Garden in the Song of Songs, where we realize that God *is* the Garden” (Fox, 1991, p. 211). If God is the Garden, the plants and animals are also Him and to harm them is to crucify God. When they are well, the glory of the divine is radiating out for all to see (Fox, 1991). So this shift from stewardship to mysticism is for Fox the basis of an ecological spirituality. “This is the home, the “*ecos*” in which we live, it is the divine home” (Fox, 1991, p. 211).

Fox speaks of the act of falling in love, or blessing. He suggests that as we fall in love with the world and universe in which we live, we feel compelled to act on their behalf. He argues that the human has, “anthropocentrized “falling in love,” we think it is something you do to find a mate for the rest of your life” (Fox, 1991, p. 213), instead it goes much deeper. Fox is asking for a spirituality that will allow us to touch the grief that we feel for the state of the world. This can only happen as we allow ourselves to fall in love with the creation around us. The despair of our time can act as an agent to spiritual transformation, helping us to discover God. We also need to use means that have long been available to us, namely song, dance and ritual to celebrate this new spiritual ecology and pass on these new values to the young (Fox, 1991). Fox says, “if we can rediscover a spirituality as if creation mattered, we will have a renaissance, a rebirth of civilization, a reinvention of our species based on a spiritual vision” (Fox, 1991, p. 216).

Conclusion on the meaning of spiritual

In the introduction to this paper I suggested that the meaning of spiritual is about connection and the implications of connection, namely love and compassion. I feel that this investigation into spirituality’s meaning has born this out. The methods for experiencing and developing the spiritual within each of us are many and varied. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has

likened them to different kinds of food. We each have to find the food that suits our individual tastes. The different spiritual philosophies are food for the mind, and we must take what is suitable for us (Dalai Lama, 1997).

The methods for establishing connection are varied, whether it is through widening our sense of self or recognizing a common bond with an Ultimate Being. Indeed the individual philosophies behind both of these traditions are varied. However both traditions, through practice, seek to strengthen the bond that we share with the beings around us and as this connection grows stronger, love and compassion arise.

This exploration into the spiritual has also revealed an area that I had not thought to explore, namely place and where our home is, although again the underlying theme is that of connection. The work of Berry and MacGillis suggests that we are lost, unsure of where we belong and our destructive actions are those of people who have become disorientated. Taking this reflection back to my questioning of why people were afraid to address the split between Buddhism and nature, I suggest that one reason lies in our desperation for a home. One finds a faith that moves us deeply and start to follow its teachings. To question these teachings is to question the structure of the home that has been searched for for so long, and embarking on another search threatens to throw one back into the void of homelessness.

What is needed is for those who are prepared to step out of these restricted homes, to start to explore alternative interpretations of the traditional, interpretations that resonate with our time and bring joy and wholeness to their practitioners. Embodied joy and the solidity of wholeness can act as inspiration for others, and for the individual practitioner the personal taste of these spiritual qualities will serve to strengthen faith in new ways.

Strengthening our bonds

The faith traditions mentioned earlier have practices for developing love and compassion. With the alienation that modern society has developed towards the natural world there is a danger that this compassion becomes unbalanced, not fully engaged with the world in which we live. Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition it is said that one should develop equanimity towards

all beings, friends, enemies and strangers, before true love and compassion can be developed. If one were not to do so, love and compassion will favor friends over those to whom our feelings are not so close. In a similar vein, I believe that analogous practices need to be brought in to reconnect us with nature, and to assist in bringing us to wholeness.

John Seed has looked at the role that ritual has played through time in enabling peoples to stay connected to the land. Seed has asked why is it that indigenous peoples have for so long used ritual to maintain and strengthen their bond with the natural world (Seed, 1994). He feels that it is because they are aware of how easy it is for humans to lose that bond. Ritual is needed in order to help us stay in communion with the more-than-human world.

The ritual that we create I believe has to have its origins in our felt experience. That experience with regard to the natural world is one of loss and alienation. We must allow our loss to inform the creation of new ritual, creating forms to fill the vacuum that has been left within us. A modern form of ritual work is Joanna Macy's "Despair and Empowerment" work (Macy & Young Brown, 1998). As the name suggests, this work is also informed by the emotions that alienation can bring. I will look at Macy's work in more detail below.

The Work That Reconnects

We might be experiencing an alienation from our world, but in the recognition of that alienation is a deep knowing of connection. Within ourselves we hear a voice from the past speaking of something of which we are a part. We long for that reconnection, but are unsure how. Modern society offers no clues, indeed challenges whether such a feeling is valid, through such modern day techniques as advertising and fashion. Follow these trends, we are told, this is where happiness is to be found. Our highly individualistic society causes us to privatize our grief, but we are cells of this world. Just as we feel the pain of our body when it is not well, so we feel the pain of the world. Compassion arises. Literally, we suffer with. We need to own and honor our pain for the world and not pathologize it. Pathologizing simply numbs our intelligence, and our ability to react. So often in relation to what is happening to the Earth we feel impotent as to how to act to change what is happening. "Surely it will be too little too late?" we say to

ourselves. We care deeply, but at a loss as to what to do, despair sets in. Through acknowledging our grief a clarity and love arises as we start to see more directly our interconnectedness with the world. Essentially the grief exposes that interconnectedness and has arisen because of it. We only mourn that which we love.

Developed by Joanna Macy, John Seed and others, The Work that Reconnects is a body of thought, exercises and rituals that work through us, connecting us with the Earth, allowing us to acknowledge the pain that we feel for this planet and then empowering us to act. One can say that this Work works through us because of the foundations upon which it is built. These are systems theory and Buddhist thought that elucidates the profound interconnectedness of all phenomena. For a system to work well it needs to be open to allow the flow through of information. As a part of the system that we call the Earth, the result of actions elsewhere on Earth will in some way have an effect on us, however small. The predominant worldview has us looking at the world from the outside. It assumes that we can know nature by taking it apart and evaluating it. This view does not allow one to see the interconnectedness and flows of information, and so numbs us from the pain of others. We need to be able to move from this view, to a view recognizing that we are of the earth, knowing and seeing itself. Through acknowledging the pain that we feel for the Earth, acknowledging our despair, we are starting to feel with the earth. Subsequently this Work has come to be known as “Despair And Empowerment” work as it leads the practitioner from an acknowledgement of their felt despair, to feeling empowered to be able act. Despair and empowerment can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

John Seed speaks of initially seeing the Despair and Empowerment work that was being developed as solely therapeutic (Seed, 1991). However, with time he came to see the value of a form that regularly “acknowledges and nourishes” (Seed, 2006) the interconnectedness between the human and the “land and the rest of the Earth community”. That form is ritual. Macy has spoken of this Work as being more than just methods (J. Macy, personal communication, May 21, 2005). It needs to be grounded in a felt understanding of the nature of interconnectedness as

taught by systems theory, deep ecology (Naess, 1986; Macy & Young Brown, 1998) and the wisdom traditions of this world. Ritual offers us a way to experience and deepen that understanding, and to allow the small *me* to merge with the larger sensed Self. It is to be repeated in order to be both a constant reminder and a method of familiarization. With time ritual offers a coming home. It becomes a conduit to connect us with our larger body, the Earth. Within our heart we feel nourished and at ease. We have merged with our true Self and are at peace.

Rituals making up this Work, such as The Council of All Beings (Flemming & Macy 1988; Macy & Young Brown 1998) and Truth Mandala (Macy & Young Brown 1998), allow us to grieve for what is being lost on our planet and also to affirm within ourselves the interconnectedness of all life. Through this increased recognition of the web of life of which we are but a tiny part, we can become more effective in the healing. We gain power through the web of life, supported in what is a shared effort to bring about change. This taps into the first property of living systems, namely synergy (Macy & Young Brown 1998). In the same way that the healing power of our body is harnessed to cure even a small scratch, we are able to draw on the power of the web of life in supporting our work for the planet. Though not knowing the subtleties of the interactions that are flowing through the web, we know, not in the head but in our heart, that we are not alone. Macy has said that we cannot do this Work alone (J. Macy, personal communication, May 16, 2005), and in the deepest sense, we are never alone.

Further rituals, referred to as Deep Time Work, enable us to experience the story of where we have come from, reliving the process of evolution that has enabled us to be here. We experience ourselves as part of place and time, not separate, and through this renewed connection can revisit and harvest the gifts that past beings used through their lives. The Work That Reconnects looks to reestablish our connection and to bring us back to the home of *eco*. To bring wholeness to ourselves and to gain energy for the work that needs to be done, we need the deep felt reminder that ritual can offer.

Discovering the sacred in nature

Rediscovering our connection with the Earth is also about rediscovering our relationship with this planet, our own personal experience of being in nature. Such an experience does not come from outside of ourselves, otherwise we would all experience the world in the same way. Our experience of the world is informed by what we bring to the environment that we find ourselves in. This is not to say that some places in nature do not already have a special quality about them, but that whether one perceives it will depend upon what the individual brings to the interaction.

I write this assuming that the reader has experienced a time in nature where there has been a perceptible presence or vibrancy in the air? A power or energetic feeling that appears to exist above and beyond the physical aspects of the area that you are in. This feeling can be energizing, nurturing, and welcoming. You feel drawn to such a place and the experience of being there remains with you long after leaving.

Speaking of the old peoples of his area, Gary Snyder comments how there are none around now to point out the sacred places, though, he adds, “with time and attention, I think we will be able to feel and find them again” (Snyder, 1990). David Abram’s speaks of his time in South East Asia and Nepal hearing people speaking of spirits and traditional magicians speak of special powers within the land (Abram, 1996). The process of trying to understand what it is was that was being talked about forced him to “*see and hear* in a manner” (Abram, 1996, p. 20) to which he was not accustomed to before. He was starting to notice events that in our ordinary everyday life we probably would not give much attention to; a shaft of light illuminating a corner of the room at a particular time of the day and subtlety altering the mood. The way a small breeze that will blow through part of a forest leaving the rest untouched. Within landscape, feeling the presence of a hill, or maybe how that hill played itself against the presence of the neighbouring hill. One might call these experiences magic (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1984; Abram, 1996).

The Shambhala tradition of Tibet describes this experience of magic as touching into the power and vastness available to us through a deeper perception of the world and our experience within it (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1984). The power being spoken of here is not a power over the phenomenal world, but rather an innate wisdom within the world as it is, similar to the quality of basic goodness within us. Within the Shambhala tradition this innate wisdom is referred to as drala (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1984; Hayward, 1995). This experience might be expressed in other cultures as fairies, angels or kamis (Hayward, 1995; S. Ellms personal communication, March 19, 2006).

To experience drala, the sacredness in our world, it is necessary to step back from your ego-centeredness. While caught up in the experience of ego, communication with drala becomes obscured. The power of drala arises in those “gaps” when we can remove ourselves from the experience of ego-centeredness. “ Only in the gap of *nowness*, between thoughts, between things, or between events, can the dralas enter” (Hayward, 1995). The more that we are able to keep ego-centeredness from our lives, the more that we are able to experience drala. The strength of drala will feel stronger in places where people are acting from a place of egolessness. Thus we experience extraordinary power in places in nature that have been shown respect and reverence. One experiences the opposite when complete disrespect has been shown towards a natural place. The dralas could be said to have left the place (S. Ellms personal communication, March 27, 2006). Within the Shambhala tradition, communication with dralas comes through the raising of windhorse, the energy of basic goodness, that egoless heart within us. The more that we are able to raise windhorse, the more easily we can communicate with the dralas. Ritual can be used for the raising of windhorse, as a means of connection with drala, whether that ritual is done within a group or through one’s own private practice.

So are dralas real entities? They are real in the same way that the world with a basis of ultimate non-dual reality is real. At our level of day-to-day communication everything is very real, but at the non-dual level there is a merging of self and other into one. Drala are entities in as far as that aids the experience of them and communication with them. Trungpa Rinpoche (1984)

speaks of the drala principle being like the sun. Whether we want to communicate with it or not, it “is always there” (p. 106). “The drala principle”, Trungpa Rinpoche says (S. Ellms personal communication, March 27, 2006), “is the embodiment of windhorse. ... The sun always shines and the windhorse principle is like opening your eyes to look at the sunshine. So windhorse is communicating with the dralas.”

Communication with drala can make possible the communication with the power of nature. The natural world becomes a mirror of our own experience and so something from which we can learn. With ego stripped away, we experience nature as ourselves. We see ourselves within nature. The barrier between nature and self becomes blurred, or disappears within the realm of non-duality. The stronger our experience of drala, the more transformative will be the mirror of nature. Opportunities for experiencing this mirror can come within a wilderness rites of passage experience (Foster & Little, 1992), or more simply from a short walk in a local park, it all depends on the openness that we have for communication. A personal experience where I live illustrates this.

I was standing outside at that time of year when summer was transitioning to autumn. The comfort and untroubled air that seem to accompany long warm days had faded. The weather was still remarkably warm, but dark skies, rain and wind had started to strip away that comfort. Within a month all the leaves would have fallen from the trees, the views across to the mountains would be stark and bare. On days when cold winds blow across from those hills, I have a sense of being exposed, stripped naked of pretense. The comfort of summer, the life of summer has its meat stripped from it, and we are just left with the bones of our being, our self, who we are. We find that we are alone. Trungpa Rinpoche describes it as,

It is like living among snow capped peaks with clouds wrapped around them and the sun and moon starkly shining over them. Below, tall alpine trees are swayed by strong, howling winds and beneath them is a thundering waterfall. From our point of view, we may appreciate this desolation, if we are an occasional tourist who photographs it or a

mountain climber trying to climb to the mountain top. But we do not really want to live in those desolate places. It's no fun. It is terrifying, terrible. (Trungpa, 1976, p. 150)

These experiences feel to me like a meeting with who I am. The pretense that one encounters in daily life, false structures of comfort and security, shudder and collapse in the face of this mirror of what really is. Within such an environment there is a strong sense of aloneness and the environment seems to reflect back to us a fear underlying our lives. This fear is of what we might be left with when we give up the voice within us telling us that we are doing well or not, or that searches for such reassurance (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1976). Looking at such a situation from the outside might give us a strong sense of aloneness.

However, Trungpa Rinpoche goes onto say that, "it is possible to make friends with the desolation and appreciate its beauty" (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1976, p. 151). "Great sages...", he says, "marry themselves to desolation, to the fundamental psychological aloneness...Aloneness becomes their companion, their spiritual consort, part of their being" (Trungpa Rinpoche, 1976, p. 151). From this arises freedom as aloneness no longer is a threat. Reassurance is no longer needed to help get us through life, we can start to simply be. Trungpa describes such freedom as a place from where concerns of duality need never arise again. We can only begin to *hear* such experiences when our ego steps out of the way and we allow ourselves to simply be with the sacredness of the ordinary world around us.

The shadow

I see the shadow side of spirituality in ecopsychology arising through the idealization of nature. By idealization I mean a denial of the harshness of nature, pretending that the more-than-human world is a safe environment for all, much like the image of an idyllic heaven. For all that the natural world can humble us in its beauty and variety, in the name of survival it can also be very hard. This view might arise when the natural world becomes for someone a place to escape from the difficulties of everyday life. Nature becomes one's refuge and one's refuge needs to be safe.

In what way is such a view harmful? If we are looking at the natural world to be a basis for our spiritual practice, such a basis must be authentic. Spiritual practice enables us to transform ourselves, for example when we look to widen our circle of identification. To wish to reconnect with the more-than-human world without embracing all that it truly is, will lessen the effectiveness of our practice. If we do not honor completely that to which we turn to for spiritual growth, a growth that underlies and informs our lives, complete trust within the rest of our life will not be possible.

A second shadow could be seen to arise in *The Work That Reconnects*, spoken of above, and possibly other ritual work. There is a narrow line between seeing this Work as simply therapeutic and embracing its ritual aspect. Approached from a therapy standpoint, the Work might only offer a temporary fix for how we feel about the world. In this case, a person turns up to take part so that they can feel better. However, the work of ritual embraces a worldview, namely non-duality, that takes us beyond ourselves to a place of deep transformation. Not embracing the ritual aspect diminishes one's own experience and ultimately that of the world.

Conclusions

In a private conversation with some therapists who also brought ecopsychology into their practice, I was asked what did it matter whether ecopsychology was regarded simply as a therapy or as a field with spiritual roots? I believe that it does matter and for very important reasons. As has been discussed, the spiritual is that which underlies our lives, the oil that helps us move through our daily lives. Just as oil in a car needs to be topped up and sometimes replaced, so the spiritual needs constant nourishment in order to develop and grow.

Within this paper we have seen how the spiritual allows us to connect more deeply with the world in which we live. We have also seen the role that ritual plays in helping to maintain that connection. Failure to maintain this connection has resulted in the environmental damage that we experience today, as well as the deep discontentment experienced in modern society. As Joanna Macy says, "The global crisis is at root a crisis in perception. There is no technological fix" (Macy & Young Brown, 1998, p. 117). The technological fixes might follow from the

change in perception, but the technological fixes alone are not enough. At this time, and for all times, what is needed is something which brings us back to our true home and at the same time sustains us through hard times. Outside fixes cannot do this. They are subject to change and decay, and when they are no longer able to sustain us, to where do we turn?

Returning to the tradition that in many ways became the catalyst for this paper, Tibetan Buddhism. If Tibetan Buddhism was simply the monasteries of Tibet, the tradition would have died out with the Chinese invasion of that country over forty years ago. However, Buddhism lives in the hearts of the teachers that came into exile. Even the simple Tibetan people spoken of earlier hold their faith in their hearts. It is that that has sustained them in their transition to their new lives, and now we in the West are starting to benefit from this wisdom as it is shared with us.

The practices of ecopsychology bring us home, a home that expands through practice to embrace all beings in love, defined within the Buddhist tradition as the wish for all beings to be happy. With such a love to sustain us, who or what is there to harm us? The pain of what is happening in our time is real and felt, and this love while only held in a few hearts will not necessarily prevent further damage. However this deep source of love, born of our shared connection will nourish us through all. Ecopsychology offers this connection through the spirituality which has informed its birth.

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Footnotes

¹On revisiting this link in October 2005, it was found to be no longer in existence.