

*The following is an excerpt from an academic article which examines how different cultures have treated the experience of being in the dark as an important aspect of ecological awareness. "Ecology" here is considered from gross, subtle, and causal views of reality; each of these views is matched with an instance of darkness retreats used by specific communities to better enhance their ecological understanding.*

Regardless of birthplace, ethnicity, or family lineage, all humans begin life with exactly the same ecological scope – our bodies make up the entirety of our known world. For roughly the first nine months after being born, children are unable to distinguish between themselves and the external material world – the primary narcissism of Freudian psychology. Even after this period, upon the emergence of a very primitive sense of interiority, the line between the individual self and the external world is often tenuous. Piaget wrote of this period: “During the early stages...there remain in the conception of nature what we might call 'adherences,' fragments of internal experience which still cling to the external world”. In a very real way, then, the physical human body is the first and most fundamental representative of the eco-psychological perspective. Any inquiry into the nature of the gross, material spectrum of human ecology, therefore, needs necessarily be concerned with the individual's depth of relationship to his or her own body.

No culture that I am aware of has made more a explicit use of darkness to identify with this level of ecological awareness than that of ancient India, in its practice of *kaya kalpa*. *Kaya kalpa* – meaning, roughly, “bodily rejuvenation” – is a practice most probably developed by the Siddha tradition of pre-Aryan India, although it also exists in Ayurvedic medical literature. While there are several variations of *kaya kalpa*, the *Kuti Pravesika Kalpa* was considered the most complete. In this version, the individual remains isolated in a small room or cave, usually for a period of 90 days, taking only cow's milk and herbs, and remaining in total darkness. This time spent in the dark, with a minimum of external stimulation, was traditionally considered to be an opportunity for reacquainting oneself with one's own physical body.

*Kaya kalpa* was a practice often taken on by middle-aged or even elderly individuals who were looking to extend the functional span of their lives. Many amazing stories of rejuvenation exist in the literature of *kaya kalpa*, with some Yogic adepts apparently documented as having lived well over 100 years of age. These successes are attributed to the time spent in darkness as being an opportunity to profoundly reconnect with the basic, most intimate span of the physical world. The *kaya kalpa* tradition emerged from an understanding that the normal rigors of the exterior world essentially act to draw the individual awareness out and away from the body in which it is housed; this disassociation from the spirit's original home served as the primary reason for aging. The healing darkness of *kaya kalpa* was designed to nurture what we might consider as the primal *Oikos* (the ancient Greek root of the English “ecology”, meaning “house”) – the first step to an integrated ecological awareness.

### **Living Through A Glass, Darkly**

Ecology, in the sense that it is commonly considered today, involves expanding one's radius of care beyond the physical self and out into the world. The Kogi people of northern Colombia, one of the South American continent's last remaining pre-Columbian cultures, use darkness in an unusual way to bring about this expansive awareness. If, at birth, a Kogi child is deemed suitable for becoming a *Mama* (the governor-priests who guide both spiritual and secular matters in tribal life), then immediately upon being born, he is placed in specially-prepared living quarters which remain in total

darkness. The child, so-chosen, remains in the dark for the first nine years of his life<sup>1</sup>, during which time his only human contact is with his mother, his caretakers, and the Mama elders who come to educate him as he grows older.

During his years in the dark (which, under certain circumstances, can end up being extended to 18 years or longer), the Mama-in-training is schooled by the elder Mamas in the ways and customs of the Kogi people. More important, however, is the function that the darkness itself plays in the child's education. The extended exposure to total darkness allows the child's perceptions to develop in a unique way – a way which the Kogi believe enables the direct perception of the *aluna*, the subtle layer of reality which lies immediately beneath, and causal to, our own physical reality. The following quote comes from Alan Ereira's book on the Kogi people, *The Elder Brothers*:

All that [the apprentice] knows is the world he sees with his mind's eye. And then this child that has been reared in the spirit world begins to hear the inner music of the universe, and he begins to act in accordance with what he hears. He begins to dance. (p. 128)

The Kogi call themselves “The Elder Brothers”, and consider themselves to be caretakers of this planet. They refer to the rest of humanity as “Younger Brother”, made up, in their view, of children who are too young and ignorant to understand the real workings of things (because of their inability to consciously interact with the *aluna*)<sup>2</sup>. Whatever events are meant to unfold in this world are always acted out first in the *aluna*; therefore, to live ecologically in this sense is to make sure that one's actions are in line with – better yet, that they enable – the momentum of evolution which transpires in the *aluna*. This is why, according to them, the machinations of global civilization are perpetually in contradiction to the intended flow of the *aluna* – Younger Brother is simply unable to see the way things should really be<sup>3</sup>. From the *Mamas'* perspective, at least, there can be no real ecological awareness without first having explored the subtler layers of reality, available only through the shrouded doorways of darkness.

## Clear Light of Darkness

While ecological awareness may be based first and foremost in our physical sense of self, and while its broader implications may involve the subtle interconnectedness of all life, many ecologists (both by name and by writ) have pointed to yet an even deeper layer – an ecology of spirit. McIntosh, for example, argues for the necessity of “rekindling” our relationship to spirit, in his seminal work on climate change, *Hell and High Water*:

The inner life is our most fundamental resource. It is the realm of thought, creativity, imagination, emotion, visions and dreams. It falls both within and beyond our conscious ken, starting in the individual mind but anchored to the eternal Spirit. We will not be able to live sustainably on Earth nor deepen human dignity unless we learn how to be resourced from such roots. (pp. 219-220)

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1 Children undergoing their time in the darkness are actually allowed out on occasion in the middle of the night; however they are given special curved, wide-brimmed hats to wear so that they never are exposed to moonlight or, by chance, to nearby village lights.

2 This calls to mind Jung's famous declaration, that “people who know nothing about nature are of course neurotic, for they are not adapted to reality”

3 Thus the inspiration for this section heading, with due respect of 1 Corinthians 13:12

This “eternal Spirit”, which rests both causal and impervious to the realm of the manifest, is at once the least obvious and most important subject for ecology to consider in its assessment of the natural world. To ignore it entirely (as is the unfortunate tendency of industrialized civilization), or – far more common in environmentalist circles – to make the mistake of simply equating nature with spirit, produces grave consequences which ultimately work against ecological harmony<sup>4</sup>.

Emerson, who considered nature as but “the symbol of spirit”, wrote extensively on the significance of “the poverty of nature” in relationship to its causal essence, spirit. In his essay, “The Over-soul”, he declared:

Before the revelations of the Soul, time, space and nature shrink away....The Soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea; long intervals of time, years, centuries, are of no account.

And elsewhere, in the essay “Nature”:

To the senses and the unrenewed understanding, belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the absolute existence of nature....[But] when the eye of intuition opens...outlines of surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.

The importance of opening this intuitive gaze to fully comprehend the causal forces at work in the natural world, is well understood in Tibetan culture. Both of the dominant socio-spiritual traditions of Tibet – Bönpo and Buddhism – consider the realm of formless spirit to be the ultimate foundation of the natural world. One of the most powerful methods employed in these traditions for realization of this deep truth is the Yang Ti, an extended dark retreat, held usually for a minimum of 49 days, and sometimes extending for many years. The practitioner traditionally remains in solitude, in a cave away from other people, and utilizes the darkness to enhance his (or, occasionally, her) meditations on the causal realm – the ultimate natural state. Martin Lowenthal, an experienced dark retreat practitioner, writes:

Dark retreat is considered one of the most powerful and suitable environments for working with the teachings of Dzogchen, the practice of the nature of mind. Dzogchen works with the essence of all being and that which is beyond everything....This nature of all being, awareness, and experience is called the nature of mind, and the pure awareness of this nature is called “clear light”<sup>5</sup>.

It should be underscored here that the effort to develop familiarity with this deep level of nature is in no way an abstract or dissociated form of ecology. Rather, it is the very embodiment of the principles of ecology. The responsibilities toward fellow humans, creatures, planet, and cosmos which are implied in these principles no longer represent external obligations which the “good” ecologist is

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4 Another pathological interpretation that arises in this context is to consider nature and spirit as completely separate – for more on this see Campbell's (2001) discussion of “mythic dissociation”.

5 I find it interesting that the experience of this ground of being is often referred to in the Tibet as “the clear light”. Going into the darkness to seek the light: this seems to me a fitting irony.

compelled to follow. To the causal ecologist, the impulse to act for the sake of all beings is no more conscious than the urge to breathe. Lowenthal once journaled, mid-retreat, regarding this shift in awareness:

It feels like my body and senses are being transformed....Deep sense of doing this for the benefit of the community and the world. I lose sense of my own identity and history and sense being part of something vastly larger....

I am also resting in my nature, as Dzogchen would say, while this is being experienced. At times the resting is more the center, or rather there is no center, no thing particularly happening. It simply is – open, silent, still, and vibrant. This is impossible to express in words. (pp. 98-99)

Although a full discussion of what, exactly, constitutes this “nature of all being” is outside the scope of this paper (perhaps any paper, for that matter), it is sufficient for our purposes to note that the use of the word “nature” takes on a profoundly spiritual meaning here. No longer does it refer merely to the phenomenal world, or even to the otherworldly aluna which filters its creativity into our own universe. Instead, the Tibetans speak of experiencing nature in a sense both utterly imminent and deeply universal – ecology in its grandest and most inclusive sense.

## **Dark Horizons**

Darkness, for these three cultures, has proved invaluable for shedding light on the layered meanings contained in the discipline of ecology. Through time spent in the dark, the gross, subtle, and causal aspects of reality present themselves clearly to the observer, and such clarity makes it impossible to consider nature as somehow separate or divorced from human enterprise. In truth, it is Western industrialized culture which stands in its own distinct minority, in its insistence on vaunting the reality of the quantifiable, concrete universe as the only (or at least primary) realm of any significance. In doing so, the understanding of cause-effect relationships becomes limited to that which can be observed by the physical eye. At this level, Emerson's eye of intuition remains closed to its own broader vision, and the realms of the subtle and causal are slighted. If there is a single ontological axiom which needs must augment the current Western understanding, it is that there are layers of reality subtler than and causal to the one of our everyday perceptions.

That the same cultural paradigm which evolved in denial of such a multi-layered reality is also one that happens to have generated such an intense phobia of darkness seems to me a highly unlikely coincidence. (Nor do I find it coincidental that those cultures which seem to have the clearest ecological understanding are also those that embrace the dark.) It is of interest to note how post-Freudian social sciences have invested considerable effort over the past hundred years or so in exploring the dark corners of emotion and the human psyche. In one sense this seems promising, as in order to appreciate a thing, one first has to recognize that it bears some value. From another view, however, there is an implicit message in modern psychological perspectives regarding darkness which seems to accept that the dark is a fundamentally scary place, where unpleasant secrets are hidden. While it could be said that the aim of conventional psychotherapy is to befriend one's inner darkness, still it remains a reactionary approach, something to be done after the fact of initial dissociation. I wonder, if we learned to adopt a more friendly curiosity towards the literal dark, at a societal level, would it have an effect on the way our own metaphorical dark spaces behave, and would it make it easier to reach them and work with them? Based on these examples from other cultures which have done so to varying degrees, I rather suspect it would.

There also seems to be a deep-seated belief in the Western cultural milieu that dark spaces should eventually be exposed to the light. (Perhaps this extends all the way back to the genesis of the Old Testament, where the world is born upon God's utterance, "Let there be light.") I wonder too, if a different, more accepting relationship to the darkness of the world around us would permit us to relax a bit with our fanaticism for (quite literally) enlightening everything.

In researching for this paper and, as a result, thinking more deeply on its thesis, I have become convinced that there can be no real discussion of ecological principles without also taking into account, at minimum, spiritual and psychological perspectives as well. The intertwined layers of self, community, and universal spirit – gross, subtle, and causal reality – cannot really be separated in any meaningful way. The implications of this statement foresee the need for a greater cooperation between conventionally disparate disciplines – religion, psychology, sociology, and environmental studies (to name just a few) would all seem to compliment one another well in this grander pursuit towards a genuine ecology. Furthermore, a culture's relationship to nature – on every level – and its attitude towards darkness seem to be strongly linked. At the very least, the lucid examples of the Indian kaya kalpa, the aluna of the Kogi, and the Yang Ti of Tibet, indicate that there is much to learn about the world around us by becoming better acquainted with darkness.

*For the complete version of this article, which explores Western industrialized cultures' relationship to the dark in greater depth, please email the author: [andrew.garrett.reece@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.garrett.reece@gmail.com)*