



Psychedelics and the Deep Ecology Movement: A Conversation with Arne Naess

By Mark A. Schroll, Ph.D. & Donald Rothenberg

The deep ecology
movement
suggests that
the real starting point
toward healing
the social and
environmental crisis
begins' with
self-confrontation,
self-examination
and examining
the worldview
influencing our attitudes
and our behavior.

Arne Naess (1912-2009) founded the deep ecology movement in 1973 with his article “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” (*Inquiry*, 16, 95-100.) “Shallow” in the sense that creating new technologies, discontinuing the use of fossil fuels, practicing conservation biology, and trying to live more simply—while important and necessary—only involves treating the symptoms. Shallow approaches, say Alan Drengson and Bill Devall, do not “go to the ultimate level in values and conceptions of the world.” (Drengson & Devall, 2008)

The deep ecology movement suggests that the real starting point toward healing the social and environmental crisis begins' with self-confrontation, self-examination and examining the worldview influencing our attitudes and our behavior. Many have wondered if psychedelics played a role in Naess' vision of the deep ecology movement. I find no direct evidence of this, although, as you'll see in the following interview, he was profoundly influenced by his psychedelic experience. Naess' inspiration for the philosophy of deep ecology primarily arose from mountain climbing, Spinoza's philosophy and Gandhi's non-violent approach to social protest (Drengson, 2005), although his psychedelic experience may also have played some role.

Psychedelics and ecology nevertheless have a direct connection in Albert Hofmann's transpersonal experience in nature (Hofmann ix-x, 1983), providing Hofmann with the ability to recognize that his accidental ingestion of LSD was of similar psychospiritual origin (Schroll, 2005). Likewise, through a reexamination of history from 1943 to the present, Ralph Metzner illustrates that psychedelics served as the catalyst for a new culture of consciousness expansion. This new culture included the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution, the women's liberation movement, the ecology movement, and the upsurge of creative innovation in music, the arts, fashion and literature. (Metzner:

42, 2008) (Schroll, in press)

Naess, meanwhile, was not unfamiliar with psychedelic experience, and its influence on his ecological perspective can't be discounted. The following excerpt from an interview by Donald Rothenberg is reprinted here with permission. (Naess, A. & Rothenberg, D. (1993). *Is it painful to think? Conversations with Arne Naess*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 52-56.)

“Bitten by Wild Animals: A Conversation with Arne Naess” by Donald Rothenberg

Arne Naess: (Describing his experience of being introduced to LSD by a student) I had a marvelous experience but not overwhelming, and I said, “It's

not overwhelming.” She was provoked, and at a new session, she ordered a really fantastic dose of LSD, and there was a marvelous experience of paintings, the room and everything. . . . First of all, the room was curved and strange, and my own body seemed to be miles long.

Suddenly, I saw some of these paint-



Mark A. Schroll and Arne Naess, taken at the International Transpersonal Association conference in Killarney, Ireland, May 28, 1994 in the Great Southern Hotel. Photo by Kit Fai, Arne's wife.

I had a marvelous
experience....
you can...
deeply feel
things in areas
you haven't
felt before...

ings of Picasso. For the first time in my life, they made a real impact on me. I was also myself somehow painting a Picasso. That was fabulous. Then my guru--she was then a guru--said, “Maybe we should listen to music.” When I was about to say yes, I said to myself, “Why should I say yes? It's been such a long time since she said anything.” So, you have this time dilation, which is also interesting philosophically. But then listening to one of the favorites from the time of Bach, something Baroque, I got a very pleasant and good feeling from the music, but not very different from the usual. Later I thought, “There's a difference--you can, from this narcotic, deeply feel things in areas you haven't felt before, but where you have gone there deeply before, it wouldn't help you.” It wouldn't help me in music, I thought, but it would help me to understand art.

Donald Rothenberg: *So what do you think you learned philosophically from this?*

AN: Well, again it was a confirmation of a kind of possibilist view. There are universes that are with certain chemicals and then there are other universes that are with chemicals of different

kinds. But then I must relate that there was a big crisis in the evening, because the telephone rang. My guru pointed at the telephone and said, “Careful, reality there. It's reality.” It was my last day in Berkeley and I thought it might be something having to do with an examination or with my job, and if I didn't answer the telephone, they would come. Very few knew my telephone number, so I said I must take the phone; I didn't understand how I could move to the telephone, but that seemed to be completely easy.

So I grabbed the telephone and I listened, and there was talk about somebody being bitten by a wild animal in South America, and it was an old woman's voice. And I said, “I am in the United States. I am not bitten. Somebody else is bitten,” I was confused. And then, suddenly, I was clear and I understood it was a student who had not delivered his final essay because he had been bitten and was in the hospital. This was his mother, and she asked me if he could send it later or something, and I said, “Yes!” with unnecessary joy. She probably couldn't understand why I was so delighted! That was OK, but this portion of LSD was so very powerful that I felt later in the night that there was no way at all I could get out of this house and make it to the airport.

DR: *This was the last night of your stay?*

AN: Yes. So at three o'clock in the morning, I called up one of the real delightful students I had, saying, “I am completely stoned and I don't know how I can clean up the stove. Can you come at seven o'clock in the morning?” “Yes, yes!” he said, and he came and arranged the house and took me to the airport. And there was something strange: some kind of film on the plane about the Soviets putting LSD into the water supply. I have never met anyone else who has heard of such a movie. . .

DR: *Didn't you bring some LSD back to Norway?*

AN: Yes. I took it up here to Tvergastein. It was impossible for the students to see me go back to Norway without a little LSD. So I had a session with Jon Wetlesen in the wintertime, going naked around the cottage, which was a delightful thing, on LSD. But I remember I was going to cut some wood with an ax, and



Photo of Arne Naess and David Rothenberg. Photo courtesy of Mark A. Schroll.

he said, “No Arne, you shouldn’t use an ax, please don’t use an ax!”

But that was an innocent time, when all the bright students used such things, and they stopped using it when, for instance, they tried to get a job. They would immediately cut their hair and be completely straight for a little while. But when weak students with problems, psychological or otherwise, started, everything went wrong. They got hooked and there were tragedies upon tragedies. But in ‘68 it was still a thing of innocence and strong persons could get away with it. Now, of course, we are more cognizant of the dangers. •

Final Thoughts on Psychedelics and Ecology

In sum, psychedelic experience provides us direct access to universal archetypal truths that transcend the boundaries of culture and the limitations of spacetime. Psychedelic experience allows us to encounter visionary mystical insights about the human condition, Gaia consciousness and/or deep community and cosmic unity. Psychedelic experience is a fundamental awakening to self-realization (and Arne Naess talks about self-realization being an aspect of personal philosophy--which he called Ecosophy-T--within the

deep ecology movement). Psychedelic experience is not the culmination of personal growth and transcendence; it is instead the beginning of the questioning process. Psychedelic experience is the root and ground from which our investigation of the big cosmological picture begins. Psychedelic experience is the tree from which the fruit of myths and metaphors of consciousness grow. Eliminating psychedelic experience violates the open scientific inquiry of radical empiricism. Without psychedelic experience religion ossifies into ritualistic symbolism without somatic significant understanding. Psychedelic experience is the very essence of transpersonal psychology and the primordial tradition. Recognizing this will require us to examine our personal and collective shadow and the reasons for why we are here.

Further discussion of enteogens and ecology can be found in:

Schroll, M. A. (2007). “Wrestling with Arne Naess: A Chronicle of Ecopsychology’s Origins.” *The Trumpeter*, 23 (1), 28-57.

References for this article can be found on the MAPS Web site: www.maps.org

...psychedelic experience
provides us
direct access
to universal
archetypal truths
that transcend
the boundaries
of culture and
the limitations
of spacetime.