

Ecopsychology, Transpersonal Psychology, and Nonduality

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Nonduality is at the core of both transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology and provides a means of finding common ground between these approaches. However, misunderstandings and the lack of an adequate conceptual language for nonduality have limited the value of this concept for ecopsychology. Nonduality is presented as a range of experiences and stages of development in which particulars are perceived and understood as part of an all-encompassing totality. Specifically, nonduality is understood in terms of a self-identity in which separating boundaries no longer isolate one from other expressions of Being. A description of nondual dimensions of Being based on the Diamond Approach of A. H. Almaas provides ways of articulating the transpersonal dimensions of ecopsychology.

Keywords: ecopsychology, transpersonal psychology, nonduality, spirituality and nature, Almaas, Diamond Approach

Many have recognized transpersonal experiences in natural settings and found qualities of peace, joy, love, guidance, and inspiration 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 powerful element in promoting sustainable lifestyles, effective environmental work, and optimal mental health. Spirituality has been part of the ecopsychology literature, though not without ambivalence or disagreement. For the most part, however, the transpersonal elements of ecopsychology have not been clearly articulated. In this article, I explore the connection between ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. Since the central issue for this connection is the notion of nonduality, I offer a discussion of nonduality and its relation to ecopsychology. I do not intend this to be a thorough review of either transpersonal psychology or ecopsychology but rather a contribution to a continuing dialogue on psyche, nature, and spirit.

Research on Nature-Based Transpersonal Experiences

A substantial and rapidly-growing body of psychological research points to the mental health benefits of nature experiences. Research settings include a broad range of encounters with nature including extended wilderness trips, nearby nature (such as city parks and gardens), built environments, and immersion

into nature images. Most of the research has focused on relaxation, a sense of restoration, and cognitive benefits (Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Ulrich et al., 1991; Kaplan, 1995; Chalquist, 2009). More recently, research on nature experiences has demonstrated increases in prosocial behavior (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2009) and a sense of vitality (Ryan et al., 2010).

An important subset of this research identifies transpersonal aspects of nature experiences. Wuthnow (1978) used three definitions of peak experiences in a large representative survey: “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 his sample reported being deeply moved by the beauty of nature, the most common of the three definitions, and forty-nine percent felt this experience had a lasting influence. Greeley (1974) and Keutzer (1978) asked large samples whether they had had what they called an ecstatic experience or an intense spiritual experience. Thirty-five percent of the U.S. population and sixty-five percent of a college population (respectively) 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. In a cross-cultural confirmation of these findings, Hoffman (2007) found that a sample of Japanese college students

reported nature experiences as the first or second most common trigger for their peak 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), using naturalistic inquiry methods, found 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; emphasis in original). Kaplan and Talbot (1983) and Talbot and Kaplan (1986) reported extensive research on wilderness experiences. Their Outdoor Challenge Program took inner city children, teachers, and others on week-long wilderness trips and analyzed the contents of participants’ journals. Although this program did not have an explicit psychological orientation, they found spiritual and 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 unstified.” . . .

[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 & Talbot, 1983, p. 178-180)

Transpersonal Psychology and Ecopsychology

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, independent agency, and separation from surroundings. The transpersonal approach differs

from other approaches, however, by valuing and describing states in which the self transcends a narrow identification (e.g., Wilber, 2000). Self-transcendence refers to states of consciousness and stages of development 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 (Caplan, Hartelius, & Rardin, 2003; Davis, 2003; Friedman, 1983; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Bynum (1997), 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) offered this integration:

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 argues that the deep and enduring psychological questions—who we are as human beings, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal—are intimately connected to our relationships with the natural world, and similarly, that the overriding environmental questions of our time—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 ecopsychology’s 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 (Doherty, 2009; Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009; Roszak, 1992; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Winter, 1996).

Ecopsychologists view the relationship between humans and nature as a deeply bonded and reciprocal communion or union 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, psychoemotional bonding with nature as a source of environmental action,

and the cultivation of environmentally-responsible 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 & Little, 1988, 1997; Davis, 2005) and other wilderness-based work (Greenway, 1995; Harper, 1995), shamanism (Gray, 1995), and psychotherapeutic practices (Cahalan, 1995; Swanson, 1995; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009).

For the most part, ecopsychology presents two images for the relationship between humans and nature: (a) nature as home and its inhabitants as family (e.g., siblings or Mother Earth) and (b) nature as self, in which self-identifications are broadened and deepened to include the non-human world. 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. Fox (1995) provided a useful outline of various positions on human-nature relationships. A transpersonal view of human-nature relationships can include these two images, and it will transcend them. Conceiving of nature as an expanded and more-inclusive self may be a necessary step in developing a more transpersonal view of the human-nature relationship. However, this broader self is not a 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 of Being. An understanding of unitive, nondual states, and practices for developing this understanding is the foundation for an effective integration of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology.

Integrations of Ecopsychology and Transpersonal Psychology

References to spirituality, sacredness, and the transpersonal (though generally without using that term) can be found in much of ecopsychology. Theodore Roszak's (1992) *The Voice of the Earth*, the seminal book in ecopsychology, includes positive references to "nature mysticism," "Feminist Spirituality," and in his conclusion, "the interplay between planetary and personal well-being, [phrasing which] is deliberately chosen for its traditional theological connotation" (p. 321). Snell, Simmonds, and Webster (2011) reviewed Roszak's work on ecopsychology and concluded that spiritual experience (though he tends to avoid that term) is an important

theme in his presentation of ecopsychology. Whether or not ecopsychology continues along the lines proposed by Roszak, they argued "it would be prudent to account for Roszak's contribution and the significance of spiritual experience in his representation of ecopsychology" (p. 112). Warwick Fox's (1995) *Transpersonal Ecology* bears directly on the intersection of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology. Although the original 1990 publication of this book predates Roszak's (1992) major presentation of ecopsychology, Fox mentioned Roszak's earlier work at several points. Importantly for this discussion, Fox included Roszak in a list of writers who "see the cultivation of ecological consciousness in 'spiritual' or 'quasi-religious' terms" (Fox, 1995, p. 52).

Andy Fisher's *Radical Ecopsychology* (2002) is another formative work for the field of ecopsychology, and he also included multiple positive references to spirituality in ecopsychology. He considered spirituality in some instances to be virtually synonymous with the reunion of humans and the rest of nature (p. 97) and a necessary foundation for encountering the depths of environmental suffering in order to engage in effective environmental action (pp. 190-191). Deborah Winter's *Ecological Psychology* (1996) included a major section on transpersonal psychology with a discussion of deep ecology, transpersonal ecology, and ecopsychology. She concluded that "with so much common conceptual ground, it is not surprising that theories are beginning to synthesize transpersonal psychology and deep ecology" (p. 249). She cited Roszak's ecopsychology and Fox's transpersonal ecology as examples of this synthesis. The subtitle of her book, *Healing the Split between Planet and Self*, clearly expresses her view of a unity that transcends the illusion of a human-nature split. Winter summarized 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, ecopsychologists, 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, emphasis supplied)

Doherty (2009) suggested that as ecopsychology moves into a “second generation” of research, theory, and application, it is becoming less defined by its countercultural, holistic, and romantic stance and more self-reflective, pluralistic, and pragmatic. Doherty called for an expansion from those early tenets of ecopsychology but not a rejection of them. For others, this movement within ecopsychology may reflect concerns about the explicit spiritual and mystical flavor of early presentations of ecopsychology by Roszak and others. For example, Reser (1995) 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, [and so forth]” (p. 242). While Reser and others are skeptical about the value of an ongoing influence of transpersonalism in ecopsychology, I feel its intersection with transpersonal psychology is one important aspect of ecopsychology’s pluralism. While ecopsychology finds useful common ground with environmental psychology, conservation psychology, and other environmentally-focused psychologies, it will also be fruitful to develop its common ground with transpersonal psychology.

Nonduality

I am using the term *nonduality* to capture the understanding of unitive states, an expanded and deeper sense of self, and self-transcendence. In transcending a sense of separate self, one realizes a nondual relationship with Being. It is not awareness or consciousness which is transcended, only the sense of a self which is grounded in separation, narcissism, and defenses (the so-called *ego* in many spiritual traditions). Nonduality does not mean a loss of consciousness but rather a heightened consciousness in which particulars (objects, persons, and relationships) can be perceived with greater clarity as the conditioning and cognitive limitations of the ego-based separate self are dissolved, integrated, and transcended. This view of nonduality is at the core of the relationship between transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology is based on the recognition of a fundamental nonduality between humans and nature and on the insight that the failure to experience, value, and act from this nonduality creates suffering for both humans and the environment. Nonduality and unitive states of consciousness are also at the foundation of transpersonal psychology. Demonstrating this close connection

between nature, nonduality, and transpersonal states, Wilber (1996) illustrated the first of the transpersonal stages of development as “nature-mysticism,” defined by “an awareness that is no longer confined exclusively to the individual ego” (p. 202). I would argue that this is one description of nonduality. At this level, “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. ... It is your own higher self” (Wilber, 1996, p. 202, emphasis in original). From an ecopsychological perspective, Greenway (1995) pointed to dualism as “perhaps the source of our pervasive sense of being disconnected” from the natural world (p. 131). He suggested that such dualism is 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). He suggested that an important step in redressing these problems is a better language for ecopsychology and for understanding nonduality. I agree.

Nonduality refers to the locus, structure, and nature of self-identity, encompassing 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 individual identity and the contents of experience are differentiated but not split or separated. The world does not melt away, perception gains greater clarity and richness, and actions flow more harmoniously. At the same time, the self is no longer experienced as separate or ultimately autonomous. Instead, an expanded, more open, and more inclusive view of the world becomes foreground. As Zimmerman wrote, “In the moment of release, 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” (as quoted in Fox, 1995, p. 239). Similarly, Fox wrote, “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 that have described nonduality have pointed out that the world becomes more real, beautiful, alive, and whole when one steps outside the confinement of duality. When the separate identity, with its filters and

expectations 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.

A central difficulty in understanding the role of nonduality in ecopsychology is the misconception that nonduality is undifferentiated (the descriptions by Fox and Zimmerman notwithstanding). In that view, the nondual state, a merged union without any differences or discriminations, would preclude perception and action. For example, Naess (1989) spoke 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. The issue of nonduality is somewhat complicated by the fact that there are nondual states in which perception does disappear into a complete and absolute cessation. However, this is not the only state in which the self is in a union with the world. The more-inclusive definition I am using here is more consistent with reports of nonduality in relation to nature. 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 identification with a separate self is lost. Duality is a product of identification, not differentiation.

Dimensions of Nonduality

Most spiritual wisdom traditions have described this terrain and developed specific methods for experiencing, understanding, and integrating nonduality. A. H. Almaas, in what he calls the Diamond Approach, articulates a richly detailed and systematic approach to clarifying personality, experiencing essence, and realizing spiritual maturity (Davis, 1999). His descriptions of nondual states (which he has also called boundless or formless) states are particularly relevant here. Almaas has described five boundless or nondual dimensions, each with distinctive characteristics, and he has related each dimension to descriptions of these states from traditional spiritual systems, including Sufism, Buddhism, Christianity, Kabbalah, and Shaivism (e.g., 1986, p. 419-484; 2000b, p. 397-441). Each dimension has a sense of freedom, clarity, and authenticity which transcends ordinary identity without denying or rejecting a sense of individual consciousness. A precise understanding of the psychological issues that arise in each of these advanced stages of spiritual work provides foundations for self-realization through the method of inquiry and other practices. He has further described

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the integration of these nondual dimensions into the personal life and functioning of individuals (Almaas, 2000a, 2000b). I will give brief descriptions of each to help clarify this discussion of nonduality in the context of ecopsychology.

In one of these dimensions the world is experienced as a flowing, dynamic unfolding in each moment. This dimension leads to an awareness that the world is born anew each moment. This dynamism reveals the world’s aliveness, its multiplicity, and its constant unfolding.

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, 2000b, p. 33)

From this dimension, nature is seen in its eternal and timeless unfolding expression and change. This expression is not haphazard but self-organizing. Inner experience, the physical world, conceptualizations, and actions all arise, discriminable but not divided. One might use a metaphor of waves on an ocean which can be identified as unique but never separate from the ocean. Self and nature are 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 (1995) cosmologically based identification and 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” (p. 252). This concept of dynamic, nondual flow is also similar to Roszak’s (1992) use of the concepts of *anima mundi*, World Soul, and Gaia. He described 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 gave 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, 2000a, p. 475)

Almaas has also referred to this dimension as the “Universal Soul” or the soul of the universe, similar to Roszak’s use of the term World Soul (personal communication, July 28, 1997). Both Roszak and Almaas use *soul* in the sense of its original meaning as individual consciousness or the medium of experience. All of these ideas, taken together, point to existence as a single unfolding reality, in constant renewal and originality, flowing, and undivided.

A second boundless dimension focuses on the richness and beauty of existence and the origin of the limitless aesthetic 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 phenomena (both as inner experience and outer world) 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. Experiencing this flow deeply reveals that its nature is beauty and love. Almaas described 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 logical conclusion or solely an 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 does not.

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 deeper dimension of nonduality, a fullness of presence. Beauty is now seen as a surface quality, and within the loveliness and lovableness of the world lies the fact of its presence. If, as Emerson wrote, “beauty is God’s handwriting,” this dimension corresponds to God, the source of that beauty (though nontheistic traditions have also recognized this dimension of pure presence without invoking a singular deity). Patterns in the world are revealed as expressions of noetic forms. The world (inner and outer) has a

quality of presence, purity, significance, profundity, and realness that was masked, as it were, by its beauty. All is experienced as pure presence without any differentiated characteristics beyond the experience 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, 2000b, p. 406)

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

This nondual presence resembles what Fox (1995) called 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)

Fox related this awareness to the insights of the Zen Buddhists, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein and suggested that 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 inner nature of the awareness of pure presence is the realm of nonconceptual awareness and pure perception. It is what Fox called “the background of nonexistence, voidness, or emptiness” from which arises existence and presence. Penetrating the pure presence and unity of the world, one discovers its ground to be awareness without 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 [sic], 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 awakens, 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, 2000b, pp. 411-412)

Note that while there is no conceptual content in this state, there is awareness and that awareness has noticeable qualities: freshness, intensity, timelessness, and transparency. Indeed, nature is revealed in a fully transparent way. One sees the world, but it is as if each perception is empty of differentiated content beyond pure awareness, brand new, and undistorted by past memories, expectations, and labels. The dynamic flow described above is co-emergent with this dimension. 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, among other contemplative and mystical traditions, has dealt with this dimension. Perhaps this is what Gary Snyder pointed to when he titled his collection of his poetry *No Nature*.

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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 described a nondual dimension fundamental to each of these. He called this the Absolute, a dimension 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. He compared it 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 all that is seen—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 ultimate source of freedom and liberation.

A Nonhierarchical View

The dimensions of nondual Being are usually presented as a linear unfolding or development according to a “journey of ascent.” This progression describes the development of consciousness from the perspective of the individual. Consciousness, as it develops and becomes more refined, reveals increasingly deeper and more subtle 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 the Absolute mystery to those more differentiated as the phenomenal world, a “journey of descent.” The mystery

unfolds and manifests first as non-conceptual awareness which differentiates into presence itself and then into forms, patterns, and qualities, giving rise to experiences of ourselves as humans, and the world. The journey of ascent is a process of understanding the inner nature of phenomena, including the physical and the experiential realms, as a progression to more and more subtle forms of nonduality. The journey of descent is a process of nonduality expressing itself in more and more differentiated manifestations without losing its inherent unity.

Both of these “journeys” and each of these dimensions can also 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 (the result of the journey of descent); transcendence, emptiness, and the mystery of union are the other (the fruition of the journey of ascent). 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. This understanding of nonduality does not devalue *or* reject the natural world or human culture. From this view, spiritual realization does not need to isolate nature from humans. To the extent that one does want to distinguish these (and there are times this is a useful distinction), they can still be seen as manifestations of the same absolutely mysterious ground of Being. None of the dimensions of nonduality means *leaving* the world. The physical world as less than the spiritual is rejected, as is as the natural world as the source of Being. Regardless of whether the physical world (including the natural world) or spirit is privileged, both of these views continue a pernicious duality. With the understanding of nonduality presented here, one can embrace both nature and human as manifestations of Being.

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 at the center.

Some ecopsychologists and deep ecologists have pointed to this as a source of environmental action. Fox (1995), summarizing a vast amount of writing in this area, concluded, “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) claimed 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 and has integrated the teachings of 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. To the extent that these propositions need empirical testing, this understanding of nonduality could help operationalize such research.

Conclusions

This understanding of nonduality has radical consequences for views of nature and psyche. When nature is seen as a family or larger self, it is a projection of our human selves, 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 the possibility judgments, grasping, rejection, and constriction—all the characteristics of a “smaller,” egoic, and dualistic self. This is the origin of the splits that lead to alienation and suffering. A nondual view of ecopsychology goes beyond anthropocentrism *and* ecocentrism. One could say that Being or the totality of existence is the center *and* equally, that there is no center, just flow, beauty, presence, emptiness, and mystery.

A transpersonal understanding 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 maturity beyond the personal and supports self-transcendence. It also recognizes spirit in all forms, including the natural, the built, the wounded, the sublime, and the toxic. Environmental problems become

an arena for selfless service, and the phenomenal world becomes an arena for transpersonal insights and nondual awareness.

Ecopsychologists and transpersonal psychologists have made connections with each other, though not without some ambivalence. Here and elsewhere, 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 (Davis, 1998). This clarity can remove some of the reluctance to accept a transpersonal view within ecopsychology (though for some, it will no doubt add fuel to this reluctance). 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, ecological lifestyles, and effective, sustainable 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.

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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.

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