

Integral Ecofeminism: An Introduction

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Abstract: This article offers an introduction to integral ecofeminism as a spiritually-grounded philosophy and movement seeking to catalyze, transform and nurture the rising tension of the entire planet. It articulates integral ecofeminism as an un-pathologizing force toward healing, as the offering of a possibility for creating and sustaining the emergent growth of individuals, institutions and our world systems toward awareness. Doing so, it embraces sacred and secular, rational and emotional, vibrant and still, in its conception of reality; and with this, it is a way of looking at the world whole, seeking to acknowledge the wisdom of creation in its multiplicity, specificity, and completely profound manifestation.

Key Words: ecofeminism, non-duality, integral, consciousness, evolution, sustainability.

This introduction to integral ecofeminism is a meditation resting on the juicy, rich, layered, and deep context afforded by critical spirituality, embodied mysticism, spiritual politics and ecstatic devotion. It is a pathway motivated by a deep call to spirit and the various wisdom traditions of our world, indigenous and post-modern. It is also a prayer for helping us to understand that which we oftentimes cannot describe or explain adequately though the vehicle of language. It is a perspective dedicated to weaving together strands from opposing worldviews, all the while guided by a vision of global community as diverse, individual, intense and sublime as all of creation. It is a journey, a call to the realm of spirit or cosmic consciousness for initiation into the mysteries.

At its core, integral ecofeminism provides an orienting vision as well as some of the strategic tactics necessary for the creation of a sustainable, thriving way of life. It invites us into the challenge of implementing the particulars of our authentic selves in the fullness of our manifestation within the context of our daily lives. Why? Because doing so is movement toward realization that we are the essential elements required for achieving the benefits of integral ecofeminism—benefits resulting from the work of love in practice, or that which breeds optimism, peace, respect and equity.

But can we honor the invitation? Doing so attempts to give meaning to being alive. It propels us toward the schisms of the world so that healing might occur. In this way, integral ecofeminism asks us to experience more of the world by re-membering who we are in ways that are not limited by either external or internalized oppressions. To make this happen, we must question our belief in the nature of things. For if we can work from the premise that life is inherently intelligent, integral ecofeminism argues us into having faith in an evolutionary developmental process. In this, we may recognize the larger ocean that is the Divine, called by any name, as

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guiding our lives. This is the truth (holding both the illumination and the shadow) of our unfolding unique stories and our collective process as human beings on Earth. It is our increasingly unencumbered soul held within the mystery of our incarnation and our evolution. Integral ecofeminism as thus defined, catalyzes the process of conscious global transformation—and this is its essential motivation.

The Road Here and Beyond

Prior to our new science understandings, the Western position has generally been one of unquestioning domination. The fight of feminists has been with rectifying a man-woman dichotomy that values only one side of the equation. Environmentalists have most often struggled with a culture-nature dichotomy, where civilization has been deemed supreme and nature regarded as an expendable resource. For ecofeminists, the link between the struggles of women and those for nature has been made explicit. In fact, ecofeminists argue that the oppression of women is inextricably linked to the domination of nature: only through the realization that the two have been equated can we begin to re-value both spheres and remove the weight of imposed inferiority. Integral ecofeminism seeks therefore to empower those marginalized by patriarchal ideology, helping them to find voice and recognition within the local as well as global systems and institutions of the world.

Greta Gaard (1993) notes that the theoretical base of ecofeminism is generally expressed as a sense of self "interconnected with all life" (p. 1). This is a sentiment of relationship; of relationship to the whole of which we are each a part. And such a sense of relationship to the whole is exactly what is required in order to break dualistic mindsets and create a worldview that incorporates the worth and wisdom of the non-dominant (for example, the female and her body, the chthonic and the antinomian, the voiceless and the unheard) readily into its embrace toward fostering new consciousness.

At its outset, the project of integral ecofeminism is that of an embodied spiritual philosophy, one that understands the central role women's bodies, the Earth body and Goddess must play in dismantling the patriarchal paradigm. And not just because these are previously undervalued tokens present in a new worldview. Rather, what is represented here is otherwise missing from the lifeblood expression today of human evolution in its fullest. We are therefore asked to take in the rainbow provided by the rich red of menstrual blood, the blackness of Kali's skin, and the whiteness of silence in order to heal. As Ynestra King (1990) asserted, there can be no sustainable vision for the future until we realize that healing needs to occur. Embracing all that is, was and ever will be, integral ecofeminism then moves us to blossom love, realizing both the polarity of opposites and the sacred marriage that births us anew in the process.

Vandana Shiva (1989) proposed that we consider the example of Hinduism's Prakriti as a guide in our healing struggles. Prakriti is living nature or the feminine principle, and Shiva holds that this concept is a pathway toward accomplishing a more balanced worldview while also promoting environmental sustainability and the well-being of diverse, autonomous communities. Prakriti also represents the sacredness of relationships, inviting us to become one with self-other and personal-planetary concerns. While women are the foremost carriers of Prakriti, in part because they have been—in the eyes of patriarchal society and its constructs—equivalent with

exploitable nature, both women and men may engage Prakriti as a non-violent, non-gendered and inclusive alternative to instigations and affronts that sap women and nature of their vital energies for the production of unsustainable profits and greedy capital accumulation that serves the interests of merely a few.

When examined, Prakriti provides more than the dualistic counterpart to Purusha, the activating or male principle of Samkhya Indian philosophy. Instead, it is the entirety of nature, replete with its ability to create, sustain and destroy in order to continue the cycle of life. It is the blood required at the birthing, the energy of growth toward ripeness, and the vulture feasting on our remains. Prakriti thus considered asserts, "both a *holistic* perspective and an *inclusive* agenda of concerns based on its considerable respect for diversity—both in turn being principles of nature..." (Kothari, quoted in Shiva, 1989, p. x). As such, Prakriti is a source of inspiration for integral ecofeminism as it emerges from the grassroots of the world's rebellions against hate and oppression. Within its embrace, those in need of self-respect and community, healing and rest may find their space and time.

The Four Tenets and Three Levels

Integral ecofeminism arises as a tripartite philosophical methodology for planetary growth reflected in many correspondences; for example, the elemental, the seasonal, the alchemical and the physical. Offering the argument that three things are needed for both wildly dramatic and sublime transformation to occur, integral ecofeminism first calls for an instigator of change. Next, it demands a consciousness that embraces death as a part of life. And finally, it asks for the will to collectively create a container for birthing. Through this scaffolding of mindsets, integral ecofeminism engages on three levels: individual, cultural-planetary and mythological-cosmic. Within these three, it articulates as foundational principles of:

(i) **Dynamism**, representing the fundamental, ever-changing, spiraling forces of the universe both within and beyond our awareness of space-time reality. Dynamism enables the visioning of our planet as Gaia (named for the primordial Greek Great Goddess) as she is situated within a universe known to provide ever-expanding potentials for a fulfilled, resplendent, and sustainable life. This principle gives worth to the tensions danced through cycles of life, death and rebirth—all the while holding deep respect and empathy for our pain—as they dissolve and are forever generated anew. It is necessarily iterative and reflective, living as the constant of change present in and through both challenges and joys.

Dynamism is our dance of complementarities on Earth. This means that the oppositional dualities of a mechanistic worldview, such as self-other, culture-nature, mind-body, and reason-emotion, are held in partnership within a container where transformation arises by virtue of inherent tension. In this way, something greater can emerge and a reflection of truth be revealed. In this moment of birthing or transcending, we are able to find our grounding, our identity and our awakening Self.

(ii) **Advaita**, denoting a radical non-duality that acknowledges the forces of nature and that which contains as well as transcends them. This principle expresses 'All in One and One in All', simultaneously. However, it is not a totalizing or annihilating tendency, but rather recognition of

life's complexities and the offerings of wisdom they provide de facto. It represents a philosophical belief in the reality of the phenomenological world and the wisdom of the body coupled with an understanding of the pervasiveness of the Divine in life willing us, retro-progressively, into the future.

Experiencing through psyche and soma an awareness of spirit in all the realms above and below, this principle teaches that as we begin to come to our senses, we begin to see the beauty of creation as well as the meaning of the crossroads in our lives. In this way, we strengthen ourselves to create an ethic and morality of care that in turn provide the appropriate boundaries required to strengthen the human condition.

(iii) **Ecofeminism**, manifest as an environmental and feminist philosophy rooted in deep awareness and dedicated to eliminating biases such as those based upon race, gender, sexual orientation, age, species and other categorical distinctions. This is so because we exist in an androcentric and anthropocentric world, where value is placed on some but not on others. Emerging from the ground of various feminist theories, ecofeminism, as described by Carolyn Merchant (1990), Karen J. Warren (2000), Val Plumwood (1993), Carol Adams (1993), Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva (1993), et al., has benefitted from liberal, radical and socialist feminisms, while evolving an ecological ethic of care and empathy, as well as a spiritual fortitude born of a realization of deep interconnectedness. As Charlene Spretnak (1990) noted regarding some tactics of ecofeminism:

Perhaps the most effective strategy for us—and certainly the most difficult—is to lead by example: to contribute to the new philosophical base and to work in its new ecopolitics and ecoeconomics; to organize around the concrete issues of suffering and exploitation; to speak out clearly but without malice against those who further policies of injustice and ecological ignorance; ...to cultivate our spiritual impulses; to act, as best we can, with pure mind/pure heart; to celebrate with gratitude the wonders of life on Earth; and to seek intimate communion with the natural world. All of these are the flowering of ecofeminism. (p. 14)

The ecofeminist principle therefore breathes the essence of creation through a willingness to act. It underscores a world in which the inequities manifest in our constructed societies cannot be undone until the inextricable links between them are made conscious and their un-doing made a priority. It opens safe spaces for marginalized Others to raise up their voices and for those around to listen deeply, with intention, toward a better tomorrow.

(iv) **Awareness**, the pathway of psycho-spiritual growth that seeks a broken-open heart, one capable of being simultaneously with suffering and a love of the world. Mahatma Gandhi, the Great Soul of India, recognized, for example, that states of war and peace sustain a dualistic vision. He therefore advocated love born of *ahimsa*, or active non-violence, to enable being with suffering as we move toward peace. The principle of awareness demands that we live by allowing our strengths to emerge from our greatest vulnerabilities. This principle also takes us on the quest of the spiritual journeyer looking to awaken to Self. Here, awakening means awakening to the universe, as in the Hermetic dictum, "As Above, So Below." It also means holding open the possibility that Gaia has a soul, a guiding spirit, a unified field, and a purpose.

Holding open a belief in intelligent evolutionary change, Rupert Sheldrake (1991) reminds us that, "Gaia herself is purposeful and...her purposes are reflected in the evolutionary process" (p. 58).

Initiation and the Work Ahead

Instigating integral ecofeminism is the recognition that ours is a time of initiation. Whether through the difficulties of a present incarnation or the travails of our collective soul, the crises of our time demand we pay attention. Jean Houston (1996) suggests that:

we are on the brink of opportunities for human and cultural development hitherto unknown...[toward a] planetary consciousness [that] involves a profound awareness of the earth, a potentiating recovery of one's historical as well as herstorical self, and a deep willingness to learn from the genius of other cultures...[which is] both the consummation of where we have been and the next stage of the upward spiral. (p. 225)

As Arthur M. Young (1976) theorized, "The universe is a process put in motion by purpose" (p. 255). And as Ken Wilber (1996) reminds us, "If we really are in the hands of the Great Spirit or the Great Mother, do we really think She doesn't know what She's doing?" (p. 49). Integral ecofeminism invites us to trust that our spiraling forth is taking us through the pain of current afflictions, wars, deprecations, and injustices into something more powerful and important than what we currently know or can even presently fathom.

It is often noted that the co-arising of many forces today are changing the course of global development. Certainly, there are technological innovations and the communications networks that facilitate the spread of information and increase human accountability. There are also findings in the realm of science that call into question the nature of the knowable world and our assumptions about it. And there is a radically non-dual spiritual awareness born at the intersection of religion, philosophy and science where the Divine is seen as transcendent and immanent, *and* as the unifying principle that embraces the entirety of creation. To this we might add grass-roots movements in the feminist, environmental and other arenas that promote putting theory into practice that we might actually change the course of our planet's current trajectory, in order to arrive at an inflection point, our initiation.

Embracing our initiation, integral ecofeminism necessarily *is* and *does*, for it is through being and through action that our individual convictions are taken from an exercise in freedom of choice into a spiritual perspective that recognizes our common ground of being within the web of life's turnings. Thus, integral ecofeminism calls us to a re-awakening of the world through a dirtying of the hands that we may know one another and our Earth as fully as possible. It embraces the work of all whose creativity and sense of wonder vitalize the planet, and it recognizes the suffering of those who have been marginalized and abused. It provides vehicles for the exploration (through dance, dialogue, debate and other pathways in support of both individual particulars and the underlying universals that weave the whole together) of new outcomes.

In many cultures, doing spirituality is commonplace. As Matthew Fox (1990) has noted, "Our thinking about spirituality cannot take place from armchairs or academic towers but must include the dirtying of the hands" (p. 16). Through the development of awareness provided by education and self-reflection, as well as growth through personal and collective action, integral ecofeminism becomes a gateway to the mysteries that we all seek to understand, whether from the fields of California's central valley, the ivory towers of Cambridge, the garbage heaps of Mumbai's outskirts, the desert oases of sub-Saharan Africa, or the industrial centers of China. This is a new kind of religion: a coming together with shared purpose grounded in the real work of embodied life and living, unafraid of looking at the dirt we have underneath our fingernails.

As we conclude our meditation, I invoke the metaphor of life as an ocean of ever-shifting dynamic forces, much like the waves upon the sea that are ever rooted in the vastness of the water. As Charlene Spretnak (1986) notes, "all forms of existence are comprised of one continuous dance of matter/energy arising and falling away, arising and falling away" (p. 41). In this, we find integral ecofeminism where the Being of Heidegger becomes the Quantum of the physicists, becomes the Brahman of Hindus, and the cosmic, All-devouring creatrix spirals in a rapturous dance with the ever-expanding, ever-transcending One to keep the universe diverse and alive.

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