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Renewing the Green Earth *Sangha*: An Interview with John Seed

--Swarnalatha Rangarajan

John Seed is the founder and director of the Rainforest Information Centre in Australia. Hailed as the “town crier for the global village” by the Christian Science Monitor, John Seed has been involved in direct actions leading to the protection of Australian rainforests since 1979. He was instrumental in initiating the US Rainforest Action Network and also in creating numerous projects protecting rainforests in South America, Asia and the Pacific.

John Seed has written and lectured extensively on deep ecology and has been conducting Councils of All Beings and other re-Earthing workshops around the world for twenty five years. He is the author of "*Thinking Like a Mountain - Towards a Council of All Beings*" along with Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess. He is an accomplished bard, songwriter and film-maker and has produced five albums of environmental songs and numerous films.

He was awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) by the Australian Government for services to conservation and the environment in 1995. From 1984 to the present he has travelled around the world each year with roadshows raising awareness about the plight of the rainforests and raising funding for their protection.

John Seed was in India in December 2009 for a series of lecture tours sponsored by the Australia India council. I had the opportunity of listening to his lectures at IIT

Madras where he entertained students and faculty with his earth-songs soulfully rendered to the accompaniment of a guitar, provoked them to thought with his open-ended questions and quiet observations and appealed to their conscience with clips from his films. While preparing to interview John Seed for *The Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*, his koan-like statement on environmental conservation- “I am part of the rainforest protecting myself”- kept echoing in my mind and I mentally put it down as my first question. After spending an hour with him, the insights flowed and I realized the koan carried within it its own answer.

What is your personal Ecosophy? You said in your lecture yesterday that, “When I think of divinity, I think of four billion years of evolution.” I understand that you are deeply influenced by Buddhism. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Shanti Deva are names that keep coming up in your discourses and writings. You believe that experience has more value than anything else and that even the Buddha and other evolved beings get their experience of enlightenment from the earth. Is your personal ecosophy an inner organic process that has grown out of your meditative practices or has it sprung from your engagement with Gaia?

The thing that influences me the most these days is the cosmology that Thomas Berry, Miriam Therese MacGillis and others provide. It is the awareness that the small identity that we have as human beings is just a thin veneer on a much larger identity that stretches back to the very beginning. I remember that every cell in my body is descended in an unbroken chain from the first cell born of the earth. There has been a continuum that has been uninterrupted since then. And to some extent, it is possible for us to experience that not as just another story but actually as our story- as the story of how we came to be who we are. I am not quite sure whether this qualifies as ecosophy per se. But that is my understanding of what took place. My beliefs suggest not just what I believe in but who I believe my self to be. When you take these kinds of beliefs and add ceremonies

such as Sister Miriam's Cosmic Walk, then that can turn into 'this is who I experience myself to be' as well as 'this is who I believe myself to be.' It is the experience rather than the philosophy that interests me. There are so many different philosophies and one can argue endlessly. I love Arne Naess because of the way he presents this room for a great deal of diversity in philosophies and yet we are still all working on the same project.

It is interesting you mention the word "stories". Your songs and poems celebrate Gaia and her infinite, open-ended narratives. It made me think of Gary Snyder's definition of art as "gift economy" where he points out that the best human contribution to the planetary ecology might be our skills as musicians and performers and our awe-inspiring dignity as ritualists and solemn ceremonialists. Who are the writers who have inspired you with their ecosophic literary practices?

I found Robinson Jeffers' poems to be most inspiring especially during the phase of my spiritual struggle when I was torn between the Buddhism that I believed in and the new experience that I was having of the passionate desire to be involved in the protection of the world. I felt a kind of tension and it seemed to me that people fell into two groups. There were the Buddhists and people from other spiritual traditions who felt that all this fuss, bother and activity were distractions from the real work which is spiritual. They believed that in some sense this apparent reality is illusory and that we get sucked into it at our own peril. On the other hand, environmental activists felt that the only way out was through the creation of a political and physical reality which was vital in protecting nature. They saw spiritual work as something for the weak minded who didn't have the courage to meet the world and therefore escaped into stories, myths and fantasies- the opiate of the masses. I was in the point of transition between these two worlds, when I

read a line from Jeffers' poem where he says, "Surely it is time for you/ To learn to touch the diamond within to the diamond outside. / Thinning your humanity a little between the invulnerable diamonds."

In his poem, Jeffers connects the inner reality, the inner diamond to the outer reality, nature or world - the outer diamond. He gives them both equal value. He suggests that when we do that, when we allow the diamond within to reach out to the diamond outside, our personality becomes stretched thin. To reduce things either to mere spirituality or physicality is to lose the opportunity to allow the tension between these things which leads to spiritual growth and also to effective political action. This was a kind of turning point. Many other poems of Jeffers have also influenced me deeply.

What about the poems you have written?

I haven't written a great many songs and poems. But there is one that speaks to my mind at the moment. It was written in the early 1990's when I was in Finland doing a Council of All Beings workshop. We were above the Arctic circle and surrounded by a fog which imparted a mysterious aura. At a certain point when the fog lifted, we realized that there was a circle of reindeer around us. From there I travelled by train to an airport to fly to Washington to participate in a demonstration against World Bank, the first of its kind. The inspiration to write a poem on the World Bank came to me on the train. People were just beginning to understand that underdevelopment was a verb caused by the actions of the IMF and World Bank. When I got to Washington DC, members of Greenpeace who were organizing this event liked it so much that they hired a PA system and speakers and we began with a performance of this song outside the DC skyscraper with the World Bank personnel against the window listening to this song. Here it is.

THE WORLD BANK SONG

Emanating from expensive business suits
Do you notice odours foul and rank?
With his ecocide genocide numbers game
Here comes the World Bank

Vampire needle drippin' dollars, clutching his structural
adjustment knife

Ecosystem after system plundered laid to waste as from Earth he
sucks the life

Teeth rip vital organs from the living Earth, spitting out
cellulose chips

How generous he greases all his minions palms, his card reads:

“ecological collapse”

Economists from hell smooth the way, run interference quelling
all your fears

With administrators, bureaucrats, "just doin my job", and all those
damn engineers

World Bank's got an evil junky wife

Goes by the name of IMF

Shoots up biological diversity

Dispenses cultural death

Mumbling 'bout sustainable development

she plies her vicious trade

If you see her comin' better run for your life

There's an "s" on the end of her aid

Asian African American Development Banks, are World Bank's
ugly cronies three

With their friends the scumbag loggers from the FAO, and the
mafia from the UNDP

They loot the biological register, with their Tropic Forest
Action Plan

Scorched earth, transmigration, chemicals, agribusiness,

logging, mines and dams

Propping up corrupt Third World elites choke the rivers with
endless dams

Keeping all them foreign experts employed with their paid-for
-by-your-taxes scams

Rape the Earth to meet the interest payments, it's that same
old shell game

Centuries of exploitation yet they still owe us?, colonialism by
another name

The time has come let's clean up this town, name names, flush out
those crooks

Biological fabric in tatters, the World Bank cooks the books

Wake up now won't you hear the cries of this planet of your
birth

Expose the lies no compromise, in defense of mother Earth

I say stop the lies no compromise, in defense of mother Earth

*What in your opinion is an integral approach regarding sustainability for a country like
India? What would be a deep and wide perspective on this?*

Without a revolution in consciousness, no model will work. With a revolution in
consciousness, the model will emerge from this understanding. I believe in organics, in
solar energy and in sustainability. These blue prints of sustainability have been spoken of
many times and demonstrated many times. India has more than 300 million people in the
middle class and all of them are striving for more. Nothing can work under these
circumstances. What they are really looking for is an expression of satisfaction and they
are not going to find it where they are looking. Unless that realization sinks in, nothing is
going to change. We should all speak our truths, not compromise in our lives and pray for
a sustainable consciousness. I don't have an idea as to what would work. There was
nothing in the 50's to suggest that the 60's would come. The 50's were bleak – the cold

war and all that- then suddenly a light appeared. It was a wave. To me it is only such a wave that can be of use to us.

*Your video, **Weaving the Robes of Shiva**, on the reforestation of the holy Arunachala mountain in Tamil Nadu offers interesting insights. You challenged the ecological indifference that you found there by proposing to the pilgrims that watering the young saplings was a faster route to liberation than circumambulating the mountain. You made them perceive that these young saplings were weaving themselves into robes for Lord Shiva - embodied as a mountain- to cover his nakedness. This is a wonderful example of how religion can be used to inculcate a deep environmental stewardship. Can you tell us how this turn in consciousness happens?*

There is a suggestion in the Old Testament that if the Lord can find twelve honest men, he will spare the city. If enough people live their lives with integrity, they will contribute to positive change even if they are surrounded by a vast sea of ignorance and bad behaviour. Take for example, the story of hundred monkeys based on the work done by Japanese primatologists who left sweet potatoes on the beach to lure the monkeys out of the forests so that they can observe them. One monkey taught another to wash sweet potatoes who taught another who taught another and soon all the monkeys on the island were washing potatoes where no monkey had ever washed potatoes before. The hundredth monkey phenomenon refers to a sudden spontaneous and mysterious leap of consciousness achieved when an allegedly "critical mass" point is reached.

Imagine if there were already ninety nine monkeys and what if I didn't turn up? It helps me to think that maybe I don't have a great influence by myself. But if there are a great number of people seriously trying to preserve the diversity of the epoch and honouring their incarnation, I think the change will be significant

There are people who say that come what may Gaia will shrug off the humans. I don't agree with that. There is nothing new we are doing that ten million years will not

take fix. Ten million years is not that long in the cosmic scale of things. I was born as a human and as a mammal. I don't feel ashamed to be patriotic. I haven't got anything more important to do than sing and struggle for the continuation of beautiful beings on earth.

You give a lot of importance to community work. In one of your interviews you mentioned the Bradley method of bush regeneration – locating the strongest area in a badly damaged patch and strengthening it which will help the more problematic areas to restabilise. You used this as a metaphor and applied it to social networks and healing. Can you tell us more about this?

The Bradley method was created to describe the return of ecological strength to a natural area. I personally prefer biological metaphors to mechanical metaphors like Spaceship Earth. I like biological metaphors because I am a biological being myself and I explore the possibility that consciousness being the fruit of biology can be described in a similar way.

Often I am accused of preaching to the choir. If I can demonstrate that it is possible to look extinction in the eye and not become suicidal or depressed, there could be a ripple effect. For instance, out of the eight million people in Chennai only fifty turned up for yesterday's lecture. If something happened to those fifty people after the talk which strengthened their connection and feeling of community, I would see it a positive ripple effect instead of interpreting this low turnout as a failure. I am reminded of J.Krishnamurti's observation about how the flower just allows its fragrance to spread without being concerned about who is going to smell the scent. It is connected to the Buddhist practice of non-attachment to the fruit of action. We should do it because it is the right thing to do. We should do it because we are called to do it. It all connects to the Bradley method. If the choir were to sing like angels who knows who might want to come into the church?

In your despair workshops you speak about how the present human predicament which is a culture of denial, results in feelings of disempowerment. Few stand up for the environment. Although we see the earth in pain, we don't do anything about it. Can you tell us about how these issues are addressed in your workshops?

Despair work is Joanna Macy's idea. What Joanna calls the culture of denial is the taboo about expressing the feelings of anguish, dread and terror that we undergo while witnessing what is happening to the earth. But we don't admit this even in the privacy of our selves because we have been given the impression that if we do so, we will be crushed. On the other hand if we release these feelings in a safe context, we do not suffer further tragedy and there is a surge of empowerment. We realize that the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, paralysis, "what can one person do anyway?" were there only because of the real feelings that failed to speak.

Feelings of grief, terror and rage are natural. They are hardwired into our pre-mammalian heritage. Only human beings think that we can dispense with these feelings and think our way through life. When we suppress our feelings those feelings are no longer available to us since we suppress that intelligence which moves us to change things. The power associated with these feelings is a part of our survival mechanism. You might say that the reason why mammals have been so incredibly successful is because of the accuracy of these feelings that determines who survives and who reproduces themselves.

So in the despair empowerment circles, I introduce the theory and then we have a different number of ceremonies that allow people to step into the centre of a circle and explore their feelings and tell a story that has feelings associated with it. The purpose of the circle is to allow these feelings to emerge. The healing takes place for the circle as a whole and not just for the people who speak. A tremendous sense of community is created for all the people who have participated in it. This is despair work. When we allow the despair to speak in a safe context, what remains is empowerment.

It is fascinating that a non-human being like a plant or an animal can be an ally and help us to engage in a larger reality than we usually identify with. How does one speak for the

earth? Can you talk about it in the context of The Council of All Beings workshops which offer a space for the voiceless to be heard.

There are many answers to this. There are different kinds of experiential deep ecology reearthing practices that I have been developing and practicing for the past twenty years. The particular process I describe is a subset of a vast number of processes, any of which will have the effect you ask for. The actual work gets done whenever people get together with the shared intention of heal the illusion of separation between themselves and the living earth. The earth always responds to that request. The earth hasn't rejected us nor denied us. We are the children of the earth. Any sense otherwise is an illusion. We are inextricably embedded in the earth and have no independent existence. The fact that we don't experience ourselves in this way is our problem. Our experience of ourselves does not correspond to the reality of the situation. When we have the wish for the veil to fall away, it is possible to do this. But the thing I have explored is what happens when a group of people get together in a circle for a day or two especially with a shared intention. Then almost anything we do is congruent with that intention - the experience of reconnection and the feeling that I can speak for the earth because that is who I am. I don't need to acquire anything new. I just have to drop the illusion of separateness. It is the Earth *sangha* and importantly a *sangha* that needs to be renewed again and again. To use a metaphor, it is like a sumptuous feast in which no matter how much I eat today, I am going to be hungry tomorrow. There is no point in regretting it. We just have to accept that this is the nature of the world we live in and the nature of ceremonies. Unless we find a way to make them a part of the culture of our lives, these rituals just remain a pleasant memory. But once we have this memory, all we need to find is a circle of people who can share this intention with us. If we really want this, we will create a *sangha*. It does not have to be big. It can be a group of people who pick up trash from the lake in the campus. That will be a very beautiful ritual if it is done with the right intention. One of the processes that I have been using recently which I like a lot is "Earth as Peppercorn"- an outdoor activity for visualizing just how big the Solar system is by using a mere peppercorn to represent the size of the earth. The reason why I mention it is because it was not created as a deep ecology process; it was created by a professor of astronomy as

a process for teaching astronomy. It is only when you add the intention to heal the illusion of separation, in this case the earth as part of the solar system and the universe, that it becomes a deep ecology ritual. Otherwise if we do it merely as an astronomy exercise, we will become good at astronomy. And so to me the piece that is missing from so many environmental organizations is this circling up to explore the spiritual and psychological dimensions. They do not have to spend their time doing anything different except to meet with each other and acknowledge this question of identity. In doing so, the empowerment would take place automatically and their work would get done as well. A dimension will be added to it. The earth *sangha* gets added to it.

If a deep ecological perspective is one of identification with everything as an extension of one's own self, how does one identify with nuclear waste or other hazardous substances?

Nothing is unnatural. Everything comes from the earth and exists in the universe. For instance, styrofoam comes from oil and oil came from the dinosaurs. From a point of view of sustainable future, we however need to make a distinction between the good and bad.

In the end it is all good. To quote the mystic, Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." It is important to include this perspective along with other perspectives so that we can change things while being rooted in the goodness of all of it.