

# Diamond in the Rough

## Primitive Ecopsychology, the Diamond Approach, and Transpersonal Ecopsychology

John Davis

**T**his article describes a confluence of two paths, the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology, using the example of wilderness retreats I call “Diamond in the Rough.” This integration can expand the field of ecopsychology into a more precise and useful understanding of its overlap with spirituality or transpersonal ecopsychology.<sup>1</sup>

### Ecopsychology

Enduring psychological and spiritual questions—who we are, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal—are intimately connected to our relationships with the physical world. Similarly, the over-riding environmental questions of our time—the sources of, consequences of, and solutions to environmental disaster—are rooted in our images of self and nature and the behaviors which stem from them. Ecopsychology integrates

ecology and psychology in responding to both sets of questions. Among its contributions are shifting the basis for environmental action from anxiety, blame, and coercion to devotion, joy, and invitation (Roszak 2001); bringing the natural world and ecological thinking to psychotherapy and personal growth (Conn 1998; Swanson 2001); and fostering ways of living which are both ecologically and psychologically healthy and sustainable (Fisher 2002).

One of a number of areas studying human-nature relationships (such as environmental psychology, ecospirituality, and environmental education), ecopsychology is founded on three insights. (1) There is a deeply bonded relationship between humans and nature. (2) The dissociation of humans and nature leads to suffering both for the environment (ecological devastation) and for humans (arrested human development, grief, despair, anxiety, or alienation). (3) Realizing and deepening the connection between humans and nature is healing for both. This reconnection expresses itself in ecotherapy, work on grief and despair about environmental destruction, integration of the interlocking projects of environmental action and social justice, and support for more

effective and sustainable environmental action and lifestyles based on positive motivations such as joy, compassion, and love.

### Primitive Ecopsychology

For many years, I have had a deep and abiding passion for wild nature, finding support, challenge, insight, and growth in the natural world and especially its wilder places. This passion found a home in ecopsychology as a vehicle for exploring the confluence of nature, psyche, and spirit (Davis 1998), and it deepened when I participated in a wilderness rite of passage, or “vision fast,” based on the work of Steven Foster and Meredith Little (Foster and Little 1988; Davis 2005). I began an apprenticeship with one of their first students, and a few years later, I met and trained with Steven and Meredith at their School of Lost Borders. In addition to the personal impact of the vision fast ceremony, I was drawn to the combination of their straightforward, generous teaching style and their thoughtful articulation of the conceptual underpinnings of their work. I have now led vision fasts for 20 years, I train wilderness guides, and I am on the staff of the School of Lost Borders.

Foster, at one-time a professor of literature and poetry, often experimented with the best language to describe his

**John Davis**, Ph.D., is a professor at Naropa University where he directs the M. A. program in Transpersonal Psychology and its Ecopsychology concentration. He has been an ordained teacher of the Diamond Approach since 1983, and he is the author of *The Diamond Approach: An Introduction to the Teachings of A. H. Almaas* (Shambhala). John is also on the staff of the School of Lost Borders where he leads wilderness trips and trains wilderness rites of passage guides. For more information, visit [www.johnvdavis.com](http://www.johnvdavis.com). Contact: [jdavis@naropa.edu](mailto:jdavis@naropa.edu), 3743 Nelson Rd, Longmont, CO 80503, 303-449-5579.

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work. He was one of the first to use the term ecopsychology and, at some point, began using the term “primitive ecopsychology” for the work of the School of

ecopsychology? Not very. The key is to encounter the natural world directly and openly with less of the insulation of modern life.

## Primitive ecopsychology may be seen as a branch of the larger field of ecopsychology, one firmly oriented to encountering the wild Earth directly.

Lost Borders. Here, the word “primitive” suggests two things. First, it points us to the wild world ñundeveloped, untamed, and unaltered by humans ñ as a means of healing, maturation, and self-realization. Touching the wild, whether in an extended wilderness excursion, a nearby park, or even in our own bodies in this moment, wakes us up, makes us more whole, and transforms us. (At the same time, Foster was not one to romanticize nature. He respected its raw power and saw the importance of preparation, support, context-setting, and integration of nature experiences.) In a second sense, “primitive” suggests that which is primary, original, or first. It points us to direct and immediate contact with the natural world before emotional reactions or intellectual analysis. Thus, primitive ecopsychology may be seen as a branch of the larger field of ecopsychology, one firmly oriented to encountering the wild Earth directly.

I see three key elements in primitive ecopsychology. The first is the value of direct, immediate contact with the natural world. The paradigm of primitive ecopsychology centers on wilderness experiences, but it is by no means limited to wilderness. Looking closely at wilderness experience, we will find it to be more of an attitude than an absolute. Most of the places we use for the Diamond in the Rough trip are wilder but not, strictly speaking, wilderness. Signs of human intervention are never far away. How wild does the wilderness need to be for the purposes of primitive

(van Gennep 1961), the vision fast is essentially a threshold-crossing ceremony. Following preparation and severance from the familiar, the participant crosses a threshold into a liminal space, and then returns. While the specific purpose of a rite of passage is generally the confirmation of a change in status or a life transition, Foster and Little designed a wide range of practices with a similar struc-

The second element of primitive ecopsychology is the model of the vision fast, Foster and Little’s first work. With a deep structure reflecting the three stages of a rite of passage



ture (Foster and Little 1989). It is not uncommon for participants to associate the vision fast model and its associated teachings with Native American Indian spirituality. Indeed, it draws from the same archetypal roots. The orientation of the School of Lost Borders’ work has

always been to respect those who have developed and kept alive such practices and, at the same time, not to appropriate them. Drawing from the deep, pan-cultural roots of all rites of passage, Foster and Little sought to re-create forms relevant to our time, place, and culture.

The third element of primitive ecopsychology is the use of a particular four-fold model of nature, including human nature (Foster and Little 1998). This Four Shields model is featured as a specific teaching by the School of Lost Border and included in virtually all of its courses. It describes four cardinal directions, times of day, seasons, ways of being, ways of knowing, ways of loving, and so on. Its specific origins appear to be Mayan, but its basic outlines are found in many cultures around the world. While our particulars fit the northern temperate zone, remarkably similar four-fold models can be found in teachings of Native American Indians, Africans, Jungian psychology, and many others (Foster and Little 1998). This model of human nature stems equally from natural cycles, human life cycles, and a wide variety of dimensions of human action and experience. It is a basis for ecopsychology inasmuch as the Four Shields model derives from our understanding of natural processes.

Each of these three elements of primitive ecopsychology are important in the Diamond in the Rough retreats. First and foremost, these retreats encourage direct contact with the natural world and support participants in opening, listening, engaging, and learning from it. Drawing from the vision fast model, this encounter takes the form of daily solo experiences, each a threshold crossing, along with a longer 24-hour solo. Finally, the Four Shields model gives these retreats their basic shape and a part of its core teaching.

### The Diamond Approach

The Diamond Approach is a thorough, coherent, and precise articulation of human nature and a path for living an authentic, realized life in the world. It is a mystical path in the sense that its ultimate foundation is the pure nonconceptual ground of being. At the same time, it values living in the world, relat-

ing to others, and functioning as means to, and expressions of, self-realization. The Diamond Approach blends both the personal and the transpersonal aspects of full human development. The Diamond Approach has been developed and described extensively by A. H. Almaas (e.g., Almaas 1998, 2004; Davis 1999). It provides a detailed, inclusive, and thorough map and path through the depths of human consciousness. I met Almaas in 1975, and I have been studying with him since as a student and one of the first teachers he trained in the Diamond Approach. The Diamond Approach is typically taught in group and individual sessions. Its methods incorporate individual practices (such as meditation and contemplation), small process groups, and large group teachings blending conceptual and experiential knowledge. While the Diamond Approach incorporates insights and findings from modern psychology, neuroscience, and a variety of spiritual disciplines, the Diamond Approach is an original system with its own mature, unique logos.

Among its many elements, two have been especially relevant on the Diamond in the Rough retreats: its main method, the practice of inquiry, and one of its central concepts, the soul. The Diamond Approach is based on the practice of inquiry, an engaged, open, and open-ended exploration of one's immediate experience (Almaas 2002). Inquiry follows the thread of one's experience, revealing the inner nature of the experience and supporting the transformation of consciousness. Along the way, inquiry exposes resistances, distortions, fixations, and other barriers to the freedom of experience. This exploration of immediate experience leads to understanding, which in the Diamond Approach is taken to mean fully-lived experience which includes the knowing of the experience. Experiencing, knowing, and realization are not separate.

In this view, the soul is not an enduring or permanent object. Consistent with the original meaning of soul in Western spiritual and philosophical disciplines, it is the organ of consciousness or being itself, the means by which being knows itself and the means through which being functions. As an organ of being, the soul is the locus of individual perception,

action, and development. It is the soul which is transformed by experience and which matures. We can say it is the soul which is truly alive in a person. More succinctly, the soul is the individual consciousness.

The soul's inherent aliveness is generally deadened, dulled, or contracted by

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patterns of avoidance and defense based on the past. The residue of undigested experiences, conditioning, defenses, and resulting ego structures such as self-images and identifications shape the soul, binding, distorting, and restricting its aliveness. These structures may be temporarily useful to the developing soul, and they are approximations on the soul's true nature, not mistakes of development. However, unless they are metabolized by the soul, these structures become barriers to inner freedom and full expression. Consequently, the Diamond Approach distinguishes a soul which is restricted from a soul which is free and realized. The more free the soul, the more apparent are its inherent qualities and the more transparent it is to its essential nature as aliveness, presence, emptiness, and depth.

The Diamond in the Rough retreats focus on certain inherent qualities of the soul: its dynamism, its exquisitely tender sensitivity, its impressionability which gives it the capacity to be influenced by experience and to mature, and its intrinsic freedom and potentiality. The integration of these qualities of the individual consciousness or soul reveal its essential presence and aliveness. These wilderness-based retreats provide the opportunity for participants' focused

inquiries in nature to reveal and deepen these qualities.

### **Common Ground for a Wilderness-based Retreat**

Both the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology aim to expand and deepen experience and bring us more fully into the present moment. Both draw us into direct and immediate contact with the totality of the body, heart, mind, and spirit. They express a genuinely optimistic view of human nature, along with a respectful, compassionate, and unflinching recognition of the obstacles to the full realization of our potential. Each appreciates the maturation of the human being as an ongoing and open-ended process. Finally, both the Diamond Approach and primitive ecopsychology are deeply committed to living in the world, this world, not transcending it.

Here, I will outline the general structure of the teachings on these retreats. We set up a basecamp in a natural wild area and practice safe, Leave-No-Trace camping techniques. Most days follow a similar format. We gather early in the morning for a period of mindfulness meditation followed by a brief teaching. The teaching leads to a focus for the day's solo. Participants are on their own for the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, free to wander from base camp as they wish. The areas we use for these retreats offer a variety of directions and terrains to explore in solitude. Sometimes participants choose a particular landscape which matches their inner state; other times, they allow spontaneity and synchronicity to guide them. At the end of the day, we gather for a brief check-in and communal dinner, followed by a more thorough debriefing and exploration of the experiences of the day.

### **The South Shield and the Soul's Dynamism**

The teaching begins with the south shield, the place of summer, high noon, the child, and the body. Entering the new environment of the wilderness invokes a sense of childhood with both excitement and fear. The child is raw, playful, and innocent to long-term impacts. The south shield invokes the body, physical-



ity, and raw sensations. These are times of instinctual fight and flight, and summer is a time of high energy, vitality, vigor, and expansion.

One aspect of the Diamond Approach's teachings on the soul mirrors the south shield well. When we first turn our attention to our consciousness, we find it is continually in change. The soul is constantly morphing, revealing its fundamental dynamism and flow. In a soul which is more free, such dynamism is unfettered. The impacts of the ego-self, on the other hand, contract and rigidify the soul, restricting its flow and dampening its dynamism. This flow may be more coherent or more fragmented, its pacing languid or frantic, its tone loud or quiet. So, it is with the body, the child, and the energy of summer. From boisterous play and splashing in the water, we summer-children lay down in the shade and drift into reverie chewing on a piece of grass, only to be stung by a bee, awakened to our physicality, and shocked into terror and rage.

On the Diamond in the Rough, the task for this phase focuses participants on the soul's dynamic flow. We invite participants to go into nature and focus on movement and flow. How does your body move across the land; where do you see nature's dynamism; how do you experience your aliveness?

### **The West Shield and the Soul's Sensitivity**

Summer eventually gives way to fall; shadows lengthen, and the child cannot stay forever a child. The rambunctious child matures into an adolescent. Playfulness slows and reflects; anger grows into recognition of its impacts; fear quiets into awareness of our vulnerability. The child is not gone, but the adolescent takes center stage. This is the territory of the west shield: autumn, dusk, adolescence, and the heart. Here, the adolescent begins to notice herself or himself as a distinct individual, and the inner life becomes more dramatic. Feelings unknown to the child appear: doubt, worry, grief, shame. Indeed, the adolescent is, as much as anything, a creature of introspection and self-reflection. The west shield is such a place of doubt, ambivalence, suffering, and heart-felt tenderness. This is also the place of

the shadow. While the archetypal child is blissfully unaware of ambiguity, guilt, shame, and other elements of the psychic shadow world, the archetypal adolescent seems to live in the shadows as much as the light. It is a bittersweet and sensitive time.

Drawing on the Diamond Approach, we recognize the soul's sensitivity to all that touches it, whether from internal or external sources. Joy and pain impact the soul, as do cruelty and kindness. The more free the soul, the more sensitive it is; the less free the soul, the more dulled it is. Whereas the obstacles of the south shield dampen the soul's vitality and dynamism, those of the west shield

## **How does your body move across the land; where do you see nature's dynamism; how do you experience your aliveness?**

entangle the soul in self-consciousness and suffering. The soul becomes thick and obscured, and the inner light infusing the soul dims a bit.

This sensitivity in the soul means it has the potential to be wounded. Yet, there is a depth of personal presence and authenticity which develops through such sensitivity and vulnerability. The focus of the solo in this phase of the retreat draws on this wisdom. To encourage participants to open the soul to all its experience, we encourage them to relate directly to their wounds and to the wounds they encounter in nature. "Find a wounded place in nature, and be with it," we suggest, or they may engage nature as a therapist, choosing a tree or rock (the ultimate "non-directive therapist") and telling their wounds to that natural object. By going into our wounds, rather than avoiding them, we re-engage the soul's sensitivity and develop its presence.

### **The North Shield and the Soul's Maturation**

The shadows of fall deepen into long nights, bringing new challenges and calling for new capacities. Cold winds blow in from the north, and winter is upon us. Now, we need. If we are to survive—if our people are to survive—we need to be more thoughtful and analytic, planning, organizing, and delaying our own gratification for the good of the community. The adolescent matures into adulthood and exercises newly developed capacities for willpower, responsibility, intention, self-control, directed action, structure, and consideration for others. Where the south shield was primarily about the body and the west shield about the heart, the north shield is about the mind. Again, the child and the adolescent are not rejected or left behind. Rather, their views of the world are incorporated into the adult who can play and feel without being deterred from the work that needs to be done. Thus, this shield is the place of winter, night, adulthood, and the mind. Its gifts include rationality, will, and the creation of enduring structures.

Through the Diamond Approach, we find something else to be true about the soul. The soul not only registers the impacts of its experiences; it records them. These imprints and impressions allow the soul to mature, individuating and developing greater capacities for knowing, understanding, and expression. With these come the capacity for effective action and thoughtful generosity.

While the focus for this phase of the retreat could go several directions, including exploration of the laws of nature, both within and outside us, we often focus on a personal exploration of our human-nature relationships. Participants are encouraged to look at the patterns in their views of their relationship with the natural world and the impacts these patterns have on their souls. How mature, realistic, and confident are these views of nature? Are they based on fear of nature, objectification and use of nature, or a kinship with the natural world? This is an exercise in sincere and mature self-understanding, not self-criticism, self-inflation, or intellectualization. Suspending both judgment and

theoretical analysis are important for this solo.

### **The East Shield and the Soul's Potentiality**

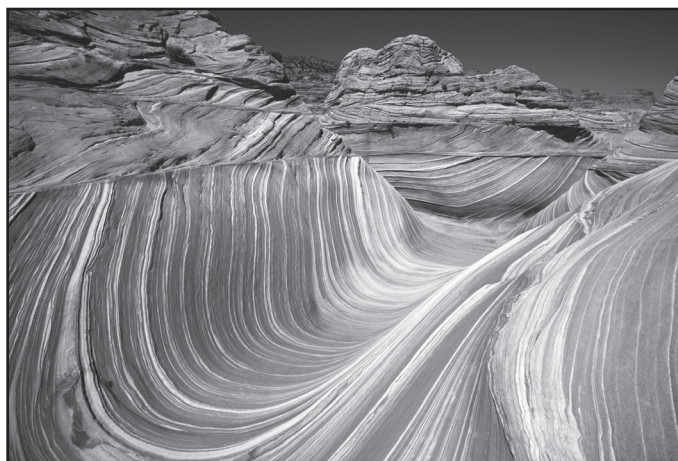
At this point in the retreat, we shift our pattern of mid-day solos and morning and evening gatherings, and we invite participants to a 24-hour solo focused. We do very little discussion of the east shield prior to this solo. Since the nature of the east shield often transcends ordinary discourse, we keep explanations to a minimum at this point, and instead, we reinforce the solo as a chance to go beyond expectations. It is an extended inquiry into one's immediate experience beyond conceptual frameworks and an opportunity for direct encounter with the soul and its potential.

The evening before the solo includes simple ceremony, reflecting the mode of this shield. Simple actions are given deeper significance. Crossing a threshold can signify to the unconscious, as well as the community, that one is willing to enter a world with fewer rules and roles and greater possibilities—a sacred space. The next morning, participants do cross a ceremonial threshold at dawn, symbolically leaving the familiar world and entering a world of unknown potential. They return shortly after dawn on the following day.

In the twenty-four-hour cycle, the east shield corresponds to the night. As the Earth turns, what becomes of the night? The sky lightens slowly in the east. First, we are fooled a bit by false dawn, and then, the sun! Illumination, revelation, vision, joy, delight! Realization and release. Unearned grace. The sun illuminates our world; a brighter light illuminates our souls. As spring arrives, what becomes of winter? One day, we discover that the buds on the trees have begun to swell, and a blossom appears on an apparently dead branch. The world is alive with potential once more, and naturally, we feel this is a time to celebrate this rebirth. And what becomes of the winter shield's adult? As the adult steps through the veils between life and death,

a life is completed and a soul returns to formlessness. At the same time, new life crosses the veils between death and life; a new life begins. The spring shield is a place where death and birth co-emerge. Similarly, this is the place of paradox, mystery, and the joker, jester, and trickster, overturning our structures so they can come alive again, infused with space and light and ready for the vigor of the south shield.

Through the lens of the Diamond Approach, these qualities of the east shield are reflected in the soul's inherent freedom and potentiality. In its most pure manifestation, the soul's realization is free and never-ending. The soul is



transparent to its divine nature and open to transformation; not just expansion in a horizontal dimension to a broader range of experience, but a vertical shift in its identity and its relationship to its source or ground.

The Diamond in the Rough retreats typically emphasize the soul's potential, the possibility of its transformation, and its ultimate transparency to being. Unoccluded by structures based on defenses and the past, the soul perceives and expresses its depth. While most participants do not articulate their east shield experiences this way, we see it in the joyful faces returning from the solo, a deeper sense of peace and contentment, a more open presence, a lightness in their steps and voices, and a taste of the mystery.

With regard to the Four Shields, the cycle does not stop in the spring. Spring is followed by summer. So, the transcendence and illumination of the east shield

is followed by a turn to the south shield once more. Our visions must become physical, embodied, and dynamic, or else, carried off by visionary bliss, we stub our toes or sit on a cactus, reminding us in no uncertain terms that we are embodied. Therefore, we focus part of the last day on the return from our wilderness basecamp to our homes.

### **Toward a Transpersonal Ecopsychology**

What can this work contribute to the discourse on human-nature relationships and ecopsychology? While the aspirations of ecopsychology for personal healing and environmental sustainability

are vital to the future of human beings and the Earth, I have also been interested in the possibilities of ecopsychology as a basis for self-realization and full human development. Ecopsychology often has qualities or sensibilities associated with spiritual wisdom traditions. Yet, these qualities are more often alluded to than examined or practiced. Ecopsychology has not articulated clearly and robustly the connections between psyche, nature, and spirit, in large part, I believe,

because it has not had the language to do so. This inquiry has led me to the interface of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. Along with the Diamond Approach, transpersonal psychology can provide such a language (Davis 2003).

I propose that ecopsychology be extended to a view that both includes and transcends its nature-as-family and nature-as-self metaphors to a narrative in which both nature and psyche flow as expressions of the same ground. This is not simply a reciprocity between humans and nature nor merely a broadening of the self to include the natural world, though it includes both. In this view, maturation continues beyond identification with the individual self as a separate entity interacting with nature to an identification with being, spirit, or the ground of being which gives rise to all manifestations, human and nature. Nature and human are relative discriminations, useful in some contexts but not

final. Transpersonal ecopsychology values all expressions of being, natural and human. Environmental action is revealed as a caring reflex, the Earth caring for itself.

The Diamond in the Rough retreats are one expression of this work, integrating the full circle of nature (summer, fall, winter, spring; day, dusk, night, dawn), human nature (child, adolescent, adult, death/birth; body, heart, mind, and spirit), and the totality of the human soul's aliveness (including its dynamism, sensitivity, maturation, and potential). Ecopsychology has developed its south, west, and north shields; transpersonal ecopsychology completes this view, representing its east shield, and enriching ecopsychology as a path for self-realization and on-going maturation of the soul.

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