

# Awakening the Ecological Self

## Personal reflections on a Deep Ecology weekend with John Seed

In a rustic hall on a wintry evening, wearing jackets and beanies, a group of humans gather, breathing fog and anticipation. We create a circle, ready to embark on the Spiral Journey.

The Spiral Journey was pioneered by Joanna Macy in a body of work she calls *The Work That Reconnects*. Since rainforest activist John Seed met Joanna Macy in the 1980s, he has offered his own flavour of deep ecology practices, infused with poetry, songs and the delightful lightness and wisdom of an elder.

*I feel glad to be here and a question spirals inside me: what shape will my love for this world take now, in my 50s?*

Norwegian philosopher and activist Arne Naess first coined the phrase 'deep ecology' in the 1970s and highlighted the need for humans to understand the inherent value of all life and to act in service of the whole biosphere. John Seed describes a core premise of deep ecology: to heal humans (especially westerners) of a fundamental illusion - the illusion of being separate from the web of life. In this anthropocentric separation, humans see the living world as a resource to be used, controlled, exploited. This has led to profound, human-caused devastation of our ecosystems.

We need to revive the place of humanity as a co-creating strand in the web of life, attuned and responsive to the needs and gifts of every part of the web of life. To do this, we need to go beyond an intellectual understanding of deep ecology concepts. Instead we *experience the ecological self*, to make a shift from the ego-self to the eco-self, to widen and deepen our sense of self to include all living beings and Earth itself.

So how do we embody and experience our ecological self?

The Spiral Journey offers practices as invitations into an experience of the ecological self, connected and interwoven with all of life. The four stages of the Spiral Journey are cyclical, like the seasons, creating a spiral that we move through again and again in an ever-evolving experiential deepening of our connection with the whole web of life.

### **Stage One: Coming from Gratitude**

*Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

- Rumi

Gratitude sharing seems simple, yet in the face of western consumerism and capitalism, gratitude is radical and powerful medicine. When we are authentically grateful, we feel and know ourselves and life as *enough* and as *abundant*. Gratitude displaces feelings of lack, of scarcity and reminds us that there is so much to be grateful for, even in the face of the world's turmoil.

*Gratitude feels contagious. As each person expresses their gratitude, I feel my heart filling up with thankfulness. I realise how solitary my gratitude practice has become. Our group expression seems to create a shimmering field of thankful presence that feels powerful. I ponder how transformative it would be if this simple, gentle practice of communal gratitude expression was embedded in western culture.*

Indigenous cultures around the world are seeped in gratitude for the web of life. Gratitude brings us into right relationship with each other and primes us for ecological connection. It is hard to destroy what we are grateful for. Through gratitude's eyes, we begin to see a reality of abundance, connection and belonging that is right here, but often hidden or overlooked.

### **Stage Two: Honouring Our Pain for the World.**

*Our choice is to be in love or to be in fear. But to choose to be in love means to have a mountain inside of you, means to have the heart of the world inside you, means you will feel another's suffering inside your body and you will weep. You will have no protection from the world's pain because it will be your own.*

- China Galland

In this stage we open up to the pain we feel for the world. Yes, the world's pain will be our own, just as the world's preciousness and the world's love will be our own.

Joanna Macy's work brings to the the world simple yet powerful ways to disrupt our cultural and personal suppression of emotions. Most of us live in a world where full expression of emotions is taboo. Emotional suppression is an understandable response in the face of the enormity of the human destruction against the web of life. It can feel overwhelming and scary to feel our pain, especially if we are isolated and without adequate support.

Yet when we avoid painful feelings, we also dampen our whole feeling life. We restrict our passion, enthusiasm, joy and whole hearted participation.

Emotions are profoundly intelligent responses to the devastation we know is happening around us. Emotions are powerful messengers. As we express emotions we receive their inherent messages, gain insight and transform bound energy into fuel for our connected, engaged, intentional action.

One of the iconic practices of the Spiral Journey is The Truth Mandala. In this practice, each individual is invited to step into a deep listening circle and express their pain for the world. In the centre are five props: a stick to hold to help express anger; dry leaves for the expression of sadness and grief; an empty bowl for the expression of emptiness and despair; a rock for the expression of fear and a cushion or cloth in the centre to hold to explore other emotions that may not fit into the first four categories.

*I step into the centre and pick up the fear-stone and feel my fear. The fear of being seen disappears and quickly I am deep in the fear of human destruction, fear of what we are losing. I pick up the grief-leaves and cry for the loss of species, loss of ancient ecologies, loss of soulful ways of being, loss of communion with our more than human ones, loss of a loving and just world. So much loss.*

*Then I pick up the stick of anger and roar my anger at the stupidity of humans, warring against each other and degrading each other and our precious earth home and creatures. The roaring comes from the guts of me.*

*I pick up the fear-stone and then put it down and realise I am not afraid to feel. I vow to continue to feel it all: the fear, the rage, the grief, the pain.*

*When I return to the circle and witness others step in and take their turn, I cry and ache. I see my own pain reflected in others' pain. With a shift in consciousness I now feel like we are each expressing one pain shared by us all. Then I see how each person has their own unique version of pain and fragility. I am profoundly moved by the courage and authenticity of everyone. Being moved in this way makes my heart, my whole being feel porous. It is like I have stepped through a portal into an altered reality, into a more tender world, where habitual defences are dropped, where human vulnerability and transparency is shared.*

*Walking to my tent, I feel open to the wet drops hanging in the branches and the orange fungus, silent companions to my raw heart. With the sound of gentle rain on my tent, I find myself writing a kind of prayer. May we break the taboo on full-bodied emotional expression. May we normalise feeling terror, rage, pain, sorrow for the world. May we come together in community to grieve and feel. May we be liberated by and through our powerful emotional expression. May we welcome emotions as messengers, helping to alert us to both the dangers to - and the invitations from - the web of life. Emotions'*

*messages are too precious to be contained, hidden and privatised within individual therapy. May we harness the power of our emotional expression together. May we know the power of what Arne Naess calls community therapy.*

### **Stage Three: Seeing with New and Ancient Eyes**

How do we see with the eyes of the ecological self?

*In a guided meditation, we are led to the molten core of the earth. The burning heart of the earth, the counterweight to the vastness of space, holding us in place with magnetism, gravity and invisible forces of connection that won't give up on us.*

*I feel the molten core of the earth in my heart - as my heart? There is a kinaesthetic feeling of connection between the molten core of earth and my own heart. In the sharing circle afterwards I am surprised when a few others also express this connection. Earth body, my body. Earth heart, my heart. Boundaries melt. My heart, molten, liquid fire. The earth is inside me, all of life is inside me. I am so grateful for this earth, this life and I feel it all through my heart. I realise this is my offering back, my gift: my burning heart.*

The Council of All Beings practice is another iconic practice, that Joanna Macy and John Seed 'remembered' together in the 1980s - 'remembered' because they were to find that the Hopi people (and many indigenous cultures) have for thousands of years practised ways to allow the more-than-human beings to speak through them, which is the core practice of the Council of all Beings.

We prepare by wandering solo in nature, receptive to the call of an ally of the natural world, whether that is bird, stone, sky, star or any aspect of the wild universe. We then create a mask to help us put aside our humanness and allow this wild being to speak through us. The Council of All Beings begins. We share our feelings of profound lament and confusion at the ruin that humans are causing. The conversation is spontaneous, insightful, surprising and moving. The experience of each being is unique, yet we have our shared experience and solidarity in this one unfolding story of all life.

*I am water. Dear friends, I come with great sorrow in my heart. My rivers, creeks are polluted. There is plastic in my oceans. So many wetlands have dried up, lost. I give of myself abundantly in the water cycle of ocean, cloud, rains. Over half of the human body is made of water. Water is in cells, blood, tears, flesh. Water given freely, yet not honoured. Not so long ago, all humans understood, protected and praised water. Now the water of life is polluted.*

*Towards the end of the council we make a vow: to return to everyday life disguised as a human. More than ever, I feel that I am carrying this precious, precious web of life in my human heart. Seeing with new and ancient eyes feels like seeing with the eyes of love.*

## **Stage Four: Going Forth**

My heart feels expanded for days after this immersive weekend. I feel tender and strengthened. I continue to feel porous, permeable to the web of life. I feel like I have gone through a portal, my consciousness flipped, tipped: I am not the centre, the web of life is the centre. I feel grateful for the eco-awakening of this weekend - the deeply felt, somatic, emotional, mind-shifting awakening into the ecological self.

*As I draw next steps on my life map, I find myself drawing circles, circles of community, expanding beyond the current small circle in my life of family and friends. I feel my need for the tribe, the village, for community - a need that also feels like a remembering, a return.*

For it is not only the web of life that humans are disconnected from. We are also isolated from each other. In the short space of a weekend, strangers became connected and love permeated our interactions. Deep ecology plants seeds for the resurrection of human connection and genuine community. I wonder what humans in loving connection with their tribe and with all of life, can be and do and create.

*I breathe with a tree. My carbon dioxide is a gift for the tree. The tree's oxygen is a gift for me. I am in awe of the perfection of this ancient give and take. As I bring my awareness to the tree and me breathing together, it opens me to the preciousness of all life. This preciousness has left me weeping many times, but right now I marvel at the miracle of being alive here on this peppercorn planet. My heart feels stretched and big enough to step onward, to go forth, knowing this belonging, this love, this kinship with all life.*

 Anahata Giri

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*Sincere thanks to facilitators John Seed, Katrina Roberg and Michael Norton. If you would like to do a Deep Ecology weekend with John Seed and guest facilitators you can find information here:*

*[https://www.rainforestinformationcentre.org/deep\\_ecology\\_ric](https://www.rainforestinformationcentre.org/deep_ecology_ric)*

Anahata Giri resides in Melbourne, Australia and works as a purpose mentor. She is passionate about helping people to live their deep purpose and find their exquisitely unique way to love this precious and turmoiled world. She combines deep ecology and nature-heart-soul-based practice through the Soul Purpose Journey online, Wild Heart Wild Soul Retreats and ongoing Soul Circles.

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