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The Transpersonal Dimensions of Ecopsychology:  
Nature, Nonduality, and Spiritual Practice

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## Abstract

The author argues that an integration of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology is useful for both. Empirical research on nature-based transpersonal experiences is cited, and the contributions of Fox (1990) and Wilber (1995) are discussed. Nondual transpersonal states are found to be at the core of both fields. However, misunderstandings of nonduality have hampered this integration. A description of nondual dimensions of Being is presented, followed by discussion of ways to bring transpersonal practices into ecopsychology.

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### The Transpersonal Dimensions of Ecopsychology: Nature, Nonduality, and Spiritual Practice

Many have recognized transpersonal experiences in natural settings and found qualities of peace, joy, love, support, inspiration, and communion with the natural world that are exemplars of the spiritual quest. Similarly, some people in both the psychological and the environmental action communities sense that ecopsychology can be a path to the spiritual as well as a necessary element in sustainable environmental work and effective psychotherapy. Spirituality has been part of the deep ecology and ecopsychology literatures from their beginning, though not without hesitation. For the most part, however, the transpersonal elements of ecopsychology have not been clearly articulated, nor have they led to the realization of ecopsychology as a basis for spiritual practice.

A few years ago, upon accepting a position as chair of the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology Department at the Naropa Institute, I was asked by the Vice-president for Academic Affairs about my own spiritual path. We discussed my spiritual teacher and his Work school with which I'd been involved for over twenty years (Davis, 1999). Then, I found myself adding my relationship with nature as a second aspect of my spiritual path. This was, for me, explicitly claiming an important part of my transpersonal practice that I had known but never announced publicly. It sat well with me, a kind of coming home, but, as homecomings usually do, it brought a responsibility, in this case, to deepen my dedication to understand and practice a spiritual path which integrates nature.

In this article, I explore the connection between ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology, including some relevant research findings. Since the central issue for this connection is the notion of nonduality, I offer a discussion of nonduality and its relation to ecopsychology. Finally, I touch on the value of a spiritual path in which nature plays a prominent role. I do not intend this to be a thorough review of either transpersonal psychology or ecopsychology, but rather some impressions as part of a continuing dialogue on spirit and nature.

### Research on Transpersonal Experiences in Nature

A substantial body of psychological research points to the mental health benefits of nature experiences. The research settings include a broad range of encounters with nature including extended wilderness trips, city parks, built environments, and gardens. Most of the research has focused on relaxation, a sense of restoration, and the capacity to focus attention (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Hartig, Mang, and Evans, 1991; Ulrich, et al, 1991;

Kaplan, 1995). However, an important subset of this research identifies transpersonal aspects of nature experiences.

### Peak and Ecstatic Experiences

Peak experiences are states of optimal mental health, ranging from momentary events without any lasting effect to intense mystical encounters with life-transforming consequences (Maslow, 1962, 1968). They are usually defined by euphoria, noesis, harmony or union with the universe, a profound sense of beauty and love, and ineffability. Maslow (1971) added the concept of plateau experiences that have a stronger quality of peace and serenity, less intensity, and longer duration. Some of the empirical research on peak experiences ties these concepts to nature.

Wuthnow (1978) surveyed a representative sample of the San Francisco Bay area population regarding their peak experiences. He used three definitions of peak experiences: "the feeling that you were in close contact with something holy or sacred," "feeling that you were in harmony with the universe," and "experiencing the beauty of nature in a deeply moving way." Eighty-two percent of the general population reported being deeply moved by the beauty of nature, the most common of his three definitions, and forty-nine percent felt this experience had a lasting influence. Greeley (1974) asked respondents whether they had had what he called an ecstatic experience or an intense spiritual experience, defined as feeling "as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself." Thirty-five percent of a representative sample of the U. S. population responded affirmatively. Keutzer (1978) asked the same question of a large sample of college students, and sixty-five percent responded affirmatively. In these studies, the "beauties of nature such as the sunset" was ranked as the most common trigger by the students and the third most common trigger by the general population. These definitions of peak and spiritual experiences are very broad and include many experiences that, though positive and growthful, are not transpersonal (Thomas and Cooper, 1980). Nevertheless, they point to the importance of nature as an important component of transpersonal experiences.

### Wilderness experiences

Several empirical studies have examined spiritual experiences in the context of wilderness adventure activities. Overall, it seems that both the adventure element and the wilderness setting play a role in evoking transpersonal experiences and that one of the primary reasons people engage in wilderness experiences is to seek transpersonal experiences (Brown, 1989). For instance, Stringer and McAvoy (1992) used naturalistic inquiry to find that spiritual experiences are common in wilderness adventure activities. Beck (1988) studied river rafters and showed that intensive recreational encounters with wild rivers often led to transpersonal experiences "expressed in terms of humility and spirituality....[and] a sense of oneness" (p. 133-135; emphases in original).

Kaplan and Talbot (1983) and Talbot and Kaplan (1986) report extensive research on wilderness experiences. Their Outdoor Challenge Program took inner city children, teachers, and others on week-long wilderness trips without an explicit psychological orientation. Analyzing the contents of participants' journals, they found transpersonal qualities to be the strongest theme.

For many participants [during the backpacking trips] there is eventually a surprising sense of revelation, as both the environment and the self are newly perceived and seem newly wondrous. The wilderness inspires feelings of awe and wonder, and one's intimate contact with this environment leads to thoughts about spiritual meanings and eternal processes. Individuals feel better acquainted with their own thoughts and feelings, and they feel "different" in some way—calmer, at peace with themselves, "more beautiful on the inside and unstifled." (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983, p. 178)

[After the trips] there is a growing sense of wonder and a complex awareness of spiritual meanings as individuals feel at one with nature, yet they are aware of the transience of individual concerns when seen against the background of enduring natural rhythms. (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983, p. 179-180)

### Flow and Compatibility

The phenomenon of "flow" or "optimal experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) has been the basis for several research studies on nature experiences as well as an extensive literature on other positive experiences. The flow experience involves total involvement in an activity, centered attention, richer perception, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, present-centeredness, and self-transcendence (Mannell, 1996). A number of nature-based activities, such as rock climbing and mountaineering have been shown to elicit flow experiences (e.g., Mitchell, 1983).

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) contrast the concept of flow with the concept of compatibility, i.e., a fit between one's needs and capacities and what the environment offers. This concept arose from their research on wilderness experiences in which participants reported a sense of oneness with nature. They argue that compatibility is one likely result of encounters with nature, including nearby nature, and that oneness (or nonduality) is the extreme of compatibility. Compared to the experience of flow, compatibility is less intense with more a sense of good fit and resonance, resembling plateau experiences more than peak experiences. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) quote a description of enlightenment as an example of compatibility: "When an eager pupil asked the Zen master what enlightenment was like, he answered: 'Coming home and resting comfortably'" (p. 200). While peak, plateau, ecstatic, flow, and compatibility experiences have different phenomenologies, at their extreme, they are transpersonal. However their transpersonal characteristics have not been fully articulated or tied to other concepts in transpersonal psychology.

### Research Methods

It is possible and important to scientifically study many aspects of ecopsychology, including the transpersonal characteristics and consequences of nature experiences and the implications of transpersonal practices for environmental attitudes and behaviors. Bragg (1997) echoes this perspective, tying together ecopsychology, environmental psychology, and implicitly, transpersonal psychology.

I believe, however, that empirical research has the ability to bridge the unnecessary gaps between these ecologically-oriented psychologies [ecopsychology and environmental psychology]. By grounding both fields in the experiences and language of "ordinary" people, subjects such as "sacred places" or "spiritual connection with the Earth" become academically appropriate while retaining their radical nature. (paragraph 4)

Such a research project will require the integration of research methods drawn from across the behavioral and human sciences. Deep immersion of ourselves as researchers and participants into the experience of nature encounters and transpersonal experiences, along with surveys and experiments, will be required in this project (Davis, 1996; Driver and Ajzen, 1996). In the deeper realms of transpersonal experiences discussed here, qualitative methods will be most useful. Transpersonal psychology has contributions to make in regard to appropriate research methods (Taylor, 1992).

## Ecopsychology and Transpersonal Psychology

### Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology stands at the interface of psychology and the spiritual disciplines. It builds on other psychological perspectives which it generally sees as useful but incomplete and limited. Thus, it is inclusive of other psychological approaches, culturally diverse wisdom about psychopathology and mental health, and various states of

consciousness. Transpersonal psychology is not a set of beliefs, a dogma, or a religion, but an attempt to bring a full range of human experience into the discourse of psychology. Transpersonal psychology focuses on self-transcendence and mystical states of consciousness as they are understood within a psychological framework (Davis, 1999).

In transpersonal psychology, as well as many other psychological approaches, the sense of separate self is seen as a product of one's personal history and is characterized by a sense of autonomy and separation from its surroundings. The transpersonal approach differs from other approaches, however, by describing states in which the self transcends such a narrow identification. Self-transcendence refers to states of consciousness in which the sense of self is expanded beyond the ordinary boundaries, identifications, and self-images of the individual personality and reflects a fundamental connection, harmony, or unity with others and the world (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993). Bynum (1992), consistent with many others describing transpersonal psychology, places "unitive conscious experiences" at the center of the field (p. 301). Based on a longer list of 202 definitions, Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) offer this definition:

Transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness. (p. 91)

### Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology argues that the deep and enduring questions—who we are, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal—are inseparable from our relationships with the physical world, and similarly, that the over-riding environmental questions—the sources of, consequences of, and solutions to environmental destruction—are deeply rooted in the psyche, our images of self and nature, and our behaviors. Among its potential contributions are bringing more sophisticated psychological principles and practices to environmental education and action; bringing the contributions of ecological thinking, the values of the natural world, and responses to environmental destruction to psychotherapy and personal growth; and fostering lifestyles that are both ecologically and psychologically healthy (Roszak, 1992; Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, 1995; Winter, 1996).

Ecopsychologists view the relationship between humans and nature as much more expanded than normally held by either ecologists or psychologists. There is a deeply bonded and reciprocal communion between humans and nature. The denial of this bond is a source of suffering both for the physical environment and for the human psyche, and the realization of the connection between humans and nature is healing for both. This reconnection includes the healing potential of contact with nature, work on grief and despair about environmental destruction, ecotherapy, psychoemotional bonding with nature as a source of environmental action, and the cultivation of sustainable lifestyles. A number of methods have been used by ecopsychologists to awaken and develop this connection, including sensory-based educational and counseling techniques (Cohen, 1993), wilderness passage rites (Foster and Little, 1988, 1989) and other wilderness-based work (Greenway, 1995; Harper, 1995), shamanic work (Gray, 1995), and psychotherapeutic practices (Cahalan, 1995; Swanson, 1995).

### Integration of Ecopsychology and Transpersonal Psychology

References to spirituality, sacredness, and the transpersonal can be found in much of ecopsychology. Roszak's list of ecopsychological principles in The Voice of the Earth includes positive references to "nature mysticism," "Feminist Spirituality," and the deliberate "theological connotation" of "the synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being" (Roszak, 1992, p. 321). Reser (1995) surveyed ecopsychology and found cause for concern with the "quasi-religious—and often explicitly religious—character of the discourse" (p. 241). "The rhetoric is of spiritual connecting and transformation, there is a clear quest for the sacred and use of ritual, frequent reference to earth magic and animism/transcendentalism, etc." (p. 242). He makes a distinction similar to that made by

transpersonal psychologists between religion as ideology and socio-political institution (which William James called “second-hand religion”), on the one hand, and direct spiritual experience and the “genuine contemplation of nature” (p. 242), on the other (James’s “first-hand religion”). While he is skeptical about the value of introducing transpersonalism into ecopsychology, Reser does reflect the sense that these two fields are closely connected.

A few writers have explicitly combined these two fields. Warwick Fox’s Transpersonal Ecology (1990) bears on the intersection of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology. Although his book predates Roszak’s (1992) major presentation of ecopsychology, Fox mentions Roszak’s earlier work at several points. Importantly for this discussion, Fox includes Roszak in a list of writers who “see the cultivation of ecological consciousness in ‘spiritual’ or ‘quasi-religious’ terms” (Fox, 1990, p. 52). I have drawn on Fox’s work in this article. Deborah Winter’s textbook, Ecological Psychology (1996), includes a major section on transpersonal psychology with a discussion of deep ecology, Fox’s transpersonal ecology, and Roszak’s ecopsychology. She concludes that “with so much common conceptual ground, it is not surprising that theories are beginning to synthesize transpersonal psychology and deep ecology” (Winter, 1996, p. 249). She cites Roszak’s ecopsychology and Fox’s transpersonal ecology as examples of this synthesis.

### Ken Wilber and Ecopsychology

Owing to Ken Wilber’s central role in transpersonal psychology and the intensity with which he has expressed his views on current ecological thinking, I will give a slightly longer discussion of his work here. His views on transpersonal psychology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecopsychology have been at the center of a vigorous debate. His most extensive treatment of these topics is in his book Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality (1995). While Wilber discusses ecopsychology only briefly there, most of what he says about ecophilosophy applies as well to ecopsychology.

Wilber is in agreement with ecopsychology in several ways. Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality opens with a recognition of the dire state of the environment (1995, p. 4). He identifies wilder places as “inviting places” to “relax egoic grasping” and seek optimal psychological health and transformation (1996, p. 291), and he cites deep experiences of nature as paradigm cases of the mystical experience and extraordinarily healthy human development (1996, p. 202). Furthermore, Wilber holds ecofeminism, deep ecology, and presumably, ecopsychology as fundamentally correct, important, and useful. Writing about the deep ecologists’ views of a transpersonal self, he calls himself

a big fan of their work. They have an important message for the modern world: to find that deep Self that embraces all of nature, and thus to treat nature with the same reverence you would extend to your own being. (Wilber, 1996, p. 204)

However, he argues that such views make one very big and dangerous mistake and are “basically half right and half wrong (or seriously incomplete)” (p. 6). Wilber criticizes ecopsychology for unwittingly contributing to the Earth’s devastation. As he sees it, one of the key problems in these views is that they set up a divisive split between culture and nature, or as he calls them, ego and eco. He argues that the eco views mistakenly equate nature with spirit, that consciousness is seen as a mere expression of nature, and that ego, culture, and rationality are posited as the antithesis of nature and spirit and the cause of environmental problems.

It is important to understand Wilber’s distinction between nature and Nature. The former refers to the physical world as it is relatively untouched by human interference, while the latter refers to the entirety of existence, including its physical, psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions and its ultimate Ground of Being. Many ecophilosophers, deep ecologists, and ecopsychologists have failed to make this distinction. Focusing attention on a limited part (e.g., worshipping physical nature) separates us from the Whole (Nature), and it is precisely this separation which leads to trouble. Thus, Wilber comes to the conclusion that “nature worshipers are the destroyers of Nature” (1995, p, 288). By identifying

ultimate value, God, and spirit with the physical world of nature, the eco views deny a higher, transpersonal transcendence.

As long as I interpret nature as the source of the Divine, then to just that extent I am locked out of any deeper or truer spiritual illuminations and intuitions: in glorifying merely the golden eggs, I am ignoring to death the goose that laid them. ... I cannot integrate nature and culture in Spirit (or true Nature), I can only recommend back to nature. I must recommend, that is, regression. ... And thus the horrible realization dawns: back to nature is away from Nature.” (Wilber, 1995, p. 471; emphases in original)

This leads to the twin errors of calling for a return to a past union of human and nature and blaming culture (and the development of agriculture and/or rationality) for ecological catastrophe. The root of these errors is the failure to see the transpersonal realms as the common source of both human and nature. The problem is not a broader conception of self which includes nature and Gaia. The problem is stopping with this broader self, holding it as the pinnacle of human potential, reifying and idealizing nature, and denying the possibility of a higher integration. “Although there is much to recommend in Fox’s approach, ...it is crippled by a recognition of only the narrower/broader dimension, and not also the deeper/higher dimension” (Wilber, 1995, p. 613). Wilber’s critique of ecopsychology is not that it is wrong, only that it is not yet complete.

It is difficult to say whether Wilber has characterized ecopsychology correctly. To be sure, most of his attention has been given to its “half-wrong” aspects, and I think Wilber has been overly harsh in his criticisms of ecopsychology. At the same time, Fox (1990) and other deep ecologists and ecopsychologists have missed his point and labeled him anthropocentric. Furthermore, Wilber could recognize more clearly that “back to nature” is closer to Nature. Since nature is a manifestation of Nature, it is an important gateway for many people. Nevertheless, I would argue that his underlying concerns are important for ecopsychology. The key for ecopsychology is to grasp the nonduality of psyche and nature, and this cannot come from idealizing, sentimentalizing, or romanticizing nature. This cannot come from attempting to return to a past we never knew. His aim is a view that is neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric, but centered in spirit or the cosmos. This must come from discovering and developing awareness of the source of both psyche and nature.

### Views of human-nature relationships

For the most part, ecopsychology presents two metaphors for the relationship between humans and nature: (a) nature as home and its residents as family (siblings, Mother Earth) and (b) nature as self, in which self-identifications are broadened to include the non-human world and Gaia. These views stand in contrast to views that nature is dangerous and needs to be controlled and dominated or that nature is (merely) a useful resource which needs to be protected, conserved, and stewarded for ourselves and future generations. Ecopsychologists, along with a number of ecophilosophers, suggest that these latter two views are at the source of environmental devastation and that the two views put forward by ecopsychologists are necessary for the future of human life. (Fox (1990) provides a useful outline of various positions on human-nature relationships.)

Both a broader/horizontal view (such as Fox’s and Roszak’s) and a deeper/higher view (such as Wilber’s) are based on a sense of self that goes beyond the ordinary ego-self. However, a broader-self view still places the self at the center of perception and action, contributing in an unintended way to its self-importance. The self is reified, creating a view that, while expanded, is still egocentric. This returns us to a subtle kind of utilitarianism vis a vis nature. We begin to use nature as teacher, healer, sanctuary, temple, or parent. Nature is these things; that is not the problem. The problem with this view is that these are not all nature is.

Conceiving of nature as a broader, more-inclusive self may be a necessary step in developing our views of the human-nature relationship. However, this broader self is not

the final understanding. What is needed is an articulation of a transpersonal view that goes beyond the nature-as-self view without invalidating it. Such a transpersonal view recognizes that both human and nature are expressions of the same ground. An understanding of unitive, nondual states, and practices for developing this understanding, are the foundations for an effective integration of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology.

### Nonduality

Ecopsychology is based on the recognition of a fundamental nonduality between humans and nature and on the insight that the failure to experience and act from this nonduality creates suffering for both humans and the environment. The title of Winter's (1996) book, Ecological psychology: Healing the split between planet and self, expresses this view. Nonduality is equally at the foundation of transpersonal psychology. Winter summarizes a discussion of these fields this way:

The basic principle to be drawn from both gestalt and transpersonal psychology (and their recent forms of ecopsychology and transpersonal ecology) is that our ordinary experience of ourselves as separate autonomous beings is incomplete and inaccurate. [Recognizing this] will require...a shift in consciousness (the transpersonal emphasis) from the smaller, autonomous, ego-oriented self to the wider and deeper ecological self. Transpersonal psychologists, eco-psychologists, and transpersonal ecologists argue that such a shift is more than a cognitive event—it is also a directly perceptual and/or spiritual event. (p. 264, my emphases)

This shift in consciousness entails “an expanded, more gracious, more spacious sense of self” (p. 264).

Demonstrating this close connection between nature, nonduality, and transpersonal states, Wilber (1996) illustrates the first of the transpersonal stages of development with a nature experience. This, and all of his transpersonal stages, is defined by “an awareness that is no longer confined exclusively to the individual ego” (p. 202), or what I will call nonduality.

At the [first transpersonal] level, a person might temporarily dissolve the separate-self sense (the ego or centaur) and find an identity with the entire gross or sensorimotor world—so-called nature mysticism. You're on a nice nature walk, relaxed and expansive in your awareness, and you look at a beautiful mountain, and wham!—suddenly there is no looker, just the mountain—and you are the mountain. You are not in here looking at the mountain out there. There is just the mountain, and it seems to see itself, or you seem to be seeing it from within. The mountain is closer to you than your own skin....

By any other terms, there is no separation between subject and object, between you and the entire natural world “out there.” Inside and outside—they don't have any meaning anymore. You can still tell perfectly well where your body stops and the environment begins—this is not psychotic dualism.... You are a “nature mystic.” (Wilber, 1996, p. 202, emphasis in original)

Greenway (1995) is another ecopsychologist who points to dualism as a central problem and “perhaps the source of our pervasive sense of being disconnected” (p. 131). He suggests that such dualism also at the root of our culture's domination, exploitation, and destruction of our habitat, “the very basis of our survival as a species” (p. 131). Thus, Greenway identifies dualism as leading to tremendous problems psychologically and environmentally. He also suggests that an important step in redressing these problems is a better language for ecopsychology and alternatives to dualism.

### Understanding Nonduality

As Greenway suggests, to the extent that nonduality is inadequately described or misunderstood, the transpersonal dimensions of ecopsychology will be limited, and I believe



this will restrain the development and contributions of ecopsychology. Therefore, this section attempts to articulate nonduality, especially as it relates to ecopsychology.

Nonduality refers to the locus, structure, and nature of self-identity and not to undifferentiated awareness. Nonduality encompasses those states of being and consciousness in which the sense of separate individuality and autonomy has been metabolized or dissolved into the flow of experience. Self-identity becomes integrated into a qualitatively higher (or deeper) perspective in which personal identity and the world are not separate. The world does not melt into non-differentiation, perception continues, and actions flow. Neither is the self experienced as separate and autonomous. Instead, an expanded, more open, and more inclusive view of the world becomes foreground.

In nondual states, there is still awareness, perception, and feeling. Indeed, as Zimmerman writes, “In the moment of releasement, enlightenment, or authenticity, things do not dissolve into an undifferentiated mass. Instead, they stand out or reveal themselves in their own unique mode of Being” (quoted in Fox, 1990, p. 239), and Fox (1990) writes, “The realization that we and all other entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality—that ‘life is fundamentally one’—does not mean that all multiplicity and diversity is reduced to homogeneous mush” (p. 232). Indeed, all spiritual traditions which have described nonduality have pointed out that the world becomes more authentic, beautiful, alive, and whole. When the separate identity, with its filters based on personal needs, history, cognitive schemata, and the like, is not reified or identified with, the world appears to us as more vivid and vital. Put another way, differentiation and discrimination of the patterns, flow, and qualities of the world are not the same as duality.

A central difficulty in understanding the role of nonduality in ecopsychology is the misconception that nonduality is non-differentiated (the descriptions by Fox and Zimmerman notwithstanding). In this view, the nondual state is a merged union without any differences or discriminations. Since perception requires difference and change, perception becomes problematic, if not impossible. This misconception also threatens our love for the world and its beauty and grace. In this (misconceived) view of a merged and undifferentiated unity, there is no possibility of recognizing beauty, joy, or pleasure. Without perception and differentiation, no action would be possible since action requires movement toward one direction and away from another. Choice is impossible without alternatives. This view of nonduality leaves us and the world in an impossible place and triggers an understandable reluctance to embrace nonduality.

This misunderstanding may be at the root of various cautions by deep ecologists and ecopsychologists against a mystical or nondual approach. Naess (1989) speaks of two ways to go wrong: “Here is a difficult ridge to walk: to the left we have the ocean of organic and mystic views, to the right the abyss of atomic individualism” (p. 165). Yet, these are not opposite sides of the same ridge. I suggest that “the ocean of organic and mystic views” is precisely the way out of “the abyss of atomic individualism.” Finding ourselves to be this ocean, nothing more than the separate self is lost.

The issue of nonduality is somewhat complicated by the fact that there are several qualitatively different nondual states and that in one of these nondual states perception does disappear into a complete and absolute cessation. Sometime this is referred to as the only “truly” nondual state. However, this is not the only state in which the self is nondual with the world. The broader definition I am using here is more consistent with reports of nonduality in relation to nature.

We should remind ourselves that logic, reason, emotion, and isolated experiences can provide only the beginning of an understanding of nonduality. Conventional psychological approaches have not acknowledged these states. However, various spiritual teachings have described this terrain and developed specific methods for experiencing, understanding, and integrating nonduality.

### Dimensions of Nonduality

One such system has been developed recently by A. H. Almaas (e.g., Almaas, 1986, 1988, 1996, 1999; Davis, 1999). Almaas has articulated what he calls the Diamond Approach throughout the spectrum of transpersonal states. While this is a rich and detailed approach to personality, essence, and self-realization, his descriptions of nondual states (which he also calls boundless or formless) states is particularly relevant here. Almaas describes five boundless or nondual dimensions, each with clear and distinguishable characteristics, and he relates each dimension to descriptions of these states from traditional spiritual systems, including Sufism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Kabbalah (1986, p. 419-484; 1996, p. 397-441). Each dimension has a sense of freedom, clarity, and reality that goes beyond ordinary experience. Each one also has a set of psychological issues, resistances, and attachments which usually arise with the experience of it. The precise understanding of the psychological issues and obstacles that attend each of these advanced stages of spiritual work is one of Almaas's contributions. He has further described the integration of these nondual dimensions into the personal life and functioning of individuals (Almaas, 1988) and the relation of these dimensions to narcissism and identity (Almaas, 1996). I will give brief descriptions of each to help clarify this discussion of nonduality.

In one of these dimensions the world is experienced as a flowing, dynamic unfoldment in each moment. This dimension is the awareness that the world is born anew each moment. This dynamism reveals the world's aliveness and its constant unfoldment.

The fact that presence includes the various manifestations of the self in a nondual way indicates that presence is not a static reality. Seeing that it is always transforming its appearance, we become aware that presence is dynamic. It is not only thereness, but also a flow. (Almaas, 1996, p. 33)

From this dimension, nature is seen in its eternal and timeless unfolding and change. Nature is revealed, some would say, as a dance, always moving. This movement is not haphazard but organized (or self-organizing). Inner experience, the physical world, descriptions, and actions toward these all arise, discriminable but not separate. Self and nature are only manifestations of this flow; neither is more or less central or fundamental. This dimension reveals that discrimination, change, and unfolding can happen without a separate self.

Without equating Almaas's description to others', this dimension compares to Fox's (1990) cosmologically based identification and to the focus by Roszak and others on "the world as a single unfolding process—as a 'unity in process,' to employ Theodore Roszak's splendid phrase" (Fox, 1990, p. 252). This concept of dynamic, nondual flow is also similar to Roszak's (1992) use of anima mundi, World Soul, and Gaia. He describes these related concepts as the view "that the whole of the cosmos is a single great organism" (p. 139) referring to its vitality, aliveness, and unfolding.

Almaas gives a similar description of this dimension: "The world is perceived, in some sense, as alive and living, as one infinite and boundless organism of consciousness. It is not merely the presence of Being or consciousness; this dimension of Being is experienced as a living organism, boundless and infinite" (Almaas, 1988, p. 475). Almaas has also referred to this dimension as the "Universal Soul" or the soul of the universe (personal communication, July 28, 1997). (Both Roszak and Almaas use soul in the sense of its original meaning as the self or medium of experience.) All of these ideas, taken together, point to existence as a single unfolding reality, in constant renewal and originality, flowing in a way that we can only call compassionate and wise. However, this dynamic nondual flow goes far beyond most uses of Gaia, anima mundi, and the like. As it is revealed in the world's spiritual wisdom traditions, it is neither scientific hypothesis nor poetic metaphor. It is the nature of existence in its dynamic, flowing dimension.

A second boundless dimension focuses on the richness and beauty of existence and the origin of the limitless qualities of the world. It is referred to often in nature writing and descriptions of nature-oriented mystical experiences. With this dimension comes an unconditional love for the world. The flow of the world (inner and outer) may be seen as a surface quality whose depth is this beauty. Or the flow may be co-emergent with this

beauty, and what is flowing is beauty and love. Penetrating this flow reveals that its nature is beauty and love. Almaas describes it as being held in the arms of a boundless loving light. Without the veils of dualistic identity, the world emerges in ever more exquisite ways, revealing its intrinsic glory and richness. Everything—including ego, spirit, suffering, attachment, environmental destruction, toxic dumps, the outrageous beauty of a sunrise, and the grace of a bird rising from a pond—is seen as an expression and manifestation of unconditional love. This is not a personal or intellectual insight, but rather a direct, transrational knowing of the nature of reality. Penetrating or transcending the boundless, nonegoic, nondual sense of flow does not halt or disappear nature; it reveals a deeper characteristic of nature, its loveliness, in a way that ego-based experience could never do.

The unfolding of nondual consciousness does not stop with this beauty and love, despite our tendency to want to hold on to it and reside in it. When this dimension of beauty and love is experienced deeply enough, its nature is revealed as a fullness and presence. Beauty is now seen as a surface quality. Within the loveliness and love of the world lies the fact of its presence. If, as Emerson said, “beauty is God’s handwriting,” this dimension corresponds to God, the source of that beauty. Patterns in the world are revealed as noetic forms. The world (inner and outer) has a quality of presence, purity, significance, profundity, and realness that was hidden, as it were, by its beauty. All is experienced as pure presence without any differentiated characteristics beyond the knowledge of its existence.

At this level of realization, we come also to perceive the unity of all manifestation. Since Being is an indivisible medium (not composed of parts), it follows that everything makes up a unity, a oneness. There is one existence, as opposed to two, or many. It is merely an infinite presence that possesses a pattern. This pattern is everything we perceive, including all persons and objects. So everything is connected to everything; there exist no separate and autonomous objects or persons. (Almaas, 1996, p. 406)

There is discriminating awareness, but this awareness is not separate from the knowledge of it. This dimension reveals that consciousness and the world are nondual. Nature is revealed as a luminous existence, palpable and precious.

This nondual presence is close to what Fox (1990) calls ontologically based identification.

The basic idea that I am attempting to communicate by referring to ontologically based identification is that the fact—the utterly astonishing fact—that things are impresses itself upon some people in such a profound way that all that exists seems to stand out as foreground from a background of nonexistence, voidness or emptiness—a background from which this foreground arises moment by moment. ... “The environment” or “the world at large” is experienced not as a mere backdrop against which our privileged egos and those entities with which they are most concerned play themselves out, but rather as just as much an expression of the manifesting of Being (i.e., of existence per se) as we ourselves are. (p. 251, emphasis in original)

He relates this awareness to the insights of the Zen Buddhists, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein and shows how people experiencing “the world in this way on a regular or semi-regular basis (typically as a result of arduous spiritual discipline) find themselves tending to experience a deep but impartial sense of identification with all existents” (p. 251, emphasis in original). I would extend this to say that all existents are experienced as a unity, and the unity of Being is the source of this identification.

The ground and true nature of the awareness of pure presence is the realm of nonconceptual awareness and pure perception. It is what Fox calls “the background of nonexistence, voidness, or emptiness” from which arises existence and presence. Penetrating the pure presence and unity of the world, we discover its ground, awareness with no content or concepts. It has a quality of emptiness that is more fundamental than form. Upon realizing the pure presence and fullness of Being, one

begins to experience the totality of the world—which forms a oneness—as external to himself [Note 1], as if his identity now is deeper than this unity of experience....He realizes that he still adheres to the concepts of world, oneness, existence, and so on, or more precisely, that these things are actually concepts. He penetrates his reification of Being, unity, and oneness. This precipitates the movement of the student’s identity into a subtler manifestation of Being, a totally nonconceptual realization of true nature. He experiences himself now as nonconceptual reality, beyond all mind and concepts, beyond all specifications and recognitions....He is both self and not self. This is a very paradoxical manifestation of Being, beyond any conceptualization. ... There is a stunning sense of awakensness, intensely fresh and new. When there are no concepts in our recognition of ourselves, nothing is old; everything is the pure freshness of suchness, the intensity of eternity that has no concept of time. (Almaas, 1996, p. 411-412)

Nature is revealed as fully transparent. We see the world, but it is as if each perception is empty, brand new, and undistorted by our past memories, expectations, and labels. Co-emergent with this dimension is the dynamic flow described above. However, rather than the flow of beauty and love or the flow of noetic forms, here it is experienced as pure flow without content. Zen Buddhism, for instance, has dealt with this dimension. Perhaps this is what Gary Snyder pointed to when he titled his collection of his poetry No Nature.

But we do not easily know nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set “nature” either as “the natural world” or “the nature of things.” The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional.

Hakuin Zenji put it “self-nature that is no nature/ . . . far beyond mere doctrine.” An open space to move in, with the whole body, the whole mind. (Snyder, 1992, p. v., emphasis in original)

Almaas also describes a nondual dimension fundamental to each of these. He calls this the Absolute, the “source beyond the source,” beyond presence and emptiness. The Absolute is the unknowable origin and ultimate nature of Being. At this level, all paradoxes dissolve, including the paradox that existence is both full and empty, present and absent. This absolute mystery is beyond all qualities of Being. It is a cessation and an absence: no perception, no awareness that there is no perception, no movement. It is compared to the state of consciousness in deep sleep or to the state of universe before the Big Bang. The Absolute is revealed only in its absence. The state of the Absolute shows us that all we see—nature, self, culture, sacred, profane—is a thin bubble over this complete mystery. This is the source of the experience of complete liberation and complete nonduality. Although it is its nature to be indescribable and unknowable, various spiritual traditions have acknowledged this mystery and recognized it as the source of freedom and liberation.

### Ascending and Descending

The descriptions of the dimensions of nondual Being are usually presented as a linear unfolding or development according to a “journey of ascent.” This movement is the usual experience of the development of consciousness from the perspective of the individual. Awareness, as it develops and becomes more refined, reveals increasingly deeper levels of Being. On the other hand, Being can be described as unfolding and manifesting in an orderly way from the absolute mystery into the multitude of forms and qualities of the phenomenal world. As it unfolds, it flows through these various dimensions in a progression from those closer to the mystery to those closer to the phenomenal world, a “journey of descent.” The mystery unfolds and manifests first as pure, non-conceptual awareness which differentiates into forms, patterns, and qualities, giving rise of our experiences of ourselves and the world.

Both of these journeys and each of these dimensions can be viewed as co-existent and co-emergent. These dimensions are complementary and equally valid. Immanence, fullness, and the myriad forms of the world are one side of a coin; transcendence, emptiness, and the mystery of union are the other. Thus, the richness and beauty of the world are no more or less privileged than its emptiness. This view contrasts with those spiritual systems which hold that one of these dimensions is real and the others are illusory. This is a particularly important point for ecopsychologists. The realization of nonduality does not need to devalue or reject the natural world (or culture for that matter). From this view, spiritual realization is completely consistent with a deep love for the natural world and the world of humans. All are manifestations of the same absolutely mysterious ground of Being. None of these descriptions means leaving the world, but rather seeing it more deeply and clearly. The physical world as the source of Being is rejected; the world as manifestation of Being is embraced. This is summarized by the spiritual aphorism, “to be in the world but not of it.”

### Nonduality and Functioning

The consciousness of nonduality is closely related to the action that emerges in nondual states. Just as nonduality is not “undifferentiated mass” or “homogeneous mush,” non-doing is not merely quietude or passivity (although it may be when appropriate). In virtually all the descriptions of nonduality throughout the world’s spiritual wisdom traditions, nonduality has been seen not as an end to action, but as the beginning of a new source of action that does not place self-interest (no matter how expanded) at the center.

Some ecopsychologists and deep ecologists have pointed to this as a source of environmental action. Fox (1990), summarizing an vast amount of writing in this area, concludes, “For transpersonal ecologists, given a deep enough understanding of the way things are, the response of being inclined to care for the unfolding of the world in all its aspects follows ‘naturally’” (p. 247). Wilber (1996) claims that in nature mysticism, “a spontaneous environmental ethics surges from your heart” (p. 204). Such engaged spirituality can be seen in the activism of Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, for example. One who understands nonduality has no resistance to acting on behalf of all of existence and its parts. Conflicts between one’s own interests and the interests of the whole are transcended. The wisdom of the whole guides one’s actions in a way that is optimal for the whole. Nonduality prompts compassionate and skillful action in the service of the environment.

### Summary

This understanding has radical consequences for our views of nature and psyche. As the Zen teacher John Daido Looi wrote in a workshop description, nonduality means no relationship between humans and nature is possible. If there is no duality, there is no relationship. One could say that we enter nature most fully when there is no doorway and that we find ourselves most natural when there is no nature to be entered.

When nature is seen as a family or larger self, it is a projection of ourselves, and an eventual split is inevitable. When we conceive of the world, we impregnate it with our concepts, so to speak, and birth it through our own images. We do not encounter nature on its own, but through our filters. With the concept of the world as a larger self comes judgments, grasping, rejection, and constriction. This is the origin of the splits that lead to alienation and suffering. A nondual view of ecopsychology goes beyond anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. We could say that Being or the entirety of existence is the center or that there is no center, just flow, quality, presence, emptiness, and mystery. Nature is an expression of spirit, but it is neither the same as nor the source of it.

To understand this view means having to work directly with issues such as attachment, judgment, identification, deficiency, and grandiosity. That which is held most dear—a sense of individuality, a relationship with the world—is called into question. For

this reason, an approach such as Almas's which incorporates an understanding of these issues is important in this work. The psychological issues which appear throughout the transpersonal journey are not only obstacles to self-realization, they are also keys to unlocking deeper understanding and deeper engagement in the world. This is the point of spiritual practice.

### Nature-Based Spiritual Practices

As the mystical traditions constantly remind us, descriptions such as these are not to be accepted at face value but are to be tested in one's own experience. Thus, there is little merit in talking about nonduality without suggesting practices for exploring it phenomenologically. Even experiences of nonduality and nature are only a start. What is needed is the development of long-term practices to cultivate, reinforce, and develop these experiences into stable traits.

I will point to several characteristics that seem to me consistent with the meaning of a spiritual path. Wilber (1997) suggests using Paul Tillich's definition of spiritual as the object of one's "ultimate concern" (p, 221, his emphasis). Thus, a spiritual path is one that supports, develops, and expands the range and depth of one's ultimate concern and allows the center of identity to shift toward the transpersonal and toward nonduality. A spiritual path inspires, nourishes, awakens, and guides us. It facilitates movement toward living fully in one's own unique way and an increasing openness to service, especially in the midst of suffering and the transience of the world and our lives. A spiritual path also requires a long-term commitment and dedicated practice. A spiritual path that is sensitive to the earth recognizes that direct contact with nature, wherever it is encountered—in the backyard, garden, wilderness, or one's body—expands and develops one's ultimate concerns and moves one toward self-transcendence. It also recognizes spirit in all forms, including the natural, the built, the wounded, and the toxic. Environmental problems become an arena for selfless service, and the phenomenal world becomes an arena for transpersonal experiences and nondual awareness.

### Exercises and practices

My colleagues and I, particularly Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon at the Naropa Institute, have developed and modified a number of practices to elicit ecopsychological awareness. These can be used as demonstration exercises to explore and ground ecopsychological insights. They can also be used as part of a transpersonal or spiritual practice. Examples of these include awareness and mindfulness practices, place-bonding, wilderness experiences, rituals, and environmental action projects. Each one has had the effect of eliciting experiences consistent with the descriptions of nondual dimensions described here. I will briefly mention some and discuss one practice in more detail.

Mindful awareness is an important foundation for ecopsychology. The transpersonal disciplines have developed an extensive literature on meditation and other awareness practices, of course. I encourage students to develop a contemplative practice such as meditation as a foundation for ecopsychology. Mindfulness in itself develops awareness of nonduality. Bringing an ecopsychological orientation is helpful to many people learning to meditate. Sensory awareness exercises which include awareness of the world are also useful. For example, I have asked students to perceive as if they are the eyes of nature perceiving itself. For most students, this prompts a shift in perception, feeling, and action that is consistent with ecopsychology and many meditative traditions. If students then stay with this awareness long enough, many report a self-transcendence in which there is no longer a self perceiving an object, but nondual perception.

In the place-bonding exercise, students relate to a particular place over a period of time (e.g., a semester or a year). This place is usually one that is easily accessible from the student's home, emphasizing nearby nature. During this time, I ask them to get to know it in as many ways as possible, to listen for ways to take care of it, and to let it listen to them.

I also invite them to enter the place in deep silence and to observe their concepts, idealizations, and judgments about it. Most discover how their “use” of the place and their filtering of their perceptions of it are tied to a sense of their own separate selves and their projections, fears, and hopes. For many, this sense of separate self then gives way, opening into the nondual dimensions.

Intensive wilderness trips with a transpersonal orientation complement the place-bonding experience and have been described by a number of ecopsychologists and wilderness educators (e.g., Foster and Little, 1988; Davis, 1989; Greenway, 1990/91, 1995; Harper, 1995). Greenway describes such transpersonally-oriented wilderness experiences and ecopsychology as “complementary, two sides of the same coin” (1995, p, 124). For many, these trips have a profound transpersonal impact. I have also used a short version of this derived from Foster and Little’s (1988) description of “the medicine walk.” This is a one-day excursion in a natural area in which nature is seen as a mirror of one’s larger life journey. This practice, too, can deepen into nondual experiences. Even a two-hour adaptation can, with the right set and setting, provide profound impacts.

Environmental restoration work can also be done as a transpersonal practice. For instance, students are given instructions to work on a specific environmental project. For the purposes of this exercise, some kind of direct action, such as cleaning up a section of a stream or a vacant city lot or digging a hole to plant a tree, has worked better than a more abstract project. In addition to improving the physical environment, students are asked to reflect on their perspective and their motivations and to use it as a mindfulness exercise or meditation-in-action. This exercise has elements of Gurdjieff’s self-remembering practice and is reminiscent of Gandhi’s practice of cleaning out the latrine of those he visited. Done deeply enough, such “authentic service” elicits the perception that working on oneself and working on the physical environment are not different and evokes experiences of nonduality.

### Disidentification

Vaughan (1993) lists disidentification as a useful transpersonal practice. This exercise is adapted from the self-inquiry practice used by Ramana Maharshi to explore identity and the nature of self. This exercise is a good example of an ecopsychological practice oriented to nonduality. It is not directed at any particular image of nature, but rather at the process of conceiving and relating to nature through a frame of reference. Seeing, and seeing through, one’s concepts of the world dissolves the duality of self and nature, and the world is related to in an immediate way.

I ask students to choose an object to focus on and to get to know it. It might be a natural object they find outside, one of a collection of natural objects I provide, or any object without regard to its origins or history. Holding this focus, students then ask the object, “Who are you?” and notice the first answer that comes without censoring. To that answer, they respond, “Not just that.” This question and response are repeated with the same object until there is a felt shift in the awareness of the object. The second part of the exercise is to notice what actions or impulses arise without concepts or effort.

Almost everyone doing this exercise experiences some kind of shift, and depending on their preparation and openness, many notice a remarkable opening of awareness, often leading to one or more of the nondual states. As one student said, after doing this for a while “eventually the bottom dropped out.” Students report a range of responses following this shift, including curiosity, compassion, love, and a dedication to caring. Without one’s concepts of the object, there is a sharper awareness and a stronger appreciation of it. Sometimes there is an immediate behavioral response such as cleaning up the surrounding area. Other times there is no behavioral response, just a qualitatively deeper openness, gratitude, and affection. I believe that either outcome supports the aims of ecopsychology and that doing this exercise regularly over a long period of time is a potent spiritual practice.

## Conclusion

Ecopsychologists and transpersonal psychologists have made connections with each other, though not without some misgivings. I have proposed that an integration of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology is needed and potentially fruitful and that its success depends on a clearer understanding of nondual states of consciousness. This clarity can remove a great deal of the reluctance to accept a transpersonal view within ecopsychology. It can also contribute to a nature-oriented transpersonal path.

This integration must be inclusive and not discount the value of what has already been promoted in ecopsychology, including ecotherapy, sustainable lifeways, and effective environmental action. It must also require a contemplative wisdom regarding nonduality that goes beyond intellectual understanding and emotional appreciation. This wisdom entails both the discovery of deeper dimensions of Being and the development of the capacity to integrate these dimensions into everyday experience and action. This is not easy, but there is ample evidence from many spiritual traditions that it is possible, that it is worthwhile, and that there are methods for doing it.

At this point, I am reminded of William Barrett's epilogue to his book, The Illusion of Technique (1978). After an extensive and detailed analysis of technology, meaning, and the philosophies of James, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, he writes about the personal impact of his walks in a nearby forest during the process of writing this book. He writes of "the living rocks" and the nobility of dead trees on his way to quoting Hui Neng: "The Tao is your ordinary mind" (p. 340). Such esoteric material as analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and mysticism has its place in a thorough discourse on being fully human in the world. If the words have been successful, we come away inspired, opened, and elevated. Then, as Barrett reminds us, we need to forget the words, return to the body, to the earth.

Time now to walk among some trees and maybe lay on the ground for a while.

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#### Note

Note 1: Almaas uses both the masculine and the feminine in his examples. In this passage, he uses the masculine, but the feminine is implied as well.

## Biography

John Davis received his Ph.D. in experimental psychology from the University of Colorado in 1977. He is a professor of psychology at Naropa University in Boulder, CO, where he initiated courses in wilderness psychology and ecopsychology. [He is currently director of Naropa's low-residency MA program in Transpersonal Psychology which includes a concentration in Ecopsychology.] He has been a wilderness rites of passage guide since 1985, is on the faculty of the School of Lost Borders (a training facility for wilderness rites of passage guides), and is active in the Wilderness Guides Council. He has been a student of Hameed Ali (A. H. Almaas) since 1975 and a teacher in his Ridhwan School since 1983. John is the author of The Diamond Approach: An Introduction to the Teachings of A. H. Almaas (Shambhala) and a contributor to Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an expanded land management ethic (Venture Publishing). Correspondence may be sent via email to <jdavis@naropa.edu> or postal mail to John Davis, Department of Transpersonal Counseling Psychology, Naropa University, 2130 Arapahoe Avenue, Boulder, CO 80302.