

The Passionate Love for Truth

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AH Almaas is widely respected for his powerful path of inquiry which integrates psychology and spirit in the quest for our true nature. He is interviewed by Dina Glouberman.

Western psychological and psychotherapeutic ideas have developed almost entirely without any understanding or appreciation of our spiritual heritage. On the other hand, spiritual traditions have tended to ignore the life of the mind and how it gets in the way of the spirit. The result is that we have psychological understanding which fails to free our hearts, and spiritual understanding which can rarely penetrate our psychological barriers.

Over the last 27 years AH Almaas, a Kuwaiti teacher based in San Francisco, has pioneered a way of inquiring into the truth of our experience which cuts through these traditional barriers between the realms of psychology and spirituality. Almaas calls the body of practices he has built up 'the Diamond Approach' and has created the Ridhwan School to make it available to students. So far 78 teachers have been trained, and courses are running in the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia and for the last three years – England.

Almaas' form of inquiry is extraordinarily powerful because it does not start out from any preconceptions other than a love of the truth, an openness to whatever is arising in our experience and a willingness to question and explore what we find there. Inquiry draws on our natural capacity to discriminate – to tell fear from excitement, for example – so that we gradually become able to objectively understand ourselves. As we can encompass more and more of our experience, we begin to see how much of it is generated from images and mental representations from the past that we have been deeply identified with. When we can recognize these images for what they are (simply mental representations of who we took ourselves to be in relation to the world) so we begin to be able to relax out of all the ways our mind has learned to define us.

It is this process that was often so difficult to journey through in traditional spiritual practices, lacking as they did Almaas' contemporary understanding of how the ego develops and how it gets stuck. With sincerity and dedication it becomes possible to see through these images and recover the natural potentials of the heart that got confused with them. As this happens, what is immediate, unconditioned, and essential in our nature is revealed. By learning to recognize these essential qualities, our true nature guides us to directly know and live the richness and mystery of life in all its dimensions.

Dina Glouberman: What is the central issue which you feel most passionate about?

Almaas: The passion is really about what we call truth, truth in the sense that the whole work is based on the passionate love for truth, like wanting to know

passionately, not from a mental perspective but from the depth of the heart, what we are, what is living, what is reality, what is the point of our life. So really the whole work is a deep experiential inquiry into those questions.

How does this relate to your life experience?

It is the center of my life. The passion of love for truth is not only about inquiring into our experience and life but at some point it begins to reveal the deeper, essential and spiritual truth.

When this reveals itself at any moment, what happens to you inside?

A sense of freedom, a sense of authenticity, the feeling that this is what I am, the sense of waking up to reality from a dream: oh here's reality – I didn't see it before – and a sense of fullness of presence.

Do you feel joyful?

It can be joyful, happy ecstatic, but it also can be deep and contented. It changes according to the situation.

People say the truth hurts. Is that not your experience?

It is very true – when we explore the truth we find many truths that hurt or are very frightening, but the passion of recognizing the truth brings a sense of integrity and sincerity that is very satisfying. And there is a sense of maturity to it. Then the deeper truth is more of a sense of liberation and fulfillment, not painful. But that's why we need the passionate love for the truth: if we didn't love it enough it would be hard to stay with it.

Do people who study with you share this love, or do they come to share it?

Some come with some of that love and some develop it. It is natural for the human being to love the truth, but we are not always aware of that; it is natural, but it needs to be awakened. It can be awakened and developed. It's important to recognize that the truth we talk of is not intellectual truth but the truth of experience. As we inquire it becomes deeper and deeper until it becomes the depths of existence.

You talk of inquiry, which is a method you use a lot. What is special about it?

It is not any inquiry, but the development of the Socratic method. Socrates started that way of asking questions where he takes the position 'I don't know what is the reality, but I would love to find out'. The mind has to be completely open. No position. In the scientific sense you don't know what you will find out, but you need to find out as clearly as possible.

I have developed it so it has many parts. At the beginning is the openness of not knowing, and second the passion of love to know. It has to be heartfelt. The third thing is a playful curiosity. Someone might love the truth but they might not be

curious, so nothing will happen. The curiosity brings the playfulness and the experimental attitude. The fourth thing needs to be a steadfastness, a determination not to buckle in the face of difficulties. And the other thing is courage and boldness of heart because the truth is painful.

There are many kinds of truth. What would you say is central to the kind of truth you talk about?

It is similar to science but it is applied to our personal experience; to our feelings, our actions, our emotions, our dreams. It is very intimate and personal.

For example, if I feel myself sad, first I need to be aware of sad, then what am I sad about? After that I keep answering the question until at some point I recognize that I am missing something or have lost something and that will reveal some kind of emptiness. The emptiness will show that we are sad or hurt or angry because there is something that we intuitively feel we should be experiencing that we are not experiencing, and usually it is a sense of value or love or acceptance or strength. We continue to explore this emptiness instead of trying to fill it. We embrace it. And as we explore the emptiness, the emptiness begins to reveal why those qualities are missing, some kind of historical event that led us to lose those qualities: perhaps in childhood we were treated in a way that hurt our self esteem. When the emptiness reveals the original wound and we feel it with our heart fully, the wound brings up the actual quality that was lost. If what we lost was a sense of self esteem or value, what will arise is a kind of nectar of the heart. We feel it as a sense of intrinsic value. You have to go through the emptiness and the wound that will lead to what was lost and you begin to recognize the quality of your being. This is not only the sense of sweetness but also a sense of presence, the quality of being, so the inquiry continues with this quality itself.

The purpose is to discover the truth of what we are. We are not trying to repair the damage; we are following the longing of the heart to know the truth of reality. Not to get better. The wound is part of the teaching – the qualities of our being get hurt or wounded in early childhood because they were not appreciated or seen or supported, so we cannot keep in contact with these experiences of our being.

You have said in the past 'The personality mimics the soul'. Is this relevant here?

In some sense the personality is a collapse of the soul. We develop a sense of self which is based on our history and our mind and our beliefs while the soul is experiencing our self as a sense of presence, a presence of the now, the reality of the moment.

I use the word 'soul' in the way it was used in the ancient Western tradition: the totality of the individual, the totality of the inner individual – our mind, our emotions, our spiritual nature, our will. That was Socrates' definition. In the past few hundred years we stopped using the word soul and started using the self. Then the soul is the spiritual part. That is not the original meaning. If you recognize what soul is, you can

sense that personality is the collapsed soul. It is still the soul but the soul doesn't recognize itself. Soul is individual consciousness.

For many people soul is the eternal part.

Yes, but people think of it as a disembodied spirit. I am saying it is the eternal part but it is our experience right now.

What about true nature or essence? Is that different from soul?

The soul can be formed by our mind or our history or it can experience itself directly in the moment. When it experiences itself it is usually through the mind and through the personal history – as the self or the personality, emotions and feelings and identity and desire. However if the soul is able to feel itself immediately, to experience itself as a medium of awareness, a field of awareness, then this awareness, this pure presence, is what I call true nature. Everything has true nature. I use the word essence to mean the true nature of the soul.

What is the most important feature of our evolution? How would you judge whether a student or anyone you know has evolved?

The evolution means the person is experiencing the true nature and they are expressing it in their lives. True nature is not just pure awareness. It is also the source of clarity, of love, of passion, of humility, maturity, responsibility, intelligence. To live it is to express those qualities.

What about people who have these qualities but are not on the spiritual path?

To be evolved I also need to know my true nature. To act well in the world is one of the stages of the evolution of the soul.

How about a person who is aware of soul and behaves badly – what does that tell you?

Just because we know our true nature, it doesn't mean we have worked out all of our unconscious motivations. That's why the work has to be from both sides: working with the psychological and unconscious motivations, and at the same time connecting with the spiritual nature.

Connected to what you are saying about the split between the personality and the soul, many spiritual teachers do not help people to deal with their emotional being.

That is the traditional Eastern tradition. That is why I integrate psychology. Neither is complete without the other. That is what is new. The method we use integrates the two in a very organic way.

How do you get your insights? What is the process? Often spiritual teachers teach a process which is not what they use.

I teach the process which I use, the inquiry. That is how I get the insights. It started for me with the love for truth. I just want to know what is going on. I don't care about the results. This opens up a whole new way of working. The true love for the truth is selfless. It doesn't want anything. Like when you truly love somebody you are not wanting to get anything from it.

Speaking of love, does this make it difficult to live with you?

It depends. I've been married for 25 years. My wife says she likes it. But it is true that I am a stickler for the truth – in myself, but also in the other. I like to know who the other really is.

You have to choose your partners well!

I also choose my students well: those who really want to know the truth.

What role do you see your students playing in the world, and what role does your work have in the general transformation of culture and consciousness. What is the larger service?

There are two levels. The first level, the basic level, by helping people open up, wake up to their true nature, they become sources of clarity, love and good will that is genuine. And that is contagious. The other level is that as the person wakes up to their true nature, they take responsibility for their lives, they begin to see what is their role in society, what is their contribution, and then they become clear and dedicated to making their contribution. They recognize they have a destiny.

Does everyone have a destiny?

Everybody has a destiny. True nature, the nature of our soul, which is the nature of the universe, and of intelligence, has its own evolutionary force, and it manifests through individuals. The clearer we are, the more awake we are to this true nature, the more the true nature expresses itself directly, clearly and without distortion. True nature expresses with each individual and we see that as our destiny.

Some people find their destiny is to become healers; some find their destiny turns out to do with conflict resolution; some find their destiny is to be authentic and human in the business community. It changes. Everyone is different. True nature is preparing them for a job to do.

Let me use myself as an example. When I was younger I was serving in a thousand different ways: I started centers I did therapy, I taught, I was an important force in people's lives. I was also in many ways unhappy and undeveloped in myself. So my soul directed me in these directions where I did a lot of good, but I was still quite unhappy. Now that I've let go of a lot of that, I'm going more into the nature of my true self but in an external sense I

do less for the world. What is this subtle contribution that we make by being who we are?

The more we are ourselves, the good we do has a different effect, a more subtle effect. My history – I was a physicist and a mathematician and I thought I would end up teaching in the university. As it turns out it was all to train my mind for my destiny as a teacher. We have to look at it from the point of view of true nature. True nature has its own love, its own intelligence and its own will to bring into the world its own qualities – freedom, authenticity, love, truth. As we learn about ourselves, we allow true nature to manifest this and we help others to manifest true nature too. When we come from true nature we find out what is true help. What Buddha said in the Diamond Sutra was that you can help as many people as there is sand on the beach but that doesn't compare to helping one person to find the truth.

Is there something else we are doing by being more true that is not about helping individuals?

By bringing out our true potential we help bring out the potential of humanity and the potential of the earth. Humanity needs to mature to be full human beings.

If I manifest my true nature and never speak to anyone again, will I still make that contribution?

You will, but you will do more by working with people, not sitting on a mountain.

Do you think that when you teach, it is the content or your presence which is most important?

Presence is most important, but the content is done in such a way as to communicate the presence. The content will help the person deal with their mind, how to relate to their experience. I am teaching them how to inquire, how to be themselves. The presence gives them a taste but the taste does not eliminate the conditioning.

What do you mean by the mind? Many people have said we should let go of the mind.

By mind, I mean what people are aware of. The mind as we know it, just like our personality, is the limitation, the collapse of the soul. So inquiry will open up the real mind.

The mind is part of what you are. You can't get rid of it. In my latest book, I go into detail about relating our normal mind with the spiritual ground and show how they are really part of the same thing. This is an idea we used to have in the West. It was Plato's approach.

Some people say that love and compassion is everything. You put truth first. Does the love come naturally?

As I recognize my true nature as light, it has many qualities and these qualities include love and compassion. This is true for everyone. If true nature is not loving and compassionate, it is not true nature. And it must be in a selfless way. The soul is experiencing our self as a presence of the now, the reality of the moment

Was there a turning point when your destiny revealed itself?

There were many turning points, different junctions, but one of the most significant ones was recognition of true nature, that pure presence. I already had experienced true nature, but there came a time when I was in an inquiry and working with the question of duality and there was a gap between me and true nature and I finally recognized that that gap was only in the mind and it was not real. That is when true nature manifested as myself, as presence and timeless. That was the most important moment. It was a realization of being the true nature and the true nature recognizing itself.

Do you experience this all the time?

Yes. I experience true nature all the time. I feel some of the emotional things – they come and go, they decrease in intensity and frequency and the sense of presence becomes more and more dominant. It is always there – that is what it means to be realized.

How is that different from being enlightened?

Enlightened is not only realizing the presence but being totally free of the collapsed mind so that there are no more reactions. That is much rarer. I have never met anyone like that – the closest person is the Dalai Llama, but he is not completely enlightened. There are different degrees of realization. One can be oneself but there can be limitations. With no limitations at all, we are enlightened. I am not free from all limitations.

Can you think of one last thing you would like to say to me?

When we talk about the truth, it is not some universal disembodied truth. It is very personal, very intimate. When we find our own personal truth, there is an intimacy in it. We have to feel personally intimate with this truth for it to be real and to work. It is not an abstract and impersonal kind of inquiry. Everything I say, I feel personally in my heart. My mind learns it after the fact.

Inquire into your love of truth.

Contemplate your heart to see whether you feel love for truth.

If you do, then what do you find limiting it?

And, if you do not, then what is in the way of this love, since it is natural for the human heart to love truth?

It is important that you answer these questions for yourself with how you feel, and not what you think. It is an inquiry into your love of truth.

Give yourself 15 minutes to sit with and reflect on these questions and any associated insights that arise. You can do this either verbally or through journaling, alone or with fellow explorers. If you do it with others, it is important that they just listen to you in silence, simply supporting you by being present.

Dina Glouberman is an author, lecturer and co-founder/director of Skyras holistic holidays.