

LOST FOR WORDS

How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the airy way,
Is a world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?
(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Introduction

My first premise is this: that we are, quite literally, *lost for words*.

Consider this. We are blessed with language but also constrained by it. The blessings are self evident: language is useful; it gives access to the mundane and the practical; it reveals the marvellous and the poetic. But the constraints, though less obvious, are no less real...and much more dangerous.

For from earliest childhood, we are encouraged to put a name to all that we see. As we grow, more names follow, and names not just for those things that we see or touch but now for all that we feel, until, at last, at the peak, if we try, we can even formulate abstract ideas. Hurrah! Thus, the mind is taught to grasp at experience and clothe it in words...in language.

However, laden as it is with explicit and implicit values, language does more than merely describe, it *governs*. So that when we name we give meaning and worth and, thereby, define that which we take to be real. In this sense, 'reality' is not absolute but dependent, dependent upon the language that we use to describe it. Furthermore, it is not simply dependent upon our own particular and chosen language but, most importantly, dependent upon a language that others have framed and that, knowingly or, more probably, unknowingly, we have accepted.

Thus, once upon a time, reality was defined by theology, by bishops and archbishops. And this 'given' language was all-embracing, extending beyond the cloister to penetrate all forms of discourse, defining what was acceptable in science, farming and trade, circumscribing family life and all forms of governance. And now, for us, here, a new language and a new reality reign - this time, the language is the language of economics and financial accounting, and the reality is the reality of markets and prices. Whatever the matter, at every place, we are urged to be 'hard-nosed' and to focus upon 'the bottom line', as though our whole lives could be measured in the columns of profit and loss and all that we value captured in a balance sheet.¹

The difficulty is not, of course, that, at times, we need to speak of prices and costs, because clearly we do, but rather that this language of accounting has outgrown itself and now extends beyond the market place, to define and limit all experience. It now rules in the hospital ward and the school room, in local and national government, in architecture and in the planning and development of our towns and cities. It is everywhere and governs all.

But this language may be less than it appears! For even the masters of the language, those thought to have it firmly in their grasp, bankers and property developers, treasury officials and, dare it be said, accountants (and, indeed, urban land economists!), oftentimes bare witness to the frailty of the reality that, otherwise, they espouse with such confidence. Anyone who can remember the tales of “soft landings” and “the green shoots of recovery,” will know that economies do not always behave as we are told they will, and failures, when they occur, can be spectacular: despite their image as bastions of financial probity, banks collapse or lend with astonishing imprudence; more money than most of us can imagine is lost in stock markets that ‘unexpectedly’ nose-dive; newly-built office buildings, carefully appraised with financial rigour and expertise, remain empty long after their sell-by date; and even the priests of this new religion, those most feted by their peers, sometimes are found to have feet of clay, their proclaimed capacity to turn all to gold proving to be illusory.

In truth, this should not surprise us. For the experience that this language defines is narrow, particular and flawed. In proposing a reality of transactions, it lacks compassion. In focusing upon rights rather than responsibilities, it distorts and even denies relationships. In failing to take account of its own ‘external’ costs, it is often blind to the degradation and misuse of nature. Given its narrow frame of reference and evident capacity for humbug, let alone failure, it is bizarre that this language, this reality, should hold such sway, but it does, and it has coarsened our touch, dulled our eye and, most importantly, taken our tongue. In many ways, it would seem, we are, quite literally, lost for words.

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My second premise, then, is: that *recorded history is misleading*.

Present language is only part of the problem. For that which we take to be real is defined also by that which we believe to have already occurred, by the stories we have been told. Thus, our perceptions about the present and our expectations for the future are shaped by our given record of history. For most of us, however, this record is both partial and specific. It extends to little more than the record of ‘great

events,' in particular the record of battles and the quest for power. In large part, it is limited to a history of intrigue and conflict. And yet, whilst all these stratagems were undoubtedly being worked, and the battles fought, whilst kings and prime ministers came and went, most of our ancestors were making the best they could of their lives, living in family groups, their fortune, good or bad, largely determined by the vagaries of climate and season or by the circumstances into which they were born. Whilst competition and conflict were no doubt there, so, too, were adaptation and co-operation. If there was greed and brutality, no doubt there was also generosity and kindness. But as only the former have been recorded, we have come to believe that they are the way things are, that competition, conflict, greed and brutality are somehow more real than adaptation, co-operation, generosity and kindness. Our expectations and, indeed, our aspirations, have been circumscribed. What we see *now* is distorted by this myopic and misleading history.

Take a very present and silly example: each April, the ritual of the Oxford and Cambridge boat race is re-enacted on the river Thames; and as commerce has increasingly taken the race within its thrall, with sponsorship and media hype, it is ever more presented as a great battle, with close-ups of straining arms and gritted teeth; at the end, one crew jubilant, the other desolate. But, *in reality*, given the delicate balance of the craft and the need for the blade of each oar to enter the water in harmony with the rest, as the stroke is raised or eased, is success really a function of conflict or co-operation? Or both? And where is the boundary between the two?

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And so it seems to me that our present capacity to be imaginative, and to live our lives together and to the full, is inhibited by a dominant language which is flawed and impoverished and by an historical record which is partial and misleading. To break these shackles, we need not just a reluctance but a robust refusal to accept the primacy of their definition of reality.

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But where and how do we start our search for another reality? My own experience has led me to believe that it is to be found in the *ground of being* and, in particular, in the experience, expression and, indeed, celebration of *relationship* and *inter-connectedness*, and that the path to this understanding is to be found *close at hand*.

Two philosophies have led me to this:

- The first is to be found in the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness.
- The second is to be found in Arne Naess's deep ecological approach.

In briefly referring to their outline, I will try to show that they share a common ground.

1. The Wisdom of Emptiness

Conventional wisdom proposes a concrete reality, a reality not only of objects but of 'products' that can be possessed, and an absolute self that can possess them. The Buddhist wisdom of 'emptiness' stands in radical opposition to such a notion. It gives expression to a robust and practical reality based upon relatedness, the loss of delusion and the end of suffering.

There are many expressions of this wisdom, some poetic others more philosophical in tone. I think, for example of Thich Nhat Hanh's beautiful commentary on the *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*.² But for my purpose, I have chosen C.W.Huntington's *The Emptiness of Emptiness*,³ a translation and exploration of a seventh century text, *The Entry into the Middle Way*, by a Buddhist monk named Candrakirti. And in this brief reference to the work, I want to draw out two particular elements:

- the reality of relationship; and
- the path of practice.

(i) Relationship

According to the four noble truths of Buddhism, suffering is caused by delusion and the ending of suffering is found in the ending of delusion, which in turn is found in the wisdom of emptiness. Delusion is caused by ignorance and thoughtlessness, by the way in which we accept uncritically, and cling to, a self-centred reality, which, in part, we receive as a legacy.

However, this illusion of reality is not to be misunderstood. There is a conventional reality in which individual, discrete 'things' "present themselves in the context of everyday affairs"⁴ but there is no such ultimate reality.

When analysed in perfect wisdom:

...no object retains its appearance of independent reality...'Things' are merely contingent...⁵

It is this understanding and experience of reality, the reality of contingency and, therefore, of relationship, that lies at the heart of emptiness, and thus of the wisdom that leads to the end of delusion.

But wisdom is something more than a matter of the intellect alone, that is a mere recognition of relationship in the abstract. Rather, it is a matter of *being in* relationship, now and at all times. Although, then, the search for wisdom may require both study and reflection, wisdom will not be found until it becomes part of being.

Thus, wisdom is expressed as being in two parts. Firstly, there is the dualistic wisdom of intellectual discernment. And then, there is non-dualistic knowledge. The former, is a necessary step towards the latter, which only arises when wisdom is actualised or effected in practice.

(ii) Practice

Wisdom, therefore, is a matter of practice, and truth and reality are only to be found "in a form of life..."⁶ a way of being. And this focus upon the "patient observation of everyday experience...an intimate encounter with the world"⁷ is an essential element of the philosophy. For through this close observation, eventually it becomes apparent:

...that any form of meaning (truth) and existence (reality) is bound up in this deeply paradoxical nexus of interpenetrating relations.⁸

In this way, all practice and all experience can be seen as the expression of emptiness. And meditation is an essential part of the practice upon which this robust and radical form of life is founded. Waiting patiently and with attention it is, indeed, the bridge between the two forms of wisdom, the intellectual and the existential. It is the way to being, the practical path to awakening, the loss of delusion and thus to the end of suffering.⁹

Preceded by the cultivation of generosity, morality, patience and energy, each of which is necessary to lay a strong foundation for the practice of meditation,¹⁰ and now in a state of mindfulness and inner peace, the separation of conceptual thought and sensation dissolve and, at the same time, relationship and action are found. In

the spontaneous experience of meditation, "the 'suchness' of everyday experience" is realised in the context of relatedness.¹¹ Understanding "becomes no longer a matter of interpretation or belief, but one of direct perception and unhesitating action."¹²

And, as we have seen, this is more than a matter of knowing, it is a matter of being, a way of being that is embedded in an intuitive awareness of relatedness. A way of being that is "a radically unconventional form of life."¹³ And the web of relationships, which are the reality of emptiness, form a 'community' which brings together all of "the sentient and insentient world in which we live."¹⁴

(v) Summary

Thus, we find:

- first, that the wisdom of emptiness is found in a reality of relationships, relationships that form a community of all forms of life;
- secondly, that the experience of this reality is found not only in intellect but in practice, in everyday experience;
- thirdly, that to be complete, wisdom must embrace and expand the spontaneous moment of non-dualistic knowledge, the span of being before the known is named;
- and fourthly, that meditation is an essential part of practice, a foundation for being.

3. The Deep Ecological Approach

Now we turn to the second of the two philosophies, Arne Naess's deep ecological approach which brings together the principles of ecology and philosophy to act as a foundation for thought and action. Placing humanity within nature, deep ecology, like the wisdom of emptiness, is concerned with relationship and wholeness.

As a philosophy, and as a movement for change, deep ecology sees relationship and community not as an imposed, external, intellectual human construct but as "an essential component of what...entities are in themselves."¹⁵ None of us, no living thing, no river or mountain, can be isolated and set apart: "an organism," says Naess, "is interaction."¹⁶

Therefore, within the context of our search for “another reality” and the exploration of the realm of “relationship” and “interconnectedness,” two aspects of the deep ecological approach are of particular relevance:

- firstly, the notion of the 'total view,' which, by revealing the connection between values and action, highlights the importance of 'language' as a determinant of 'reality;' and
- secondly, the notion of 'identification,'¹⁷ which stresses the existence of 'relationship.'

(i) The 'Total View'

Naess's concept of the 'total view'¹⁸ is based upon the presumption that, for each of us, whether we are aware of it or not, our perception of 'reality,' is based upon a foundation of unproven and unprovable ultimate values or norms.¹⁹ And, for Naess, our view is 'total' if it demonstrates a relationship between such ultimate values and our practical actions.

To be 'a deep ecological total view,' Naess requires that both values and actions reflect the broad ecological view expressed in what has become known as the Deep Ecology Platform. Ultimate norms must lead to the Platform, and lifestyles and action must demonstrably flow from it. Thus, the total view must have general and ecologically particular qualities of coherence and consistency.

By a process of 'deep questioning' we may reveal our own and other's contradictions and inconsistencies, and, conversely, make explicit values that are unspoken or even not consciously acknowledged - the implicit values that inform language and action. The failure to expose these 'hidden' values underlies the very problem of language referred to at the outset of this essay.

(iii) 'Identification'

Within the context of this total view, and at the heart of Naess's deep ecological approach, is the proposition of 'intrinsic value,' that is that:

The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.

For Naess, the acceptance of such non-instrumental values is not seen as arising primarily from rationality and morality.²⁰ Rather, such acceptance comes from experience and arises intuitively. We come to recognise and accept intrinsic value naturally, because we are inclined to do so. And such inclination is to come from identifying more widely with nature, from 'identification'.²¹

'Identification,' then, is:

...a spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which *the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests.*²²

And:

It is characterised by the perception that all life is interdependent; common goals bind all living beings to the life process. In its most expansive form, wide-identification is the perception that the interests of *all* entities in nature (both living and non-living, ecosystems and individuals) are our own.²³

This is, then, a most radical formulation of the notion of 'relationship.'

(iii) Practice

Thus, the 'identification' of Arne Naess's deep ecology, like the Buddhist wisdom of 'emptiness,' is based upon a reality of relationships. But, again like the wisdom of emptiness, such reality is to be discovered in practice. For Naess, identification is found in the direct experience of nature.

When, one morning in May, Arne Naess enters the seminar room at Schumacher College by climbing through the window, he brings with him the spirit of the Norwegian mountain upon which he has built his now famous and remote hut. When he speaks, the mountain speaks and even those of us that have never been on such a mountainside can hear its voice. The teaching and the mountain are one. But Naess also speaks of the intimate and small. In his childhood, he crouched for hours beside the rock pools at Oslofjord, cupping his hand to gather in the shrimps. And in his teaching he has upon the table at which he sits a single flower, and looks at it with the greatest care. He tells us stories of taking students out into the countryside and, when they are looking at the mountain, he is stooping down with

deliberate attention to look at the lichen and the insects.

So whether it be in the vast or the intimate, direct and spontaneous experience of wild nature, *being there*, is, for Naess, the source of his 'identification.' It is in such moments that we feel ourselves to be at-one with all that *is*, there is no ultimate separation, only *being in* relationship. Perhaps that which Heidegger refers to as 'dwelling.'²⁴ For Naess, too, recognises that identification, this sense of one-ness, comes from our daily lives.

(iv) Summary

So, again, we find:

- first, that Naess's deep ecological approach is holistic, insisting upon a 'total view' that connects values and actions, and embracing the inherent value of all sentient and non-sentient forms of life;
- secondly, that the approach is based upon an acceptance of the reality of ultimate relatedness;
- thirdly, that this acceptance comes not only (or even primarily) from the intellect, nor from morality, but from inclination nurtured by identifying with the whole of life;
- fourthly, that identification, at-one-ness, is a spontaneous, non-rational but not irrational process;
- and fifthly, that the inspiration for Naess's identification comes from practice, from the direct experience of nature, *being there*.

4. Common Ground

What, then, is the common ground of these two philosophies, the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness and Naess's deep ecological notion of wide identification? In summary, it might be expressed as follows:

- Both speak of a reality of relationship or, rather, of relatingness. They speak of being at one with, being within, being a part of the 'web of life.'
- Both speak of an experience that lies beyond the confines of rationality,

something that is found in intuition and spontaneity.

- Both also speak of practice, of direct, everyday, experience, whether this be in the vastness of the mountain, the nearness of the rock pool, the attentive silence of meditation, the sharing of a meal or the washing of a bowl.
- Both suggest a path that requires a loss of self and speak of a reverence for all forms of life, sentient or not.
- Both urge a practice that requires an attentive mode of being, a path that is at one and the same time both practical and beyond practice.

The common ground, therefore, is one of radical being, for whilst we may speak of 'being with' or 'being at one with,' it is clear that as there is no separate being, being is *always* a condition of relatedness. Therefore, we can speak simply of *being*.

The common ground is also the ground of compassion, the ground of reverence and loving-kindness. Being is a state of grace and love is the pulse²⁵ that gives life. It is the thread that binds the web. In the wisdom of emptiness, there is no inherent self. And for Naess, the self as ego is lost, giving way to a wider self-hood in which the realisation of the self can only be found in the fulfilment of all other forms of sentient and non-sentient life.

However, whilst deep ecology speaks of 'intrinsic value', the wisdom of emptiness claims that there is no 'intrinsic being', and this seems to suggest a lack of common ground. But, as we have seen, the absence of intrinsic being is expressed as an absence of absolute being in separation. And, thus, perhaps it can be argued that it reinforces, or is at least sympathetic to, the notion of inter-connectedness, the very quality upon which Naess's intrinsic value is based.

The wisdom of emptiness and the philosophy of deep ecology describe a radical reality and offer not only another language but also another way of being. For, ultimately, the common ground is beyond language, experienced in silence, without words. The moment we begin to name we have already lost that which, for a moment, we knew. We can be there, we can embody the experience in practice, but we can not possess it, for there is no 'it' to possess. That which may be known can not be named, or even thought about. It may only be experienced. And perhaps, in stillness and silence, the naming mechanism may be set aside so that, for a moment, the door can be opened to that which is beyond thought.

And so it is to *being* that we return. Not least because it is the still point of the

common ground and "there the dance is."²⁶

5. Ending and Beginning

The Buddhist wisdom of emptiness and the practical ecosophy of Naess, regard the spontaneous experience to be found in the attentive silence of meditation or in the moment by the rock pool as part of a practice that is close at hand. And it is this radical but everyday practice that sets the path of recovery, the way by which we are able to move beyond the narrow realm of possession into the realm of relationship, beyond rationality into being, beyond control into compassion.

However, although deep ecology and the wisdom of emptiness stress 'inclination', intuition and spontaneity, our common practice is at present so affected by the dominant language of possession and control that, for most of us, the path of recovery is difficult to find and to follow. In order to *be* in place, we have to find a way that is *present*, both in time and place. In order to take the first steps along this way, we have to find a form of practice that is familiar, albeit that it is at the same time mysterious.

And in order to begin to recover the ground that we have lost, we may have to take a deliberate step along a new path. As Eliot describes it in *East Coker*:

In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.²⁷

One way to discover such a path may be to give more attention to the ground of our being, quite literally to the earth, the winds and the waters, the passage of the seasons and the cycles of sun and moon. And, for many of us, this will be found not in distant landscapes of wilderness and mountain but *close at hand*, in the garden, the park, the hedgerow, even the waste ground. Here is wonder and mystery. Take a walk along a country lane or walk across the wasteland of a forgotten corner of the city and the mystery is there. The cowslip in the ditch, the poppy on the embankment, the bramble, the briar, the mouse, the butterfly, the bee and the finch are its voice. And who can plant the shrivelled husk of a seed and watch it grow into the lush abundance of a courgette plant without being filled with wonder?

The path, then, may be a garden path! For working in a garden is a meditation. And the path away from possession and control can be found if the garden is worked with reverence, acknowledging the seasons, feeding the ground with compost, not asking more from the ground than it will give with care and attention.

Here, here in the garden, is a place of relationship, a threshold between the known and the named. Again with Eliot, we move:

Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.²⁸

And, I would say, close at hand.

David Cadman, *The Hamlet House*, Autumn 1996.
Published in *Mandala*, 1997

Not to be published without the author's consent.

APPENDIX 1: THE DEEP ECOLOGY PLATFORM

- (1) The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The usefulness of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
- (2) Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.
- (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- (4) Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- (5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- (6) Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
- (7) The ideological change is mainly appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
- (8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.²⁹

NB. In discussion, Arne Naess has confirmed that Point 8 should be revised as follows: "...to implement the necessary changes peacefully and democratically."

This version of the Platform is taken from Naess, Arne, *Ecology, community and life-style: outline of an ecosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 29.

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1. This mode of being is discussed by Erich Fromm in *To Have or To Be*, Abacus, 1970, and by R.H.Tawney in *The Acquisitive Society*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1937. Fromm contrasts the 'being mode' with the 'having mode', the latter taken to express our present culture. Such a mode is expressed in the language of financial accounting. For what would be the point of all that arithmetic unless, at the end, one *had* something!
- 2 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, Parallax Press, 1988.
- 3 Huntington, C.W., *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhtamika*, University of Hawii Press, 1984.
4. Ibid. 88.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Ibid., 109-110.
8. Ibid., 110.
9. Ibid., 112.
10. Ibid., 76. The first four "perfections" of generosity, morality, patience and energy are described *ibid.*, 69-75.
11. Ibid., 82.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 120.
14. Ibid., 124.
15. Naess, Arne, *Ecology, community and life-style: outline of an ecosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, (First published 1989), 36.
16. Ibid., 56.
17. See: Glasser, Harold, 'Deep Ecology Unravalled: A Few Fallacies and

Misconceptions', submitted to *The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy*, 3/95, 7, where the deep ecology approach is described as comprising six concatenated elements:

- * the notion of unifying total views
- * the use of a normative-derivational system
- * the practice of "deep questioning"
- * the practice of "loose derivation"
- * the adoption of ultimate premises that incorporate "wide identification"
- * the eight points of the deep ecology platform

See also: Glasser, Harold, 'Naess's Deep Ecology Approach and Environmental Policy', submitted to *Inquiry*, 2/95. 5-17.

18. Naess, Arne, 'The Deep Ecology Movement', in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, (ed.) G. Sessions, Shambhala, 1995, 64-84.

See also: Naess, Arne, 'The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects', *Philosophical Inquiry*, 1986, Vol VIII No.1-2, 23-25.

19. Naess, Arne, 'Notes on the Methodology of Normative Systems', *Methodology and Science*, 10, (1997), 75.
20. Op. cit., Glasser, 'Deep Ecology Unravelling'.
21. For example, see: Naess, Arne, *Ethics and Ecology*, an unpublished version first given at the International Congress & Exhibition, Gothenburg, 1989 and then at the Melbu Conference, Norway, 1990, 3-6.
22. Naess, Arne, 'Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes', *Deep Ecology*, (ed) M. Tobias, San Diego, Avant Books, 1985, 261.
23. Op. cit., Glasser, 'Deep Ecology Unravelling', 10.

24. For a discussion of the relevance of Heidegger's thought to these themes, see Zimmerman, Michael, 'Heidegger, Buddhism, and deep ecology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.240-269.
25. The use of the word 'pulse' is inspired by Verdi's *La Traviata* in which Alfredo and Violetta sing of love as being "The pulse of the whole world."
26. Eliot, T.S., 'Burnt Norton,' *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber, 1979.
27. Eliot, T.S., 'East Coker,' *Four Quartets*, Faber, 1979.
28. Eliot, T.S., 'Burnt Norton,' *Four Quartets*, *ibid.*