

## STAYING IN TOUCH WITH OUR ECOLOGICAL SELF

### Sensation, emotional intelligence and resilience

*Viola Sampson, Landscapes of the Mind conference, The Eden Project, September 2009*  
[www.violasampson.com](http://www.violasampson.com) [www.ecopsychology.org.uk](http://www.ecopsychology.org.uk)

The word 'health' comes from the same Latin root as the word 'whole'. Living in connection with the world, with feeling and understanding of the impacts of our actions and inactions must be a deeply healthy way to be in the world. When we are alive in this way, our responses to our changing environment can be fluid and healthy.

In this workshop, I will offer some elements of a perceptual practice that can help us deepen our appreciation of our relationship with the other-than-human world and be in touch with a sense of being part of a wider whole – what is sometimes called our ecological self. So that we can spend most of the time exploring different aspects of a perceptual practice, and sharing our experiences, rather than discussing the ideas and concepts behind it, I have outlined the conceptual framework of this workshop below.

It also feels important that being sensitive to what's going on in the world is sustainable and not overwhelming, as this only causes us to burn out or shut down, losing our connection with our ecological self. So, I also want to make some space in the workshop for us to talk about our resources and how we support ourselves and each other.

### **Biting the apple: a change in self consciousness**

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden emerged in Bronze Age Sumer 6000 years ago, from much older stories. One reading of it is a depiction of a radical change in self consciousness, our relationship to Nature and our bodies. The birth of reasoning, objective thinking that sparked the scientific revolution in the 1500s I think of as a significant one of the many bites humanity has taken of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge standing at the centre of the garden. And of course, in just the last 50–200 years, the industrial, agricultural and information revolutions have further changed the way we experience ourselves and the world.

With the scientific revolution, a new intellectual brilliance came as a triumph of objective reason over subjective, embodied knowing. It must have been a time of great social, intellectual and spiritual upheaval. Not only had an entirely new way of thinking been forged but also scientific reason transformed humanity's place in the cosmos, our relation to the divine, with our self and our bodies. The entire world was reenvisioned, and the ramifications of this – psychologically, scientifically, ecologically, existentially and spiritually – are still unfolding today.

But the reasoning mind that prizes objectivity as a way of knowing the world, has also alienated us from our part in the universe. Objective knowing requires a separation between subject and object: It requires distance, and a rejection of subjectivity, and so generates an experience of a fundamental separation between the experiencing human self (subject) and the rest of the world (object).

In this system of understanding, inanimate, objective facts that make up the world 'out there' are given meaning and coherence 'in here' by the power of the human intellect. This means the human self *acts upon* the world, defining it. No pattern or meaning exists except as constructed by the human mind. For the clear thinking enshrined in modern scientific reason, the factual world must not contain subjectivity and therefore inherent meaning or conscious intelligence. Nowadays, instead of consciousness being a fundamental, pervasive force of the universe, we think of it being *created* by the circuitry of the brain, rather than *received* by it.

A continuity of subjectivity that could extend from the interior world of the human to the surrounding (and permeating) world is interrupted. Responsive, creative intelligence, as well as consciousness, spirit or soul, are all believed to be qualities only of the human world. Indeed, any recognition of human-attributed qualities in the encompassing world is dismissed as projection and anthropocentrism. As a result, the encompassing world is seen as passive, inert, inarticulate and non-participatory. And as the world is disenchanting and objectified, humanity's uniqueness in subjectivity is magnified, giving a greater sense of freedom and power over the world.

Perhaps this thinking split between subject and object, is one logical conclusion of Eve's first bite of the apple when the state of wholeness and unity fell into apparent opposites – good and evil, man and woman, life and

death, sickness and health, mind and body, subject and object. These dualisms are alive in our culture today, and for example, in rationalising thinking, *quantity*, an objective measurement, supersedes *quality* – a function of subjectivity, and essential to an embodied, relational understanding of the world.

However, being able to stay with a paradox of two apparently contradictory truths simultaneously, can allow us to grow beyond this mode of thinking. If we are able to hold the tension of two opposites, like the energy of the string on a bow powering an arrow, something new can arise. Between quantity and quality, deeper meaning can sing through. Between subject and object, a new kind of relationship between two subjects can arise.

Staying with an experience of our own subjectivity, together with an awareness of that which we are perceiving also has subjectivity, is an attentiveness that I call *radical intersubjectivity*. This radical intersubjectivity is somewhere between complete merging with the Whole and a separateness: It is about quality of engagement; right distance and meaningful contact; likeness within difference; identification within differentiation; a balanced state of awareness.

This does not mean rejecting objectivity in favour of subjectivity; rather it calls forth this new kind of subjectivity that embraces both. It has the feel of a completion, a kind of holism. As with all states of balance, it is often only experienced as a glimpse, for at any one time, we may be more drawn out towards the other, or more engrossed in our sense of separate self.

In holding the tension of radical intersubjectivity – of me, of you, of the tree outside the window – a new awareness of an ecological self can arise. The ecological self provides a sense of continuity with all of life on earth and the energetic and material world. With an *experiential* awareness of the ecological self, our individualised self-interests can fade as the interests of the Whole come to the fore, whether that Whole be the ecosystem in which we live, a community of beings, or the global climate system.

## **Perception, embodiment and enworldment**

Our sensory perception mediates our relationship with our world and our perception is intimately bound with our subjectivity. So it is possible to explore a personal experience of our ecological self through perceptual practice – through being awake to our senses and to the active process of perception. A perceptual practice honours subjective experience. Reclaiming our natural perceptual capacities through practice can put us in touch with our animal selves that evolved over many thousands of years in relation to the other-than-human world, and it can soften our cultural conditioning of dualism.

### ***Awareness of reciprocity and relationship deepens our perceptual capacities***

Perception is an expression of relationship and an expression of reciprocity. It is both a receiving and an active reaching out. When you touch the bark of an oak tree, the bark touches your hand; your hand is part of the tactile world it explores and the world offers you a chance to explore your own tactility.

Becoming aware of the relational aspect of our perception cultivates our experience of radical intersubjectivity and awareness of interrelationships that means we can more easily recognise wholeness. Once we can *experience* the Whole – through its interrelating parts – we are able to identify with our ecological self.

### ***Our sensory world is a whole body experience***

When we perceive something, *all* our sensory systems participate together to give us integrated information of what calls us into relationship. We can see this in how we describe colours as warm or cold, sounds as harsh or soft. This is called synaesthesia, and it weaves together our sense of the world into a whole-body experience. Being aware of this can also deepen our perceptual capacities and sensuality.

### ***Perception blurs the boundaries of our self in relation to the other***

As we deepen into our senses, the separation between us, as an experiencing subject and the perceived as an object, diminishes. The perceiver is interdependent with the perceived. With radical intersubjectivity, both can be understood to be different aspects of the same alive field. We can only perceive because we are part of the same material world we are perceiving. We are the world perceiving itself, or the world is perceiving itself through us. We make sense of ourselves, and of the world, *in* the world. As we make sense of the world, it makes sense of us – and this is the holistic process of how we make sense of ourselves.

### ***Affinity is ground for relationship and resonance is a perceptual capacity***

But we are also very much a material part of our larger body, Earth, in a relationship that is a dynamic and often rhythmic, interchange. The world moves through us in the air we exchange with each other, or in the food we eat and incorporate into our bodies, and in the waste we shit. The minerals that make up the bedrock beneath our feet, and found deep in the bowels of the Earth, are suspended in the fluid matrix of our bones, and death returns our physical form to the earth.

As we breathe out, the carbon dioxide we release is taken up by green leaves and used to grow. In turn, they give us the oxygen that we breathe in. Just like oxygen is needed for fire, it helps ignite the chemical reactions in our cells so that we can grow. You can get a sense of that in a co-meditation – sitting and breathing with a tree, a plant, or a field of grass.

The waters of our body – blood and the fluid that bathes each and every one of our cells – are saline, like the ocean. Like a drop of water merges with the ocean, our fluid body is resonant with the fluid body of the earth. Our fluid body responds to the moon, it moves in tides. The cerebrospinal fluid that nourishes and cushions our brain and moves through the centre of our spinal cord and deep within caverns in our brain, is freshwater. The waters of the womb have the same content of dissolved gases as the primordial seas, before plants appeared on earth.

We are made up of the same elements that have existed for millennia, from before the Earth was formed – we are stardust! In any one moment, our physical existence holds past, present and future; a chemical ballet suspended in time within the living matrix of the wider system. Perceiving sameness and affinity is good ground for building relationship, and resonance is an often-overlooked form of sensing.

### ***Perception is an active, receptive process of making sense***

Rather than a simply passive, receptive process, perception is an active process of feeling that calls our imagination out to play and participate with the world around us. Our feelings, located in sensation, provide an interpretive layer to our experience. They lend meaning or sense to that which we perceive. By feelings I mean the continuous bodily sensitivity that interacts with our world, rather than emotions, which we can think of as our conscious interpretation of all our feelings at any one moment – known as the felt sense. Our felt sense forms the basis of our emotional intelligence.

Without having feeling about that which we are perceiving, it remains noise, image or sensation lacking in meaning. But we also need symbols to provide the framework for our feelings: The felt meaning is called forth by the symbols of what we perceive. By symbols I mean anything from the shape of a tree, to a particular sound, to the pencil line of a sketch, to a letter or word.

Meaning arises in the process of relationship between the perceiver and the symbols. When we read words, we project what we imagine we understand onto them to build up a picture of what they convey. It is this active mode of enquiry that allows us to understand the meaning of the words. The word 'blackcurrant' may have given you an image, a taste or even the delicious feel of a blackcurrant bursting on your tongue.

We think nothing of hearing sounds and seeing images when we read a story, but what of our natural, perceptual capacities for reading symbols and narratives in the natural world of rocks, rhythms and rain? Our natural capacity to make sense of our world has been transferred to our capacity to read and write and we are now engrossed in a human-defined world. Instead of being in intelligent, participatory relationship with our encompassing earth, we are now immersed in a web of communications reflecting humanity back to ourselves, like a hall of mirrors, losing the reciprocity of relationship with our encompassing earth. Within this hall of mirrors, we are insensitive to the warning signs of ecological collapse, and disconnected from the implications of our way of life.

### **Supporting ourselves to stay in touch**

In a society where objectivity is overprivileged and subjectivity is undervalued, authority figures call for objective, scientific or economic facts and delay action. The constant denial of our subjective experience in the world as a source of expertise can in itself be traumatic and disempowering. We need our emotional and subjective intelligence now more than ever.

Western culture tends to provide stimulation rather than encouraging sensitisation. One response to this is a numbing to overstimulation, such as that found in city life, on TV news, mainstream film and advertising, which in turn increase in intensity of stimulus in order to reach through the desensitisation of the modern individual.

In response to an experience that is too overwhelming to process and integrate as part of a person's life experience, the experience may be split: Through tissue patterns, psychological defences and emotional numbing, the person may separate out this experience in a process known as dissociation, to protect their sense of self and ability to function in the world – to survive the experience.

Humans are deeply sensitive and deeply interconnected beings. Perhaps most of us are aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the impacts of the way we live. The psychological and emotional splitting that we do to be part of everyday western culture, for example to catch a plane even though we know that the polar ice caps are disappearing at an alarming rate, is one form of dissociation. Dissociation is a basic survival strategy, but in this case – although it may be life preserving in the individual sense – with looming ecological collapse, it is clearly life threatening.

In western culture, we take an active role of the destruction of our natural world, whether that is forest destruction for the books we read, or the destruction of the health of the soil by industrial agriculture for the food we buy. We are just beginning to realise our collective power in changing the global climate and life on earth as we know it. To stay in touch with such painful knowledge requires a high level of resources to prevent it from overwhelming our sense that we can survive as part of this wider whole and creating a sense of powerlessness to respond ecological and social injustices. In many cases it may cause us to shut down our sensitivity to our relationship with our world or split from our experience, and so the patterns of denial, apathy and inertia are formed.

When distress, disempowerment or social conditioning close our hearts and minds to the destruction of our planet and its life-sustaining capacity, we become deadened, unable to respond in a healthy or creative way. We may become unable to act out of a basic hunger for justice, for physical safety or security – or even for a sense of future for ourselves let alone our generation's children or the other-than-human world. How do we support ourselves to stay open and in touch with the pain as well as the joy; the devastation and the beauty?

Whether you read the story of Adam and Eve as a creation story, a prophecy of humanity's fate, or a depiction of archetypal dynamics that were emerging many centuries ago, it is dripping with meaning and significance for this planet time. From the first bite of the apple and the subsequent changes in our self consciousness, it may be the biggest tragedy that we wake up to our ecological self only to find we looking at the consequences of our own destructive powers. But climate change – perhaps more than any of the environmental problems we have created – calls us to see our part in a global system; a whole of intricately responsive parts. Could it be that we, as part of a wider intelligent system now present ourselves with an incredible opportunity to discover our place in the world and live in touch with our ecological self?

## **FURTHER READING**

### **Core texts: perception, phenomenology, embodiment and ecopsychology**

David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous* 1997 Random House

Andy Fisher, *Radical ecopsychology: psychology in the service of life* 2002 Suny

Laura Sewall, *Sight and Sensibility* 1999 Tarcher/Putnam

Francisco Varela, in: *The psychology of awakening*, eds Watson, Batchelor, Claxton, 1999 Rider

### **Change in worldview and consciousness**

Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and psyche: Intimations of a new world view* 2006 Viking Penguin

### **Cranial osteopathy, resonance, continuum movement practice**

Bonni Gintis, *Engaging the movement of life* 2007 North Atlantic Books

### **The story of Adam and Eve**

Anne Baring, Jules Cashford, *The myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an image* 1993 Penguin Arkana

Steve Taylor, *The fall: The insanity of the ego in human history and the dawning of a new era* 2005 O Books