Deep Ecology and East-West Dialog

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Abstract

One of the main challenges of our time is the ecological crisis. This crisis is a result not only of economic, political and social factors. It concerns also the very foundations of our attitude to reality and to ourselves. One of the answers to the ecological problems is the Deep Ecology movement. It seeks to identify, suggest and encourage the implementation of ways for overall ecological transformation of our socio-cultural systems, collective actions and lifestyle. This paper aims at presenting the East-West dialogue in terms of the ideas of deep ecology. What could offer to the ecological issue Eastern teachings, how could they be harmonized with the Western traditions – these will be some of the questions in this paper.

Keywords: deep ecology, East-West dialogue, Eastern philosophy.

1. Introduction

One of the main challenges of our time is the ecological crisis. This problem seems to be more and more severe every year. Therefore, among the most important priorities of the European Union’s strategy for smart and sustainable development is the need for much higher energy and resource efficiency. The problems of ecology, however, could not be resolved only by administrative and technological means. They require a much larger and more complete change – a change in our consciousness, in the way we understand and perceive nature and the world as a whole and our place in it.

For more and more researchers from different areas of knowledge “an environmental crisis of this complexity and scope is not only the result of certain economic, political, and social factors. It is also a moral and spiritual crisis which, in order to be addressed, will require broader philosophical and religious understanding of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems” (Tucker & Grim, 2000: XVI). The new report to the Club of Rome, 2018, strongly emphasizes that “it is particularly important to “look at the philosophical roots of the current state of the world” (von Weizsacker & Wijkman, 2018: 8). Many people come to the conclusion that it is necessary to rethink our worldviews and ethics, to explore the main premises of our thinking, and to analyze the ecological potential of our spiritual heritage as well as that of cultures other than ours. As the report to the Club of Rome 2018 states, it is important to “look at the great traditions of other civilizations” and especially at “Asian traditions” (von Weizsacker & Wijkman, 2018: 114-115).

Therefore, in this paper I will discuss one of the most important movement connected with the ecological crisis that of the deep ecology, as an innovative example of a dialogue where Eastern ideas are creatively combined with the Western ones creating a new and working model.
2. Deep ecology as a realization of the East-West dialogue

The concept of “deep ecology” was introduced by the Norwegian philosopher and ecologist Arne Naess. In his Introductory Lecture at the 3rd World Future Research Conference in Bucharest in 1972 he distinguished two notions: “The Shallow Ecology movement” that “fight against pollution and resource depletion” and “The Deep Ecology movement” that rejects “the man-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image” (Naess, 1973: 95).

In fact, this distinction could be regarded as an example of a distinguishing between one-sided technological approach that is in tune with the major Western tendency, and a more holistic approach that is closer to some ideas of the Eastern wisdom or minor traditions in the Western one. Shallow ecology deals with the symptoms of the ecological crisis and tries to solve the problem through the means that generated it upgrading techniques, introducing new technologies, etc., i.e. its tools “are based on the same consumption-oriented values and methods of the industrial economy” (Drengson, 2012). It is precisely because it deals with symptoms, however, that this approach could only offer partial and temporary solutions, and sometimes even leads to a further deepening of the problem. That is why the approach of the deep ecology is important. It seeks for the roots of the crisis and tries to identify, suggest and encourage the implementation of ways for a comprehensive ecological transformation of our socio-cultural systems, collective actions and lifestyle. The approach of shallow ecology sets short-term and relatively narrow goals, while the deep ecology “involves redesigning our whole systems based on values and methods that truly preserve the ecological and cultural diversity of natural systems” (Drengson, 2012). While shallow ecology “does not inspire a change in the way people perceive the world around them – it only seeks to guide human action”, the deep ecology “defends the position that a change of perspective and attitude is required” (Guilherme, 2011: 61). Since the deep ecology approach is based on the reconsideration of our worldviews and attitudes to reality, Arne Naess supposes to replace the term “ecology” with the terms “ecosophy” meaning by this term “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium” (Naess, 1973: 99). The deep ecology as introduced by Arne Naess could be regarded as a kind of realized East-West dialogue at least for three reasons: according to its origin, its ideas and its practices.

3. East-West dialogue at the source of the deep ecology

The origin of the deep ecology is based on two main philosophical roots: the ideas of Baruch Spinoza from one side, and the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi from the other. What unites these two thinkers who belong to different cultures and ages? The main idea that inspires the ideology of the deep ecology is the idea of oneness. This is the leading idea of the teaching of Hinduism to which Gandhi belongs. Monism, from the other side is the core principle in the Spinoza philosophy.

According to Hinduism everything is just a modification and manifestation of That Unnameable One, tad ekam that is beyond all forms. It is simultaneously indescribable and paradoxically described as a non-dual unity that transcends all polarities: “To this world I am the father, the mother, the grandsire and the sustainer”.

The goal, the support, the Lord, and the consciousness witnessing – all this I am. I am again the abode, the refuge, and the friend of all, as also their origin, their dissolution, their ground, their treasure-house and their seed imperishable.

“... both immortality and death, both being and non-being” (Bhagavadgita, IX, 17-19).

That one has different names and interpretations. In a cosmic or objective sense, it is Brahman, the Ultimate reality of the Universe. In personal or subjective sense, it is Atman, the true inner self. In human worship practices, “the same formless, impersonal, pure and passionless
being of philosophy is worshiped by the warm full-blooded hearth of the emotional man as a tender and benevolent deity... Religious consciousness generally takes the form of a dialogue, a communion between two wills, finite and infinite” (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 96-97).

Since this one is the only thing that is, everything in the multiple world is just its unfolding and manifestations. The deepest truth of Hinduism is the truth of the identity of the inner and outer essence, the cosmos and the psyche, the human and the divine. “Tat Tvam Asi” or “you are that” is one of the grand pronouncement of this tradition. This means as well that every being has the same essence:

“(the essential self or the vital essence of man, atman) is the same as that in ant, same as that in gnat, the same as that in elephant, the same as that in these three worlds, indeed the same as that in the whole universe” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, I. 3. 22).

Therefore, one of the main principles of the Hindu ethics is that of non-violence, a principle that Gandhi strictly followed in his life. This principle sees the one divine nature within every being and therefore approaches everything with equal care and respect. This principle sometimes seems too non-human and this is one of the critiques to the deep ecology as well.

The principle of non-violence, however, has a good counterpart in the principle of reverence for life, proposed by the Alsatian thinker Albert Schweitzer as well. The ethic of reverence for life firmly states that it does not recognize any relative ethics, “it only admits what serves to preserve and develop life. Any destruction or damage to life, regardless of the circumstances in which it is done, is characterized as evil” (Schweitzer, 1973: 314). Albert Schweitzer points out that this absolute ethics does not provide ready solutions and recipes. Every time it should find the balance, “when I cause harm to one's life, I must clearly realize how much this is necessary” (Ibid., 315). The Alsatian physician, philosopher, and public figure clearly shows that this absolute ethic places high demands on us and makes us responsible for our most insignificant actions: “I must do only the inevitable, even the most insignificant. The peasant, mowing thousands of flowers from the meadow to feed his cow, does not have to crush the flower growing near the road, for in this case he will commit a crime against life that is not justified by any need” (Ibid., 315).

Regarding everything as one and seeing the same essence in every being, Hinduism is not puzzled by the question whether this vision is polytheism, monotheism, pantheism, panentheism or henotheism. One and many, unmanifested and manifested are two different sides, two aspects of the same reality and are constantly transformed into one another. The oneness is at the root of everything and manifests itself in different ways. Everything in the world, even gods, is only aspects and manifestations of this oneness.

In different language and in a different perspective the idea of all-embracing oneness is developed in the philosophy of Spinoza as well. In terms of Western philosophy his ideas are described as monism and pantheism.

Spinoza asserts that only one substance exists and everything is a modification of this substance.

“Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (Ip15).

For Spinoza God or Nature (Deus sive Natura) are one and the same. He distinguishes two aspects of the substance – passive and active:

“By Natura naturans we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is ... God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.
But by Natura naturata I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from God's attributes, that is, all the modes of God's attributes insofar as
they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.” (Ethics, Part I, Prop. 29, Scholium).

These aspects however are not two realms but rather two ways of our perceiving the reality.

In Hinduism there are also different aspects of oneness and also different interpretations of their connection. The explanation of the oneness of Atman and Brahman, the one and the plurality varies from the strict monism of advaita, through the limited monism of vishishtadvaita and equal non-difference and difference of dvaitadvaiya to the dualism of dvaita. In similar way, “there is some debate in the literature about whether God is also to be identified with Natura naturata. The more likely reading is that he did, and that the infinite and finite modes are not just effects of God or Nature’s power but actually inhere in that infinite substance. Be that as it may, Spinoza’s fundamental insight in Book One is that Nature is an indivisible, uncaused, substantial whole – in fact, it is the only substantial whole. Outside of Nature, there is nothing, and everything that exists is a part of Nature and is brought into being by Nature with a deterministic necessity. This unified, unique, productive, necessary being just is what is meant by ‘God’” (Nadler, 2019).

In such a way, two different philosophies coming from very different times and cultures complement each other inspiring the creation of a new vision, that of the deep ecology insisting to respect every aspect of life in the world. The deep ecology states that an inspiration for such a vision could be every philosophy and worldview if it helps us to find the way to perceive the value of life in its plurality of forms.

4. East-West dialogue and the main themes of the deep ecosophy

Based on the vision of oneness, the deep ecology develops three main views: (i) the view that everything has its intrinsic value, which “is not dependent on usefulness to human beings”; (ii) biocentric egalitarianism, or “the view that all entities, whether a cell, an entity, or an ecosystem such as the Amazon Basin or the planet Earth, have equal value”; and (iii) self-realization, or “the view that everything seeks to self-realize itself, however self-realization is understood, such as enduring for as long as it possibly could and/or as fulfilling its own purpose” (Guilherme, 2011: 64-65).

According to the ideas of the deep ecology these views could be supported by different philosophical systems. Arne Naess was inspired by the monistic philosophy of Spinoza and the ideas of Gandhi. At the core of the both philosophies there is the idea of oneness and interpretation of reality in terms of something much higher that the narrow anthropocentric perspective.

Actually, the view of the intrinsic value of everything stems directly from the idea of oneness. Regarding the multiplicity of things as manifestation or modes of this oneness this idea makes everything an aspect of the highest reality. In fact, here we could not even speak of the highest or ultimate reality because there are no different levels, there is no rank and hierarchy according to which to build our value system. Therefore, if this reality is the only reality and there is nothing but it, the intrinsic value of all these modes should be equal.

For the Western mind that is used to perceive the world in terms of duality oneness seems a little bit paradoxical.

This paradoxality is shown very well in the introducing mantra of Isha Upanishad:

OM. This is the whole. That is the whole.
The whole generates [only] the whole.
If from the whole the whole is taken,
again the whole remains.
This equality of the values, however, is at the same time a lack of any value, since there is no subordination and hierarchy of being in accordance to their closeness or remoteness to the Supreme source, as it is in Christianity and Neoplatonism, for example.

This lack of hierarchy is especially obvious in Daoism where everything has an equal value and equally has no value. Daoism is very un-anthropocentric teachings, as deep ecology intents to be, and it is a good example of an approach that is aware of “equality of things” (according to the title of the second chapter of Zhuangzi). As this chapter states, everything has its viewpoint, its perspective to reality. This perspective is adequate and true for it but only for it: “If a man sleep in a damp place, he will have a pain in his loins, and half his body will be as if it were dead; but will it be so with an eel? If he be living in a tree, he will be frightened and all in a tremble; but will it be so with a monkey? And does any one of the three know his right place? Men eat animals that have been fed on grain and grass; deer feed on the thick-set grass; centipedes enjoy small snakes; owls and crows delight in mice; but does any one of the four know the right taste? The dog-headed monkey finds its mate in the female gibbon; the elk and the axis deer cohabit; and the eel enjoys itself with other fishes. Mao Qiang and Li Ji were accounted by men to be most beautiful, but when fishes saw them, they dived deep in the water from them; when birds, they flew from them aloft; and when deer saw them, they separated and fled away. But did any of these four know which in the world is the right female attraction?” (Zhuangzi, II chapter).

This equality of viewpoints might seem too relative for the Western mind that is used to seek for absolute foundations. If everything is so relative, is there something absolute and how this relativity could be connected with the idea of God who should be the source of the absolute truth? From the position of the wholeness and oneness, however, it is namely this relativity that makes things equal and complementing each other aspects of the whole, these are the different and harmonious strokes that construct the picture of the whole. Therefore, in this vision the idea of mutual connections is of great importance. In fact, as Guilherme point it from the perspective of the whole, “from the perspective of the substance” in the case of Spinoza: “nothing has value (cf. Appendix to Part I of the Ethics) as value is something that only exists from the perspective of the modifications of the substance; that is, only a mode can value another mode as something that increases its capacity to exist for as long as it possibly could” (Guilherme, 2011: 67). Therefore, the deep ecology calls us to leave our narrow one-sided position and to assume the position of the whole where everything contributes to the picture regardless our short-terming aims.

The idea of equality where everything equally lacks value is revealed in its fullness in Buddhism as well. In Buddhism nothing has inner essence, everything is empty and in interdependent relations with everything else. The emptiness of everything is an aspect of the ultimate emptiness of the whole.

The intrinsic value of everything of the world and its equality to everything else is its static aspect. Everything has as well a dynamic aspect: a strive to achieve its full potential or a strive for self-realisation.

Self-realisation is one of the core ideas of deep ecology. It is based both on ideas of Gandhi and Spinoza. Naess used Gandhi’s words that all that he has been “striving and pining to achieve... is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha (Liberation)” (Naess, 1986: 233). As the Norwegian philosopher and ecologist points out Gandhi relates this strive to all beings: “Gandhi recognized a basic common right to live and blossom, to self-realization in a wide sense applicable to any being that can be said to have interests or needs” (Naess, 1986, 234).

The other line of inspiration to the notion of self-realization “is directly connected to Spinoza’s thesis of conatus, the thesis that every modification aims at enduring as it is for as long as it possibly can” (Guilherme, 2011: 68). For the deep ecologists this means that everything has and should be able to achieve its own value, and “the human beings should interfere as little as possible with the self-realization of these other entities, because everything should be able to self-
realize itself because everything has an intrinsic value and all life is held to be equal in value” (Ibid.).

Intrinsic value, equality of different values and the strive to self-realisation are in inner connection and interdependence. They supposed to re-define the way we perceive ourselves, other beings, nature as a whole and the ultimate reality.

Changing in understanding of nature and other beings is closely related to transformation of our awareness of ourselves. We cease to identify ourselves with our little ego and begin to feel that we are a living and inseparable part of greater and greater wholes.

In this connection, the founder of the Deep Ecology theory speaks of “Ecological Self”. This is the highest and matured state of the Self. The first and most superficial stage is the ego. The second is the social self, which includes the ego, and in which one feels as a part of a larger community. The next degree is the metaphysical self, which includes the social one. The highest degree is the Ecological Self that embraces all the others, including nature, the habitat environment (Neass, 1995: 14). According to Arne Neass, expanding the understanding of himself by going through these four stages, human being will achieve a more complete and true self-identification and self-realization.

This extension of our “self” to identification with all nature and cosmos becomes the basis of the deep ecology. It means to recognize that just like ourselves, “all beings strive in their own ways for self-realization” and that “all are endowed with intrinsic value, irrespective of any economic or other utilitarian value they might have for human ends” (Harding, 2002).

Thus one of the important consequences of this widen self-identification is the understanding of “a fundamental equality between human and non-human life in principle”. In such a way, the anthropocentric viewpoint, according to which “man is a measure of all things” and their value is determined by their usefulness for the human, is replaced by a much richer ecocentric perspective, according to which, on the one hand, everything has its own significance, and on the other, everything is interconnected with everything else and the well-being of each individual thing depends on the well-being of the whole.

These ideas, however, are in a good connection with the ideas of Eastern philosophy and could be regarded as a new Western interpretation of some forgotten Western and living Eastern ideas. It is especially true for the Chinese thought which present a view according to which all things are intertwined. All-encompassing energy provides the universal interplay of everything with everything, so there are no distinct things, but perishable and mutually conditioned processes. In this case, the environment, the surroundings, is that which is essential. The perspective is from outside in, from the position of the object, not of the observer. This difference in the construction of the coordinate system is obvious in the very sense of the verb “to see”. In a Western reading, it expresses the action from the point of view of the subject, the perspective of the observer, the Self – I see. In Eastern reading, the verb is rather “to be seen,” “to show, to manifest itself”.

This vision from the position of the other things might be expanded to the vision from the position of a universal view, from the perspective of the whole. This is the position of non-duality which is very important for the Eastern vision. In such a way the perspective is no longer a point, but a circle or even a sphere.

This position sees the world as a huge set of interconnected processes. The relation has a greater importance than the entities themselves.

This is the position of the deep ecology. As Arne Naess explains, it sees “Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so
that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things. The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept – except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication” (Naess, 1973: 95).

Alan Watts who inspired many Western followers of Eastern thought considers that the main feature of the Western world is to perceive things through the subject-object relationship, which, like the soul-body and spirit-matter oppositions, is related to the attitude to the world established in Christianity. In the Eastern worldview, insists he, the subject and object, organism and environment are not in opposition but in a balanced relationship. According to Alan Watts, the main specifics of the Eastern philosophy of nature, which distinguishes it from purely monistic pantheism, is that the subject and object are viewed as “inseparable poles of subject-object identity” (Watts, 1958: 89). At this point of view, the gap between the ego and the world disappears, and “subjective inner life no longer seems separated from everything else, from the overall experience of the natural stream” (Ibid., 111). It becomes obvious that “everything is Tao – the unified, harmonious and universal process from which it is absolutely impossible to deviate” (Ibid.). Unlike the perception of the world in Western thought, inherited from the eschatological views of Christianity, in this “non-purposed” world the thing is as it is, not in terms of its transient and future states, but in its “connections to the present of all others” (Watts, 1958: 113).

The ideas of deep ecology are in a good accordance with the ideas of ancient Eastern wisdom, especially this of Daoism and Buddhism that interpret the world in terms of interconnections at the same time, they are based on the new achievements of science. These achievements, in their turn, are in tune with some of the ancient truths. In this connection, Fritjof Capra, one of the leading figures in the Deep Ecology movement, elaborates in detail the principles of the so-called system view of life and system approach in science.

In his books The System View of Life: A Unifying Vision (Capra & Luisi, 2014) and The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems (Capra, 1996), The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture (1982) and all others he presents life as a network in which the most important are not individual parts and entities, but connections and relationships. This is in a direct accordance with the ideas of most Eastern teachings, especially with Daoism and the concept of the interdependent origin of Buddhism.

In contrast to the analytical and reductionist approach, the system thinking does not divide the reality into smaller and independent pieces but regards everything in terms of its connection to the everything else from one side and within the context of the greater whole, from the other. Emphasizing “the fundamental interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena, and also the intrinsically dynamic nature of physical reality”, this worldview is “holistic and ecological” (Capra, 1982). The ecological vision of deep ecology, however goes far beyond the immediate concerns with environmental protection. It is supported by modern science, and in particular by the new systems approach, but it is rooted in a perception of reality that goes beyond the scientific framework to an intuitive awareness of the oneness of all life, the interdependence of its multiple manifestations, and its cycles of change and transformation. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels connected to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is truly spiritual. The idea of the individual being linked to the cosmos is expressed in the Latin root of the word religion, religare (“to bind strongly”) or the Sanskrit yoga which means “union” (Ibid.).

Since this “new vision of reality is consistent with many ideas in mystical traditions”, practice and mystical experience are very important for the deep ecology just as they are important in the schools of Eastern thought.
5. East-West dialogue and the deep ecology as a practices

One of the specifics of deep ecology that makes it an example of interconnection between Eastern and Western ideas is that it implies inner transformation. It is not a transformation of the technological means by which we master reality, but a transformation of our own inner attitude, through which we perceive the world and treat it. This is in tune with Eastern understandings according to which psycho techniques are basis and goal of philosophical as well as of the doctrinal levels of every school.

According to Arne Naess, deep ecology should include deep experience, deep questioning and deep engagement.

These three components are interrelated and mutually conditional, shaping “an ecosophy: an evolving but consistent philosophy of being, thinking and acting in the world, that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony” (Harding, 2002).

A key point in order to step on the path of deep ecology is the experience. It is this inner transformation, the transformation in the perception of the world, which in turn will lead to external transformation or transformation in actions and behavior.

According to Stefan Harding, a leading figure in the Schumacher College in England, where the ideas of the Deep Ecology Movement are being developed and applied, “deep experience is often what gets a person started along a deep ecological path”. Something must happen to make us feel “the ecosystem as a great being, dignified and valuable in itself”. This experience is described as “a moment of tremendous liberation and expansion of consciousness, of joy and energy – a truly spiritual or religious experience... The mind which saw nature as a dead machine, there for human use, vanished. In its place was the pristine recognition of the vast being of living nature, of what we now call Gaia” (Ibid.)

Such an experience would provoke a radical change in the way we perceive ourselves, the world and our place in it:

“A key aspect of these experiences is the perception of gestalts, or networks of relationships. We see that there are no isolated objects, but that objects are nodes in a vast web of relationships. When such deep experience occurs, we feel a strong sense of wide identification with what we are sensing. This identification involves a heightened sense of empathy and an expansion of our concern with non-human life. We realise how dependent we are on the well-being of nature for our own physical and psychological well-being. As a consequence, there arises a natural inclination to protect non-human life. Obligation and coercion to do so become unnecessary. We understand that other beings, ranging from microbes to multicellular life-forms to ecosystems and watersheds, to Gaia as a whole, are engaged in the process of unfolding their innate potentials” (Ibid.).

When we achieve the depth and breadth of our identification with nature, then the care for nature and ecological behavior becomes quite natural and does not require rules and prescriptions. In the words of the author of the idea of deep ecology: “Care flows naturally if the 'self' is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves ... Just as we do not need morals to make us breathe ... so if your 'self' in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care” (Naess, cited by Fox, 1990: 217).

In such a way, the deep ecology implies unity of a profound philosophical questioning about the essence of the world, a deep mystical experience of our unity with it, and actions to transform our way of life, both on individual and social levels.
6. Conclusions

According to its origin, ideas and emphasis on the experience, the deep ecology is an example of an established dialogue between Eastern and Western ideas.

It seeks to overcome the anthropocentric attitude to reality inherent in the major Western tradition according to which human is a measure of everything. It reveals that in fact, this narrow approach turns against the humans and destroys them. This non-anthropocentric approach is in tune with the main Eastern traditions. It is in tune with Hinduism that sees the divine essence within every being. From the other side it is in tune with Daoism and its objective non-human approach as well as with the vision of Buddhism according to which nothing has its inner essence.

The approach of the deep ecology attempts as well to replace the ego-centric view that presents us as isolated entities with an eco-centric approach. The ecocentric approach has three important aspects: first, it emphasizes the importance and the intrinsic value of every living being; second, it is aware of the interrelations between all things; and third, it understands the inclusion of everything into common natural and cosmic rhythms.

All these ideas are in tune with both the contemporary science and the ancient Eastern wisdom.

Sometimes the approach of the deep ecology that insists on the significance of the non-human world is regarded as a neglecting of humans at the expense of nature. In fact, however, this ecocentricity does not take from our own significance, but on the contrary it extends it and enriches it with the feeling that we are unseparable part of a much more complex and complicated whole.

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