

Why is a connection with nature so important? Living in Italy up a hill in the middle of nowhere for 3 months in a tent was the strongest experience I've ever had of it. Is that something you're doing on purpose?

It has been yes. We are nature. If we don't allow ourselves to express and honour that on a regular basis then things go wrong.

The problem is that we don't recognise that need nor its lack. Yet we don't feel ok and so we want to know what the cause of our disquiet is. Not knowing that it is actually alienation from nature, we have to invent a cause of our disquiet, an imagined problem. Then we have to invent a remedy.

So we have all become psycho-behavioural hypochondriacs. We've invented all these refined and specialised solutions to our core, unrecognised problem, which is simply one of alienation.

Our alienation from nature is more than alienation from the natural world. It includes alienation from other people, and even from ourselves. This is because we are nature. Human beings are the fruit of nature. We are nature's most hard won fruit: human beings. We need the nourishment that direct contact with nature provides. We also need the nourishment that intimate exchange with other human beings provide.

Nevertheless many human beings in the so-called developed world have little or no contact with nature. This is a disaster. It cuts us off from our source, and from our sustenance. We become malnourished in a deep, but subtle way. It is not so obvious to most people.

It seems that urban humans cope perfectly well with little or no contact with nature.

It may seem that way, but that doesn't mean it is that way. When I lived in Ibiza I slept on the earth every night, with only cotton and sheepskin in between. When I would go travelling I couldn't sleep. To me it was really obvious why. It was because I was cut off from nature. Now that I don't sleep on the earth every night I've got over it. I can sleep almost anywhere.

Nevertheless I feel the lack, the deprivation. So when I go home to Italy, it's the wildness of the mountains I need and long for. Even if I am living in a small village it doesn't really matter, because nature rules and reigns there.

Everybody that lives there is deeply engaged with nature, one way or another. Old ladies still wash their laundry in a trough that catches the mountain water as it passes by. They gather herbs by the roadside. Herbs that I don't even notice. People are collecting, cutting wood, growing vegetables, erecting fences, tending bees and donkeys.

I think that it's a much bigger issue than people realise. As a culture and society, we've been progressively alienating ourselves from nature while apparently getting away with it. Apparently, but not effectively. Yet at the same time we do know we've got lots of problems. We just don't connect the two.

Is that what you are trying to do, connect people with nature?

Actually what I am trying to do is connect people with wholeness, with the wholeness. It is the wholeness that we are most deeply alienated from. While we are alienated from each other and from nature, and while we may not realise that, we do at least realise that other

human beings and nature exist. We tend not to realise that they, that we, exist within a wholeness. That is what i am trying to put people in touch with. Not only through yoga, meditation and tantra, but also through nature, through living in nature. Even if only for a while.

When people have the opportunity to do that, as you did, they're sometimes really shocked by what it can do to sleep in a tent made from natural fibres. It's quite different sleeping inside wood and cotton to sleeping inside aluminium and nylon. Nylon provides another layer of insulation, isolation, alienation. Cotton is more porous to the atmosphere, to nature.

Sometimes people have come to us not really realising what was going to happen. When they see how simple and basic their living quarters are they can freak out a bit. Of course it's not only sleeping in a tent. It's also shitting and showering outside and recycling the water.

Some have been saying 'I can't do this; I won't do this.' Then they leave and say 'when can I do this again?' They have become aware that something had been missing from their lives. Something that had been missing all along that they hadn't realised had been missing. Even that what they'd been missing, they'd even been frightened of: contact with, exposure to nature.

So I think it's a huge thing. People need much more contact with nature. I don't mean just going for a walk in the countryside, though that's something. I mean really interacting with nature. So that you get to know its rhythms and details a little.

If you sleep in it that's a really good way to do it. But working in it is a simple way is a great way too. Picking berries and cutting your finger on a thorn. And not being bothered by it. That's the kind of thing that bothers people. You know, getting dirt on your trousers or dirt in your mouth. People can't handle that. They're so scared of dirt and in the countryside dirt is nature. In the countryside it's not oil or toxins that's dirt – it's earth and water that people don't want, are repelled by. Its totally neurotic.

What do you think are the implications of everyone living in cities and being so cut off?

I think cities as we know them are an inevitable recipe for suffering. Cities being the way they are. I'm not saying the concept of large numbers of people living together in close proximity to each other is intrinsically anti-natural. It's just the way that we've done it. Cities don't have to be anti-natural. It's just the way that they've been developed without enough thought about it.

I think that we need cities in one sense. It's human culture and the needs which have been created by that in us. We can't go back. What is life without cities? Life without cities is a nomad's life. There isn't enough space for that anymore for a start.

Agriculture leads to cities because of the surplus that it creates. So it's a question of more deep urban planning. But that's just theory because the reality of the situation that we're facing now is that we have an urban problem of massive proportions. I don't see how a transition could be made from the urban situation that we have now to something that could be sane that did not have some kind of cities at its heart. There are too many of us for any other option.

People have a very narrow view of what nature is. Everything is nature really: even plastic. We call it unnatural and this can make us forget that it still originates in nature. We depend on nature for everything. Every moment of every day we express that dependence in our

breathing. We express it more actively in eating. We can't survive without food. Science Fiction aside. Food is nature.

If it were true that we don't need nature then we wouldn't need food, we wouldn't need air and we wouldn't need each other. We need all those things. Everybody knows we need food and air but we also need each other much more than people are willing to acknowledge. But we need more than that. We need earth and grass and rain and sun and the wind on our cheek as well – definitely.

Do you think the pagans got it right – more emphasis on celebrating the seasons and having more reverence for the cycles of nature, the trees, the elements rather than external Gods?

Well to me that split is a false and unnecessary one. Imminence and transcendence to me are not different things. I lived in a community in Scotland 30 years ago and that was part of what it was about – celebrating the Celtic seasons. We put a lot of effort, time and thought into those celebrations: Lammas, Beltane the Solstices and Equinoxes.

We were responding to our felt sense of alienation, trying to find a lost connection. We knew it was possible through drugs but we wanted another way to feel our connection to nature. Actually we were just playing, for us it was a game. It wasn't like it was for the ancient Celts themselves. For them it was fundamental to their sanity.

I don't think that kind of dramatised conceptualisation is so important now. I think what's more important is that we recognise the nature of the relationship between an organism and its environment. That we see and feel the interdependence.

Whether or how you celebrate it I think is secondary. I don't think you need to overtly celebrate things that you appreciate. I think that you can appreciate things silently. I don't think that ritual and form necessarily indicates anything of higher value. I think it's more how you choose to live.

The problem is for most people, that they don't have any choice. Most people would like to live in a little cottage in the country, or at least to have a nice back garden. I think that's something that people often don't compute. People organically feel, but don't necessarily conceptually recognise, their need for nature.

Almost everybody loves going to the beach and spending a day in the sand and sun. Others love to go into the forest or the mountains. Obviously this is about connecting to nature. Its not just about getting away from it all. Its equally about getting into it all: the all of earth, water, wind, flora and fauna. The magic of nature. People perhaps don't realise it's the magic of nature that's pulling them. It's raw nature that draws people to the beach, mountain, forest. To me that's a clear indication of our need for nature but also a clear indication that we haven't gone mad yet. The time we need to worry is when people don't want to go into nature anymore. That's when we'll have really lost contact with nature. So even though most people are not living in nature the need for nature is not lost.

We are nature. We are cells. Our cerebral cortex that comes up with those phenomenally seductive ideas, is a cellular functioning, a direct expression of nature. To me the split between biology and something else, something better is not a real one. However it's about to sound like I'm making that split. The division that I'm about to make, however, is a conceptual one. It's not a structural one. It's a functional distinction only. Two different ways that human intelligence functions.

We are not just biology. We are not just the chemical mechanics of cells and tissues. We are also consciousness. I would refute totally the idea that consciousness is a by-product of the sophistication of cellular development. I would refute totally the idea that consciousness is limited to the conscious mind, or conscious awareness. There is a spectrum to consciousness that goes through the subconscious, not only into a collective unconscious, but also into the intelligence of the body.

As somebody who has spent my life becoming intimate with my body and with consciousness, it's obvious what the relationship between them is. It is obvious that consciousness is not a by-product of biology. In fact its quite clear to me that life is consciousness, that biology is intelligence.

The fundamental mechanism by which life has found its way out of the primeval swamp is its ability to discriminate, respond and remember. Life survives on a cellular level by discriminating between safe and dangerous stimuli and responding accordingly. Life continues by way of genetic propagation through its ability to remember, to learn. This ability is coded into our DNA. This is what pushed life forwards from amoebas to human beings.

All life is cellular, no matter how sophisticated its differentiations, specialisations and organisations may have become. And in us they have become incredibly sophisticated. Yet we are still cellular organisms. Our cerebral intelligence is driven by our more fundamental cellular intelligence. Our self-consciousness rests upon the consciousness that allows individual cells to discriminate, respond and survive.

Consciousness is not an afterthought.

The need that we have to be intimate with nature is also a need to be intimate with consciousness: by which I don't mean the mind. Consciousness is the source of mind. Mind, as we know it is, is self consciousness. Consciousness goes much deeper than that. Consciousness is the source of nature. Consciousness is the source and driver of life.

It's the same as the fact that we all have a need to be alone. It's not to just be alone with your thoughts. It's to be alone without the need for thoughts. It's not to indulge your own thoughts. We indulge our own thoughts much more when we're with other people than when we're alone. We need to be alone so we can become quiet. So we can recover a deeper sense of our own centre, our own nature.

On the one hand it's nature as our body, our cells with all their collective needs and demands. Then on the other hand it's coming back to consciousness which has no demands and no needs. Consciousness is taking care of biological needs. This is why we can make a pragmatic, though not innate, distinction between consciousness and biology in the experience of being human. They are not separate domains of existence. Biology is a phase of consciousness.

Like consciousness nature does not demand anything of us. It is we that do all the demanding, the taking. Nature only gives. Consciousness unconditionally includes. As our bodies nature does make demands, but as our environment it gives. The demands of nature come only from within us.

I think that is what is so nourishing about nature. When you go into nature, for a walk in the countryside, the trees don't ask you for anything. They're not demanding anything. They are

not only giving oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide. They also provide a softening, a softness, a grounding, a nourishment.

Of course nature is not only outside us. It is also inside us. Our bodies are nature. To get back to nature the first, and perhaps most powerful, step is to become intimate with nature as your own body.

There are two elements to that. One is through what you put in it: the food that you eat. Of course there is a wide spectrum to that. Nature does not express itself in exactly the same way in all of us. We have different blood types, different skin pigments, different bone sizes.

There is not a single human way of eating. There are many natural and anti-natural ways of eating. Every individual body has its own sensitivities, preferences and needs, which adjust and respond to changes in environment, changes in lifestyle. Each one of us needs to find out what they are. It's got nothing to do with cultural trends. I think that's important to recognise. Nobody can tell you how you should eat. Even if they can make suggestions, you need to verify, you need to decide. Your body needs to decide.

Are there any simple principles that underly a natural way of eating?

I think so. I was deeply involved, personally and professionally, in the Natural Food Movement for many years. In fact i practiced Macrobiotics, which is a very sophisticated form of veganism, for almost twenty years. Those simple principles of yin and yang, expansion and contraction, still guide my food choices. However i am no longer vegan, and whole grains are no longer my staple. Before that i was a 'compassionate' vegetarian, and now i don't make too much of what i eat.

Nevertheless i am quite confident that we can extract a few fundamental, universal principles for a natural diet. By natural i mean both healthy for the individual and healthy for the environment. Dietary choices are a major factor in the destruction of the environment, even in global warming.

First principle would be: eat organic. Nature does not need manufactured chemicals to produce nutrients. It does not even need them to respond to a massive population. It is the corporate profit and loss account that requires petro-chemical agriculture. I think people are finally beginning to realise this.

Eating organically is not only necessary for the integrity of the environment. At the same time, of course, it is necessary for all those who draw their nutrients from it. Not only humans. As human beings it is very naive to act or think as if the quality of our fuel is irrelevant. Of course it is relevant.

The quality and functioning of our cells depends to a great deal on the quality of our environmental input: air, water and food. As individuals there is not much we can directly do about air quality, except change location. We can choose to drink only water, or organic, natural juices. Likewise we can choose to eat as many organic foods as possible. This is a win/win situation: for both human beings and our environment.

Second principle would be: eat local. This not only about environmental sustainability. Of course it is a gift to nature and all who depend on her to not consume large amounts of fossil fuels to transport the food to your kitchen. It is also about the well being of the individual. Organism and environment are not two.

It is a little ironic that Darwinism has so much authority in a world in which the adaptation of the individual to its environment is so deeply and consistently overlooked in the case of human beings. Which is a lot of cases. Billions in fact.

If you eat tropical fruit your body will cool down. If you eat meat it will make you more resistant to the cold. If you eat pineapples in a snowstorm you are going to feel freezing very fast. If you try to survive in the antarctic as a fruitarian you gonna get a fast come-uppance. Equally if you try eating bacon and eggs for breakfast, followed by a steak for lunch and more meat for dinner in the tropics you are gonna be pushed into a booze bender to compensate.

Third principle would be: eat seasonal. This is directly related to the second principle. The foods that any environment produces in any season support its organisms in adapting to its qualities and impact. Fruit grows in the warmth of summer. Grains ripen into winter. Greens come out in spring time.

This might appear a simplistic way of looking at things. Nevertheless it is how nature works. And nature has been working pretty well for millions of years. The same can not be said of human beings. We may have done pretty well for the first hundred thousand years or so, but more recently we have not really been justifying the 'sapiens sapiens' thing.

It is not so wise to replace natural fertility cycles with chemical additives. Not only because the soil then becomes less and less fertile, but also then more and more chemicals are required. More chemicals means more cost. Of every kind.

Fourth principle would be: eat natural. What this means is eat foods that are as much as possible in the natural state. This doesn't mean don't cook or don't wash your foods. It means don't add non-nutrients to them to make them more palatable. Cook them, soak them, ferment them to make them more palatable. This will usually make them more digestible too, and so more nutritious.

A nutrient is of no value if it can't get out of the blood and into the cells. Sodium is like that. If you put salt on your food at the table you are asking for trouble. Deep trouble, heart trouble. This is because sodium requires fat to cross the cellular membrane. Otherwise it stays in your blood, hardens your arteries.

Eating naturally means choose foods that do not have any chemical additives, whether for flavour or for preservation. This of course links straight back to eat local, eat seasonal.

Fifth principle would be: eat whole. This is not only because olives have more nutrients than olive oil. It is also because they are more digestible. People often neglect the importance of fibre because it is not exactly a nutrient. But a diet without adequate fibre is one that leads to serious digestive problems.

Grains are the almost universal staple of traditional, and most contemporary, diets outside the so-called developed world. The nutrient value of refined grains compared to whole grains is limited. Refined grains have most if not all their minerals, vitamins, fibre and protein stripped away. That leaves little but their sugar. It may not be as bad as sucrose but it comes close. Too much of either is implicated in diabetes. They both give you an energy rush, then a come-down.

Likewise throwing away carrot tops is really stupid. It's wasteful and it reduces the nutrient profile of your meal. Of course you can't eat all the bits of every plant. But how many non italians eat the courgette flowers?

I won't get into it here and now, but the Japanese, Chinese and Indians used to have very sophisticated approaches to eating before industrialisation. Their differences are more about geography and climate than right and wrong. Nevertheless we are living in a different world, with different stressors, and different levels of resilience. The key to selecting your own foods according to these principles is the intelligence of your own body.

You said there were two factors that directly support intimacy with nature as your own body. What is the other one?

The other element is having some practice that puts you deeply in touch with your body: a somatic practice of self enquiry, or somatic spiritual practice. Not to get in touch with the capacities of the body, but with its nature.

If physical movement is practiced as self-enquiry, as somatic spirituality it will deliver a deep intimacy. The key to this possibility is sensitivity to sensations. The physical sensations being generated by the body are the most concrete, direct expression of nature available to us. What they tell us is not only about the body, its needs, capabilities, habits and possibilities. They also speak, indirectly, of consciousness. But you have to really listen to hear that. If you do, you will for sure.

Likewise meditation, somatic meditation, can do the same. Not meditation as mind control, but meditation as simply being present to what is actually happening, what actually, already is.

I think many things that people might think could deliver that very deep intimacy, deep enough to reach consciousness, don't. They don't because they have another more overt agenda. Like dancing, or sex. Those are of course both an encounter with your body but what they are is an encounter with a certain aspect of the body's capacity.

What somatic self enquiry, and also dance, can be is an encounter with the body's nature: which means an encounter with nature in the form of your body. Dancing definitely could be approached in this way: not as self expression but as self discovery.

What we need are bodily practices that have no other end other than hanging out with the body. That means hanging out with nature, which means hanging out with consciousness. To me there's no difference - nature is a manifestation or an expression of consciousness. The nature of nature is consciousness. The nature of matter is consciousness. So, It's not a split and I think that in a sense that's what we really need. We need to encounter nature, not just as our mother, but as consciousness, our source. Nature as source rather than nature as a resource.

That's what we're wanting when we go to the beach or woods...

Yes – the surface level is nature but the deeper level is consciousness.