Leading from the Ecological Self[1]

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"It is the reawakening of the ecological self that can save us and the life of our planet"

Joanna Macy

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Context / Introduction

Human beings often reach out for leadership: guidance, maybe wisdom, about which path to choose when there is a fork in the road. We all—all beings—need to know what will keep us alive and what will destroy us. There are examples of leaders and leading in all species. In our species of human beings, there seems to be a belief among many that our fellow humans should turn to the largest, most dominant, or strongest among us. On the other hand, we could seek leaders who are wise: who aim to take into account as many as possible of the forces that affect life on this planet and to craft a path that will enable human beings and all life to thrive. This chapter describes one way of looking at such leadership: *leading from the ecological self*.

This chapter is written for a unique leadership book that interweaves leadership with the arts and how humans are interconnected with all that lives. I aim to conceptualize a significant developmental step forward, where we ground ourselves as leaders in what many people feel nonverbally when very young—a sense of oneness, wholeness, ease, and naturally being nourished—and unite that with what maturity can bring: the wisdom of appreciating what it is to be alive with a human mind and body. Bring these together means that we are able to communicate using language in ways that let us know what has happened not only in our own lives and our personal ancestors, but in the lives of many groups of people, over centuries. It means we know how to use extremely complex tools that we construct in ways that build additional tools and structures that last far beyond our own lives.

Connecting with one's ecological self is a way for human beings to sense ourselves as interdependent and interconnected with all forms of life. Developed initially by Arne Naess, Joanna Macy, and John Seed (1988), this perspective shifts the ground from which leaders function, nourishing a spacious, vital sense of identity and agency. By living from this view, leaders can support those focused on developing and implementing policies to enable human societies to shift from an extractive to a generative relationship with the Earth.

This short piece will give readers an understanding of what the ecological self is, how it is essential for leadership at this time, and of practices for living in this way. Before setting out on this journey, I want to more fully presence myself and why I find this so nourishing at this time. As child of 5 or 6, I grew up with a mother who walked around the house singing *Vici d'arte* from Verdi's opera Tosca. This beloved aria tells of a woman who lives for art and love and senses that her life is heading towards pain and suffering as the country where she lives is leaving behind its hopes for democracy. My mother once took me for a walk when there was a huge storm with gale winds. Holding my hand, she urged me to be at ease in continuing to walk because "It's just a little wind, Kath!" All of this combined to make art not something separate, but a core element in how I live: somehow weaving beauty and courage together. She had a large book on the coffee table with the title

[1] This is a pre-publication version of a chapter under review for publication. It is based on a thesis I wrote for the Upaya Zen Center Program in Socially Engaged Chaplaincy.

God is One. Although we almost never participated in formal religious practice in temples or synagogues, I appreciated the spiritual aspects of life in some visceral way.

So it was not surprising that years later I became interested in Buddhism and found myself walking with my wonderful teacher, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, on a path through the woods where he taught in the mountains near Santa Cruz, California. I was saying something that I thought of as a huge commitment about "all humans," and he stopped walking, put his hand on my arm, and said "Not all humans, Kathryn! All beings! All beings!" I have never forgotten that. It has become a core part of me to consider our relationship with all beings (humans, animals, plants—all!) and the effects of our actions on all beings. So for me, art, liberation, awareness, and love are all interconnected. And at this time in human history, appreciating how leadership can be colored and nurtured by the ecological self seems essential for a flourishing future for humans, all beings, and the earth.

More and more people are concerned about the state of our home, our Earth, our "relatives" from other species and types of life. In speaking at a global leadership conference where few speak about spirituality in leadership, I saw my theme resonate for some listeners. As I spoke, I saw their eyes light up. They leaned forward, commented, expressed interest. This gives me hope that the potential I perceive may be real! Welcome to my journey!

The Ecological Self and Leadership Today

The roots of the ecological self grew within deep ecology and systems thinking. Deep ecology is a perspective developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1986, 1995, 1996; Diehm & Naess, 2004) who focused ecological thinking on large questions such as how human life has been affecting the planet and the sustaining of life on Earth (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Naess knew that what he was aiming to convey could not be rendered entirely through words. I learned from him that two words which I had always thought were the same, actually are not! He distinguished between the meaning of the term *weltanschauung* in German and the term "worldview" in English, pointing out that one's experience of the world combines words and something more:

> A "view" can be totally rendered in language: "My view of the world is so-and-so." But *Anschauung* has to do with what you feel and see, so the Welt-*anschauung* has to do with the integration of this view with feelings; it is how you *feel* yourself and how you *feel* the world. And because it has to do with what's immediate—how you feel the world and how you feel yourself—the *Weltanschauung* cannot be properly expressed in language. (Diehm & Naess, 2004, p. 6)

This suggests that a leader in today's world needs to *feel with* all beings, not merely know something about them and the world. The other core component, systems thinking, is the capacity to study and understand the interconnected patterns of relationships within social systems and how this impacts change. Leading thinkers from the 20th century whose influence has continued into the 21st century are Donella Meadows, Peter Senge, and Margaret Wheatley, each of whom published widely-read books about leading global change towards a sustainable world (Meadows et al., 1972; Senge, 1990/2006; Wheatley, 1992/2006). This combination of deep ecology and systems thinking is not often brought into leadership development, but I see it as a critical element for the thriving of all.

Everyone alive today faces not only a climate crisis, but a polycrisis: complex, interacting systems are creating seemingly hopelessly interdependent problems for life on Earth (Waddock, 2024). Many are convinced that if human beings as a group do not change direction, we will destroy not only the biodiversity of life on Earth but possibly the conditions for life as we know it. This recognition leads to the need for a dramatic change in the type of leaders chosen to take us forward.

The notion of the ecological self is powerfully conveyed by Joanna Macy (2021) through both the title and content of *World as Lover, World as Self.* Tibetan Buddhist teachers have long said that the title of a work should convey its essence fully to those who understand the real meaning: Here, her title clearly conveys being in the world with no separation between what we conventionally experience as ourselves and all the beings. Speaking of an ecological self is a secular way to describe what has been sensed by mystics throughout time. We are passionately loving and being loved by the world! I don't conceive of the ecological self as a "thing,"

but rather as a way of seeing or experiencing the relationship of the particular and the multiplicity of living beings. Having experiences that allow us to sense our ecological self helps us move fluidly back and forth between our own particular way of being in this world and the sense of the whole. Realizing the ecological self can be a source of nourishment when we feel too small for this huge task of shifting our societies from an extractive to a regenerative way of life.

Sources and Development of The Ecological Self

The notion of an ecological self grew from the collaborative work between Joanna Macy and John Seed in the 1980s and 1990s. They created a community ritual that they called *Councils of All Beings,* in which those participating represent whichever being calls to them. Having essentially "become" the various beings, those participating speak with one another about what the earth needs. One thinks like a mountain, or an eagle, or an ant. This and other rituals are designed to enable people to fully experience their grief and anger at what human beings are collectively doing to our planet and its inhabitants, so that they may be freed to move from such deep feelings into action. Both Macy and Seed see this as a way to help people in communities transmute repressed feelings of anger and pain into shared and sustained systemic action. These councils were sourced by Naess's writings on deep ecology and other rituals that Macy had created in order to "awaken people's commitment and courage to act for our planet," as well as by Aldo Leopold's notion (from the 1930s and 1940s) of thinking like a mountain (Seed et al., 1988, p.7).

As an ecological self, one identifies with all living beings, rather than with one's small physical body. This is part of a philosophical weltanschauung, not an isolated concept or recipe for action. To be human, in Naess's view, is to have a distinct perspective from that of other beings: We can understand the interrelations of all species over time (Diehm & Naess, 2004).

> When we realize this, we must put an end to things such as war, the humiliation of the planet. Within the next several hundred years we should begin to feel that these things are childish—not that we are more ethical but, really, to kill things? That is immature. (p. 7)

Infusing a deep sense of interconnection—indeed "interbeing" (to use the term created by the Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh)—with all beings with such an ethical perspective yields the particular sense of an ecological self, as developed by Naess, Macy, and Seed.

According to Macy (2021), "We are beginning to realize that the world is our body" (p. 142). This can be understood literally: Our ability to breathe clean air depends directly on the "breathing" of trees and the absence of raging wildfires. Macy lives from an "unshakable love for Earth, a profound sense of belonging to our home planet. This living planet is our larger self. By widening our sense of relationship with all of life, we open to what Joanna refers to as the ecological self" (Macy & Kaza, 2020, p. 1). People can experience themselves not only as a physical small self with a personal name like Susan or Paul, but can also sense their interconnectedness with all life through highly somatic experiential explorations during workshops. Participants would take an evolutionary journey from the beginning of history to the present time, performing rituals in the mountains or doing role-plays of being nuclear guardians (pp. 122-123). Macy and Seed saw these experiential learning processes as ways to access the ecological self.

In addition to Macy and Seed's rich notions about the ecological self and how to nurture it in ourselves, we can turn to Indigenous traditions for similar perspectives. Roshi Joan Halifax took a "journey through Buddhist practice and tribal wisdom" in *The Fruitful Darkness* (1993). Can we learn to know the Earth both through the analytical mind of science and through our heart-mind, through becoming still and listening? Halifax quotes a shaman, who says

> "What the people of the city do not realize is that the roots of all living things are tied together. … There is too much cold in the world now, and it has worked its way into the hearts of all living creatures and into the roots of the grass and the trees." (Halifax, 1993, p. xix)

Reflecting on the nature of the ecological self and ecological thinking, Halifax describes various people's experiences of the inseparability of oneself and the Earth: Black Elk's vision that all things are woven of the same spirit; her friend Chato's description of the mountains where he lives; and the oneness of Ogobara's familiarity with the clifftops of Dogon territory in central Africa. All seem at one with the Earth where they

live and walk. “In our bones is the rock itself; In our blood is the river” she writes (Halifax, 1993, p. 150). She continues:

> We share the same body and the same self. Ch’ansha, a ninth-century Chinese Zen monk, said, “The entire universe is your complete body.” Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, “Tathagata is the body of the whole earth.” Walt Whitman wrote, “I am large… I contain multitudes.”[2] And Thich Nhat Hanh says in the Zen *gatha* he composed to be recited before eating,
>
> In this plate of food,
> I see the entire universe
> Supporting my existence.” (p. 152)

As Halifax reminds us, Gregory Bateson regarded the notion that the mind is separate from the world as “the great epistemological error of Western civilization” (p. 156). Through Buddhist and other spiritual practices and the perspective of deep ecology, we can experience the ecological self: the self that is not separate from the entire living world.

The Ecological Self and Leading

Today, there are many programs and trainings for leadership, influenced by decades of leadership research and by people’s desire to gain roles that are associated with power and monetary rewards. During much of history, leaders have been respected and honored, but today, somehow they have become both widely discussed and simultaneously disrespected. Top national leaders in many of the wealthiest nations have low “popularity ratings,” including the leaders of France, Canada, the UK, Germany, and the USA. An analysis of what is causing this trend would be a different piece than this, so I will simply state my belief that if humanity and the earth are to flourish together, we need leaders who relate not just to people (and probably their own ‘tribe’ of people) as having importance, but all beings and ultimately, all life.

Some intriguing ideas for what is needed in such leaders can be sourced by those knowledgeable about Indigenous traditions (See Chungyalpa et al., 2024; Nelson & Kimmerer, 2023; Spiller et al, 2024). These sources convey a very different feeling for how to search for social solutions. They do not conduct experiments or analyze data; instead, they listen with humility to ancient stories. They seek to sense a path forward in the stories of the ancestors—seeking to reconnect with the images the ancestors used and to again feel connected with the Earth and those other beings seen as “all our relatives.” There is an emphasis on women’s knowledge and on practices that have allowed Indigenous peoples to live sustainably for hundreds or thousands of years. When I listen through the sense of being an ecological self, these themes come to the foreground for me.

“A Sacred Responsibility to Give Back to the Earth” and Consciousness-Centered Stewardship

Melissa K. Nelson and Robin Wall Kimmerer[3] have raised a fascinating question: Do humans have a sacred role on the Earth? It is evident that increasing numbers of people think of humans mainly as wrecking the Earth, but at a recent conference both of these globally honored professors spoke of humans as having a sacred responsibility to give back to the Earth. Both Kimmerer and Nelson said there is too much emphasis in climate action on THINGS and policies that have to be changed and too little on how we as people need to change ourselves. Both emphasized that there are too many outward solutions, with too little focus on transforming our consciousness. Speaking from the kind of sense of self we are invoking here, Nelson asked:

> How do we fall in love with creation as an embodied being? We are water, we are rivers. How do we relearn and remember the sacred gifts of life? With all the knowledge we have about what is needed, why do we still not change? Why do we work against our best interests?

As described by Spiller, Nicholson, and Spiller (2025), “Consciousness-Centered Stewardship” means focusing on caring for Earth and her biodiversity as Indigenous Peoples have done for centuries. This reverses

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[2] To see the whole Whitman poem, https://poets.org/poem/song-myself-51

[3] Based on a conversation at CLIMATE CONVERGENCE 2023, held online by the Pachamama Alliance Oct 5, 2023. https://pachamama.org/climate-convergence-2023#speakers and available at https://vimeo.com/showcase/climate-convergence

the trend towards "dominion over" that has been present as a part of colonialism and capitalism. It is a reversal, because the capitalistic mind has long viewed the people who practice such stewardship as "underdeveloped" (Spiller et al., 2024). Such an ethic of care is characterized by the Māori term "*Kaitiakitanga*", which refers to a "long-term intergenerational obligation to protect, maintain, and enhance the spiritual and material wellbeing of precious resources that have been handed down by ancestors and will be passed on to future generations" (Nicholson et al. 2015 p. 6). Māori enterprise is expected to be aligned in purpose with the needs of the whole community, in contrast to capitalist beliefs that all must serve the accumulation of capital. All is grounded in a connected view of life and well-being of the whole.

A Need for Re-Storying

Nelson and Kimmerer spoke about story and "re-storying": Not restoring, but re-storying! I have found that across all the scholars who have Indigenous roots, whether in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia—all seem to tell stories and learn from stories and see life through the stories that people tell one another (for example, see Archibald, 2008).[4] They see settler or colonist societies as telling the wrong stories—stories about endless taking and material wealth. They urge us to re-focus our stories on our sacred role and responsibilities, on the intersection of wisdom and knowledge. Nelson suggested that climate change can be experienced as a gift of Mother Earth, who is responding to the actions of a small group of humans — the colonizers—who created the Anthropocene era (the geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems). She said that we are seeing the impacts of the exploitative ways of the settlers, the colonizers, who acted with the arrogance of scienc*ism*, rather than from deep wisdom *nourished by science*.

Such re-storying is expressed in Chellie Spiller's (2021) exploration of "I AM" consciousness across various Indigenous traditions. This is a way of understanding the inseparability of oneself and all life, all beings, which she discusses in the context of Irish, Māori, and African wisdom traditions. To me, this seems like other wording for the ecological self! To the Māori, *"Ko te awa ko au, ko au te awa – The river is me, I am the river,"* even legally, as a river in New Zealand has been viewed as having the same rights as a person (Spiller, 2021, p. 2). There is "human kinship with all of creation whereby everything is connected as a totality" (Spiller, 2021, p. 2). Similar traditions can be seen among the Xhosa, Hadza, and Maasai peoples, and in Irish poetry from between 400 and 700 BC. She offers as an example, an invocation that is regarded by some as the first Irish poem:

> Am gaeth i mmuir (I am wind on sea)
> Am tonn trethain (I am wave upon land)
> Am fuaimm i mmuir (I am ocean roar)
> Am dam sethair (I am stag of seven fights)
> Am s´eig for aill (I am hawk on cliff)
> Am d´er gr´ene (I am tear-drop of the sun)
> Am cain lubai (I am fairest of plants)
> Am torc ar gail (I am boar for valour)
> Am h´e i llimd (I am salmon in pool)
> Am loch i mmaig (I am lake on plain)
>
> *– Amhairghin, Ireland, circa 400–700 BC (as quoted in Spiller, 2021, p. 4)*

This is so like Thich Nhat Hanh's beloved poem in which he describes himself as being all beings—those tortured and the torturers as well (Nhat Hanh, 2022). Such re-storying can help us let go of old stories that separate us from one another and the Earth, that teach our children that coldly manipulating tools is what makes humanity great, rather than our innate heartfelt interconnectedness with life forces.

[4] As Archibald (2008) explains, Indigenous stories come from the elders, and it takes many years, typically decades, for learners to appreciate the many levels of meaning within them. The way settlers and public school curricula have used them does not convey their place in teaching within Indigenous cultures. From what I hear and read, the core seems to be in connecting with the intentions and wisdom of the elders, and rarely in the words or text itself.

Warmth, Connectedness, and Love

When I read or listen to stories with Indigenous roots, I sense a weltanschauung that is distinctly different from what is taught in schools and universities and imbibed from popular culture. For example, in the conversation between two esteemed scholars with Native American roots, the scholars closed with expressions of love for one another in this very public setting. Each expressed great warmth and appreciation for the fullness of the other—the richness of mind, heart, and spirit—and how honored they felt to walk together within academia and on the Earth. This is not what is normally seen in academia today—or in politics.

A similar connection with love comes from Otto Scharmer's discussion of his relationship with noted systems thinker Edgar Schein, an MIT professor — a founder of the field of Organization Development who always aimed to place people in charge of their own change processes. As Scharmer described what he learned from Schein, it was how to create a learning relationship that inverted the more typical relationship between teacher and learner. Instead of relying on the teacher as expert, they have both created processes "based on what learners know without realizing it, a learning structure in which the educator coaches the learner on how to access those deeper layers of knowing" (Scharmer, 2023, p. 3). Scharmer described what he learned as well as "accessing your love" (Scharmer, 2023, p. 3).

Christiana Figueres was the UN Executive Secretary of the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) when the Paris Agreement was reached in 2015. She is not only a noted international leader, but also a longtime student of Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and she took a leading role in a major online course that was developed based on his book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Plane*t (2021). I mention this, because what was perhaps most powerful in her talks was her openness in talking about her personal struggles at the time she was leading these climate accords: her longtime marriage was falling apart, yet she wished to continue as leader and be publicly strong. The way that she conveyed her love for the Earth and her sense of the interconnectedness of life was extremely powerful.

Nourishing Planetary Resilience

Leaders are selected by the people to be governed in democracies, and more typically, gain power through strength and maneuvering. In no case are they chosen for their stewardship of the entire Earth and her biodiversity. Yet that is what many of us see as needed today.

An intriguing project lead by Dekila Chungyalpa at the University of Wisconsin, known as LOKA can offer insight into this type of leadership. The term LOKA comes from a Sanskrit word that "refers to 'our world' as the basis for all life. ...Each Loka or world is in a sense many worlds, overlapping and embedded within each other. Evocatively, the word Loka also means 'vision,' the act of seeing that not only beholds a world but brings it into being." (https://centerhealthyminds.org/programs/loka-initiative) The initiative, supported by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, brings scientific and spiritual leaders together to develop strategies for a resilient world. They have determined, based on conversations among faith leaders of many traditions and scientists, that "inner, community, and planetary resilience are interdependent" and accomplishing any one of these requires working on all three (Chungyalpa, 2024, p. 5). Drawing upon traditional Tibetan Buddhist wisdom traditions and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge from North and Central America (also known as Turtle Island), they are exploring what practices can make a difference. Based on these two knowledge systems, they have concluded "that interdependence is the unifying principle for building inner, community, and planetary resilience, which is reinforced by science at all levels" (Chungyalpa, 2024, p. 9). In this perspective, we look to leaders who appreciate all of their relations – their interconnectedness with all creation. "Reconnecting with one another, and with the land and water through culturally rooted practices is critically important for Indigenous peoples and communities," and also maintaining ties with ancestors (Chungyalpa, 2024, p. 10).

Appreciation for Beauty Through the Arts

Finally, if we seek ways that such leadership intersects with the arts, an example came to me immediately from the students of Thich Nhat Hanh, who have become teachers in the Plum Village tradition. They created a course that has now been offered online several times, based on his book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (Nhat Hanh, 2021). It gathered approximately 500 people from around the world to move

through a curriculum of learning, reflection, and small group conversation to support people in developing a sense of personal purpose in service of the Earth. Why I mention it here is because of all online gatherings I have experienced—a great many—only this one is notable for its beauty and artistic quality. It opens with a short video showing nature around the world overlain with music that I believe was composed by one of the teachers. So in addition to the value of the many and varied teachers, including (as mentioned) Christine Figueres who led the negotiations for the Paris Climate Accords, it brought in an emotional power that came from this beautifully-crafted opening video, thus being intrinsically an exemplar of artful leadership.

From Ideas to Being: Visions of Life that Make Ecologically Awake Leadership less Far-Fetched

Considering the polycrisis in which we find ourselves today, this is a moment in time when the need for cross-sector innovation coming from an awareness of societal wholeness is not matched by the level of development of the leadership in most countries and most sectors. Scharmer sees collective sense-making as having four stages: [1] Denial, [2] Distancing, [3] Depression, and finally [4] Deep Sensing and Co-Creativity. He believes that today most leaders are in what he describes as the first two levels of collective sense-making and decision-making (denial and distancing), leaving large numbers of the population in the third stage (depression). A hope (which perhaps is realistic) is to move into the fourth stage of "Deep sensing and Co-creativity": managing to stay present, be with the struggles and pain, and then let go of attachment to old ways enough for new possibilities to emerge (Scharmer, 2022, September 6).

Such a level 4.0 system is where eco-awareness flourishes. As in Waddock's writings, a level 4 system is grounded in the intention for wellbeing among all: There is respect for the value of all beings, which means of all ages, stages of development, and cultures—so that all are educated in a whole-systems perspective, have sufficient economic means to thrive, have comparable access to healthcare, and can participate in governance in meaningful ways.

Finally, from the perspective of Māori cosmology, the universe is evolving and this evolution is inspired by a welling up of emotion. Life spirals from potential to consciousness to manifestation and then back again into potential (Nicholson et al, 2015). This force or vibration of potential is called *hihiri*, and it can become manifested through intention. Intention "orchestrates and organizes life-energies into new forms and expression," and then attention and awareness support this in becoming manifest. Intention, attention, and awareness are processes that we human can influence through training our minds, as is taught in traditional wisdom practices from both Indigenous peoples and Tibetan Buddhism. In other words, although this way of being, living and leading from the ecological self seems far-fetched from the vantage point of the 2025 political situation in the world, there are long streams of thought that attest to the power of such forces for change and life.In Māori traditions in particular, there are songs about how such latent intentions can become real, which are similar to the melody in music (Nicholson et al, 2015). This process of unfolding is described in detail in Māori rituals.

All of this depends on the collective will, and the cultivation of healthy collective will has not been focused upon by contemporary societies. If cultivated at all, it is stirred up through forces in popular culture that encourage fear and hostility-based emotions, rather than a feeling for the common good. There are few if any channels for contemplating and nourishing a healthy collective will grounded in a sensing of mutual reciprocity, awareness of interconnectedness, and love—grounded in the ecological self. Fortunately for human beings, other species, and the Earth, such an awakening is merely difficult and not impossible.

Reflections and Implications for Practice

Given how much potential there is for leading in ways that recognize the interdependence of humans on all forms of life and the importance of giving back to the Earth, creating a path forward in this direction feels to me like a sacred duty — a charge our generation has received that is both a gift and a challenge. This option has always been a potential, but its necessity seems more evident because of the power humans have been using to destroy species and influence the conditions for life.

Sandra Waddock addresses this challenge often in her writings on systems change in the face of the polycrisis. Like the Indigenous authors, she writes of the need for new stories, which she refers to as "Eco-Social Narratives for Awakening an Era of Transformative Change" (Waddock, 2024). The story or narrative

that I can see is one in which potential leaders cultivate their heart-minds (because what we perceive in the West as "mind" is often merely the brain, without the heart) through a combination of training, practice, and good common sense, and also learn the socio-technical skills of engineering and management in order to innovate in today's large complex systems. This does not guarantee anything, but might provide a population that values the Earth and has the skills and resources to work collaboratively across all of the many boundaries we humans draw around ourselves (such as race, nationality, and class).

Recent research suggests that intentional mind training can transform behavior so it aligns with core values (Chungyalpa et al, 2024, referencing Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, & Davidson 2020). If we wish to participate in such a process ourselves, one path is to begin with inner work, such as recognizing the interdependence of all elements within us and our connectedness with others and life. This may involve various specific meditation practices, some of which are being taught by Thich Nhat Hanh's community of teachers, others by Tibetan teachers such as Mingyur Rinpoche, and many by Indigenous teachers around the world (for example, see Halifax, 1993; Macy, 2021; Macy & Kaza, 2020; Nicholson et al, 2015). It may mean combining these with artistic practices such as calligraphy (Tanahashi, 2016), walking in nature, or immersing oneself in the wildness of life (Norris, 2024). Chungyalpa et al (2024) describe what they see as the three pathways to such deep resilience. My own research has shown that simply making time to sit quietly or take a walk often leads people to feel more connected with the original purpose that led them into their area of work (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2018, 2017). Our research also suggested that such simple processes influenced participants to feel more connected with nature; we did not mention this as a goal or intention—it simply happened (Koskela & Goldman Schuyler, 2016).

In closing, as an example, here is one process that I found deeply meaningful related to living and leading from our ecological selves. Walk through it in your mind with me! Pause, and sense you are breathing as you sit and read. Let yourself become aware of yourself sitting and breathing –and of the space and beings around you…

In the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, in his text *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (2021), he guides the reader through the following pathway of contemplation:

1. You are the Earth; the Earth is you. This is what is meant by the term interbeing. We are not separate from each other and the environment: we inter-are.
2. Live in feelings, speaking from feelings and the heart – not from concepts or theories.
3. Embody the four core insights of the Diamond Sutra:
    - There is no self, as we and everybody and everything are all composed of Earth, water, air, fire, and space—the five elements;
    - therefore, there is no worthwhile distinction between a human being and other beings; and
    - actually—why distinguish between living and non-living beings—all are composed of the same elements; so
    - is there really any meaning to a lifespan, if our awareness is on these elements of which we are all composed?

Everything is composed of water, earth, air, fire, and space, coming together in different ways. This dissolves the experience of my "self" as being more solid and real than these component elements. They began to become foreground, alongside my sense of "Kathryn" as a being persisting over time. I seemed to sense this Kathryn-being as composed of elements, with space, and somehow inexplicably keeping itself together sufficiently to experience itself, myself, as "me" and to be perceived by others as Kathryn—yet the reality, almost a cosmic joke, is this dance of elements.

When I had this powerful experience, at the same time it felt light and even funny. It became harder to take myself and my irritations too seriously. It seems a bit like wave-particle duality in physics, where a subatomic behavior may be described either as wave behavior or particle behavior. I can experience myself as me, Kathryn, one being, and I can sense myself almost like a cloud of elements somehow cohering sufficiently

to seem to be what we all accept as a person.

From there, I can look at dogs, other people, and other living beings in the same way.

And then, consider rocks, trees, the bay, and perhaps my husband in a similar way.

I find this notion that all living beings are composed of the five elements helps me sense myself as interpenetrated by nature, flowing with life, dancing….

When I read in Okumura's (2018) *The mountains and waters sutra: A practitioner's guide to Dōgen's "Sansuikyō"* that "Sansuikyō means 'Mountains and waters are sutra'" (p. 15), I had a sudden sense of "How amazing!" Here was the missing piece. This major Zen teaching wasn't a sutra *about* mountains and waters, but one written *from* them — written from being one with what lives, with the Earth, the waters. This is the most profoundly clear expression of the ecological self I've encountered. I felt it when sitting with it, without needing to understand cognitively. *The mountains and waters are sutra*; my "self" is not this small physical being and this personal history—it is being one with the forces of life and Earth and water, the scale of life beyond the human.

"Being confined to words and phrases are not the words of liberation. There is something free from all of these views" (Dōgen, 1240, p. 3). I couldn't "understand" the words, yet I had a felt sense that they described my path. And if "I" am all beings throughout time and space—the ecological self—I am indeed not only "seeing into mind and seeing into essence" which is "the activity of people outside the way" (p. 3). Therefore, just sit. Sitting may be seated or walking, since mountains are always walking. One is with whatever is: mountains, waters, thoughts, outrage, flowing, stillness.

Conclusion/ chapter summary.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what it might mean to lead from the ecological self and how this could help shift humanity from using up the Earth to treasuring it and understanding ourselves as one among many forms of life, evolving together.

The concept, developed initially by Arne Naess, Joanna Macy, and John Seed (1988), could transform leadership. The ecological self is larger than our small, personal selves, and is our sense of interconnectedness and interdependence with all forms of life. From this, we sense our "sacred duty" to sustain and nourish life. This kind of sense of the self incorporates appreciation for the arts and is nourished by the arts.

Themes related to leading from the ecological self include:

- "A Sacred Responsibility to Give Back to the Earth" and Consciousness-Centered Stewardship;
- A Need for Re-Storying;
- Warmth, Connectedness, and Love;
- Nourishing Planetary Resilience; and
- Appreciation for Beauty Through the Arts.

While it doesn't appear at this moment in time that humanity is heading towards such leadership, we really do not know. Both social science-based wisdom practices like Presencing and ancient Indigenous wisdom practices suggest that we can, through deep listening to the sacred, find our will and our way.

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