

Interview: At the cutting edge of using psychological concepts in soul work is spiritual teacher Hameed Ali

By Pythia Peay

It's a conflict as old as the religious instinct itself: whether to fully engage in the exhilarating turmoil of everyday life or seek out a more transcendent reality? To pursue individual self-fulfillment or sublimate one's personal needs in service to the divine? In its most dramatic form, this tension between the secular and the spiritual has played itself out between those who have chosen an ascetic path as monks or sannyasins and those who have decided upon a more worldly way of life—marrying, raising children, enjoying the sensual dimensions of earthly experience.

With the advent of psychology, this tension has assumed a new twist: what to do with the ego. Almost all mystical traditions see the ego as an obstacle to unfoldment. Selflessness and surrender are thought to be the keys to a genuine spiritual life. In contrast, modern-day psychology views a strongly defined sense of identity as the linchpin of human development. For those individuals with a foot on both paths, the contrast between the psychological and spiritual perceptions of the individual "I" can sometimes prove troubling.

Hameed Ali, a spiritual teacher living in Berkeley, California, has devoted his life's work to healing the schism between these opposing perspectives. In one of his many books, *The Pearl Beyond Price: Integration of Personality into Being*, Ali, who writes under the pen name A.H. Almaas, addresses the longstanding friction between what he calls "the man of the world and the man of spirit." The central difference between these two views, he writes, is that the first considers the separate personal self to be the center of life... while the latter makes a higher reality to be the center of life, and believes that the personal life must be subordinated in relationship to such a higher reality." Yet, Ali wondered, if "the ultimate goal of the human being is the universal impersonal truths of Spirit, why is it that all humans end up with an ego, with a self and a personality? Can it be just a... colossal mistake?"

Concluding that the personal self could not be some kind of aberration, Ali delved more deeply into the nature of the ego, seeking to understand it in a way that gave it meaning without contradicting timeless spiritual perspectives. Drawing upon the insights of developmental psychology, a field that includes object relations and self, depth, and ego psychologies, he studied how the ego develops during early childhood. Recognizing that this knowledge about the origins of human individuality had never before existed until this century, he saw it as a kind of missing link in spiritual unfoldment. At the same time, because psychology omitted the transcendent dimension of experience, it could take a person only as far as the limits of individual development, but no farther. Thus like the founder of analytical psychology, Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung; the founder of psychosynthesis, Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli; and other transpersonal theorists, Ali sought to bring together the spiritual and the psychological in one unified discipline. He has perhaps succeeded in this task in a more practical way than those who preceded him. As the noted transpersonal writer and thinker Ken Wilber writes in *Eye of Spirit*, Ali's unique method, known as "The Diamond Approach," combines "some of the best of modern Western psychology with ancient (and spiritual) wisdom ... uniting ... spiritual and psychological into a coherent and effective form of inner work."

What sets Ali's Diamond Approach apart from that of other transpersonal theorists? For one thing, his orientation is that of a spiritual teacher not a psychotherapist. Thus work on one's personality is used as a way to access spiritual states of consciousness, much in the same way as prayer or meditation. Second, he is one of the first spiritual teachers to have ever formally worked on transference—the transferring of childhood emotions onto present-day relationships—with his students.

But Ali's most significant contribution to both spiritual and psychological thought is the way in which he has located the ego along the spectrum of spiritual development. Rather than accept the traditional religious view that the ego is a falsehood that must die for transformation to occur, or the psychological concept that ego development is a complete process on its own, or the more recent transpersonal view that the ego must be developed prior to its transcendence—as in the aphorism made popular by psychologist and longtime Buddhist meditator Jack Engler: "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody." Ali envisions the ego as a pale imitation of a more glorious reality, capable of manifesting a far richer consciousness in everyday life than had been thought possible.

Spiritual work is not a matter of repairing certain life situations. It has to do with repairing our disconnection from spirit.

Ali discovered that just as psychotherapy helps people see where they may be blocked in achieving greater intimacy, so, too, can psychological techniques highlight areas where a person's ego defenses obstruct or distort their relationship to the divine. Thus in the Diamond Approach, understanding one's psychological make-up is an integral step toward spiritual unfoldment. This occurs through a process of "inquiry" into the structure of one's personality. By questioning how one feels in the present moment and then accepting one's emotions, a person locates those areas where they feel a sense of lack, or what Ali calls "holes." It is through these holes, or empty spaces, that the transpersonal dimension of a quality arises. For instance, a certain life situation might trigger feelings of powerlessness. By going deeply into that painful feeling rather than resisting it, a true sense of empowerment might begin to emerge. "Through your hurt, you will find the compassion to tolerate the hurt and go deeper," writes John Davis in his new book, *The Diamond Approach: An Introduction to the Teachings of A.H. Almaas*, and through "your shame, you will come to the sense of self-worth that allows you to open more."

In the Diamond Approach, this process of inquiry is seen as a kind of metabolism. By deeply understanding the nature of the ego—its defenses, attachments, and identifications that developed as a response to childhood conditions—it becomes, Davis writes, "integrated ... into the self." One "digests" those parts of the self that had been previously split off or misunderstood. In doing so, one matures into the fullness of the authentic self what Ali terms the "Pearl," or one's "true Essential personality." Yet this self is neither "spiritual" nor "worldly," but a synthesis of both. The result is a human being whose individuality is rooted in a broader eternal reality, rather than conditioned patterns of behavior, and who is able to manifest in everyday life a range of divine qualities such as compassion, integrity, or harmony. This developmental process, Ali explains, could be called "God becoming a human person, an individual," instead of a human being seeking to become less individual and more impersonally transcendent.

Although the core of Ali's Diamond Approach revolves around psychological inquiry, his path to expanded consciousness draws upon Buddhism, Sufism, the enneagram, and body work, among other methods. His teachings as they exist today, he said during the course of our interview, arose directly out of his own spiritual odyssey. As he explains, "It is important to understand that I did not develop my work by organizing it at the beginning, looking at the various theories and integrating them. It was a living and organic process of development that was guided by spirit."

Born in Kuwait and raised in a large Muslim family, Ali came to California in 1963 to study physics. His passion to decode the mysteries of reality eventually led him to study with the Chilean psychiatrist Claudia Naranjo, a pioneer in developing the enneagram. In addition, Ali studied with various Buddhist and Gurdjieffian Sufi teachers. Still, he does not identify himself with any specific religious or spiritual tradition.

Ali's Diamond Approach, also known as Diamond Heart Work, is taught in group and individual settings by certified teachers within the Ridhwan (an Arabic term that means "the manifestation of contentment in the complete human being") Foundation. According to Executive Director Janel Ensler, Ali first established the Ridhwan Foundation in 1983, then formed the Diamond Heart and Training Institute (DHAT), the seminary/educational arm of the Ridhwan Foundation, in 1992. The teacher training, Ensler says, "is a whole other level of commitment. We do not certify teachers who have not already been students of the Diamond Approach for quite some time." Training lasts for approximately seven to eight years; the exact nature of this training is kept private in order, Ensler says, "to discourage premature interest" in it. Currently, approximately 1,500 students are directly or indirectly involved with the Diamond Approach. The Ridhwan Foundation has centers in Berkeley, California, and Boulder, Colorado, with outlying groups in Seattle/Vancouver, Montana, Hawaii, Boston, New York, Arizona, and Michigan, as well as Europe and Australia.

By all accounts, Ali, who is married and has a daughter, is a kind, gentle teacher, who shuns the public eye and whose abiding commitment is to the search for truth. Sometimes called a "teacher of teachers," Ali has over the years become a trusted guide to Buddhist and Sufi meditation teachers, as well as to a growing number of psychotherapists and spiritual students. Indeed, Ali's reputation as a leading figure at the forefront of the psychospiritual movement is what sparked Common Boundary's interest to learn more about his quest to understand one of life's enduring mysteries: the nature and purpose of the human ego.

Common Boundary: I want to begin by asking you about the conflict between "the man of the spirit" and "the man of the world." Does resolving this conflict form the basis for much of your work?

Hameed Ali: Definitely. To integrate the spiritual life with normal life is a central principle of the Diamond Heart work. Frequently, spirituality is seen as something set apart from life. But human beings have the potential to live a

life of fullness, richness, and freedom, and that happens when the spiritual dimension is brought into our everyday life.

CB: In the past have spiritual traditions led us away from life?

HA: Not uniformly, but there is that tendency, and for good reason! It's easy to be trapped by everyday concerns and forget the spiritual dimension. Many teachings push life concerns away in order to be able to focus on the spiritual because life is seen as some kind of a seduction and it can function that way. That is why bringing the two together is not easy.

CB: You also say that ego development and spiritual enlightenment are not separate but part of the same process. Is this one of the ways that you work to make spiritual transformation part of real life?

HA: It's more like I see human life as development. Personal consciousness, what I call the soul, evolves and matures. Some stages have to do with the development of the ego. It's not like something is wrong; ego development is just one of the natural stages necessary for spiritual realization to occur in further stages. During childhood, for example, our consciousness gets structured and organized in a certain way. A sense of self develops, an identity that people call the „ego," though it can also be described as self-centeredness. But in that process we learn how to live a physical life; our minds and a discriminating awareness develop, as well. This discriminating awareness needs to develop if we are going to have true spiritual realization and it develops partly through ego development. It's all part of the same process.

CB: So you are saying that ego development isn't just necessary to live in the world, but that it plays a central role in our spiritual development as well.

HA: Yes. When we say "spiritual" it usually means that we are more explicitly aware of the spiritual dimension, but that doesn't mean that previous stages are not in the service of that spiritual dimension. At the same time, there is always the possibility of arrested development, of getting stuck in a certain stage. Many people go through ego development but don't go much beyond it. They think that's it. When that happens we live an ego life. It's not a great thing, not because it is bad but because we have the potential to develop beyond the ego. We're bound to suffer if we get stuck in arrested development because our potential is not fulfilled.

CB: How do you go beyond the ego?

HA: By understanding it and metabolizing it. The ego is not something on its own. It's a perceptual process that happens in our mind and in our consciousness through which we develop a sense of self; we individuate and develop a personal identity in the world. By understanding that process, we can take it to the next step, which is to integrate and metabolize those structures and concepts into our spiritual nature. This leads to the development of a certain quality of the spiritual nature that has to do with being in the world, what I call "the pearl beyond price."

CB: Is that what you refer to as "Personal Essence?"

HA: Right. The ego is in the direction of the pearl beyond price, but it is still at a mental level. It hasn't filled out yet with inner substance and richness; it's empty. But a person who has that "pearl beyond price" is filled with spiritual richness.

CB: I'm still not sure I understand how one goes about metabolizing the ego.

HA: Because experience is patterned by our ego, we don't experience things directly or purely. Our perception has many veils and patterns to it, and our actions and choices are all conditioned by our history. By understanding our actions and feelings-by recognizing what a certain situation is really about, what makes it that way, or what the truth is that is underlying it-we begin to see the mental nature of these obstructions and how they developed in early childhood.

CB: Is this where you draw on the insights of object relations and developmental psychology?

HA: Yes, because both object relations and developmental psychology offer good theories as to how the ego develops. I use a large part of that knowledge in understanding our personal experience of the present moment.

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And when you feel that in your center, you immediately feel different from the way you did before.

CB: Can you give me a specific example of how a person might go beyond the obstructions of the ego using your method?

HA: One example might be a person who always has relationship problems. By exploring the nature of their difficulties with intimacy, they might recall early childhood experiences. For instance, people might remember that at certain times as children they were so intimate with their mother or another family member that they did not have a separate identity; they were consumed or undifferentiated. This is a common thing, but people become scared because it means losing their separateness. Yet as they continue to explore the original condition of being undifferentiated, it might take them to a state in which they realize that the childhood experience was sometimes good. There was some genuineness to it, some authenticity, that could lead them to the quality in their original nature that has to do with unity and oneness.

CB: So do you do this in personal sessions, like a psychotherapist?

HA: Not exactly. We do therapy in the sense that we explore the present experience. As we explore, we don't intentionally go into childhood. But exploring present experiences often reveals childhood patterns; it's in the experience itself. But there are two ways in which we depart from psychotherapy and go in a different direction. One is that we don't look at all the conflictual situations, we just try to understand our experience, whether positive or negative. While psychotherapy deals with the conflicts in order to ameliorate them, the direction of Diamond thought is to understand any experience by recognizing what the truth is about it-not trying to correct it, just trying to understand it.

The second way in which we differ from psychotherapy is that at a certain juncture we begin to see the spiritual component of the situation. For instance, the person who is afraid of intimacy is, at some deep level, resisting a positive spiritual quality, such as unity. So the question of intimacy and relationships goes much deeper than the personal level. If you seek to understand and to allow the experience to manifest the truth, then these things just emerge because the spiritual and psychological are truly connected.

CB: It's fascinating the way you see how a person's psychological problems are often the negative reflection of a more positive quality. How does this work with will, one of the qualities that you mention as being central to both everyday life and the spiritual path?

HA: A conflict around will, for instance, might manifest in everyday life as a lack of confidence or an inability to persevere. It might also appear as too much will; a person may be too hard or harsh. Exploring this conflict more deeply will reveal a disconnection, a spiritual gap or abyss, from true will. Through understanding and experiencing this abyss, the spiritual quality of will is able to manifest itself.

CB: The way that you describe disconnection from true will as an "abyss" or a "gap" brings to mind the way that, in your work, you use the term "hole." Through your method of inquiry, students experientially feel a gap or hole in their body. Could you explain this technique further.?

HA: When we inquire into our experience in order to understand it, it has to be our present experience, what we are feeling in the moment. Present experience is an embodied experience, related to our body, mind, and emotions. When we come upon a dimension of our experience that has to do with disconnection from our true nature, we experience that disconnection as a kind of emptiness, a hole.

Take will, for instance. The center of the will is in the solar plexus. So when a person begins to be aware that they don't have will, they feel an emptiness, a hole, in the solar plexus. As a person stays with that feeling in order to understand it, the hole opens up and expands. Gradually some understanding of why we are disconnected in that area may begin to emerge. For example, a man may have felt castrated by his father or a woman may have had a chauvinistic father. As the source of a person's disconnection from true will is revealed and the hole is fully experienced, then something begins to appear there, a presence like a full silver moon appears and fills the solar plexus. The quality of authentic will begins to emerge, and the person feels power and confidence.

Spirit is a presence, like the full moon-solid, full, and round. And when you feel that in your center, you immediately feel different from the way you did before.

CB: Throughout your work, you describe what seem like different layers of consciousness, terms such as "Being," "Essence," and "Personal Essence. "

HA: I use "Being" and "Essence" and "Spirit" interchangeably, yet with a slightly different emphasis. When I use the word "Being" I mean the spiritual nature of everything. When I say "Essence," I am talking about the spiritual nature of the person, which is the same thing as Being but as it is focused within a person. Being or Essence or Spirit could be described as a multidimensional aliveness that also has a dimension of emptiness and awareness and can manifest itself as qualities such as love, compassion, clarity, and strength. I call these the Essential Qualities; they are ways that Being or Essence differentiates itself through our particular experience in life. These Essential Qualities are necessary for integrating a personal life with the spirit.

CB: This emphasis on the immanent dimension of the divine as it manifests in creation through the various qualities would seem to distinguish your school from Budd-his and Hinduism, which emphasize the more impersonal, otherworldly aspects of the divine.

HA: If you look at the Far Eastern traditions, especially as they came through India, there is the idea that liberation is freedom from life and death. So while these traditions include the personal aspect, they tend more to see liberation in terms of leaving life; it's not liberation in life.

CB: You also write about the Sufi and Christian traditions as being more in line with what you're teaching. Why is that?

HA: Sufism is part of the Western tradition because it has its roots in Neo-Platonism. Western tradition includes Judaism, Christianity, and the Islamic tradition. They all originated in the same place and tend to emphasize life in the present, life here and now. It's the opposite view from that of the Eastern traditions.

CB: The way that you describe using psychological inquiry to access altered states of consciousness differs from the usual means of prayer or meditation.

HA: Yes, it is very different. That is why I think of it as a Western method, as a way of understanding and inquiry. Socrates ' for instance, who was a central figure in the development of the Western tradition, basically asked questions. That's what we do, we ask questions.

CB: So you don't pray or have meditations as part of your practice?

HA: We do have meditations at different junctions of our work. We do some sitting meditations, prayers, chanting, and visualizations, but we see those as supports to the principal practice, which is the inquiry into experiences. Our visualizations and prayers are drawn from different traditions, such as Buddhism and Sufism.

CB: One of the things that I find most intriguing is that while you work with students as a spiritual teacher, you also work with the issue of transference.

HA: Yes, I use transference similarly to the way it is used in psychotherapy. Our main message is inquiry into experience. When there is teacher-student bonding, transference and counter transference issues are bound to arise. They are part of the truth of the situation. As we enter into a deeper understanding of the situation, those constructs become useful. Still, we don't focus on transference as much as psychoanalysis does.

CB: I'm sure you're aware that there have been many crises and scandals in this country in spiritual organizations because of sexual misconduct on the part of teachers. Do you feel that working with issues of transference will help to prevent that kind of abuse?

HA: Well, yes, partly. But sexual misconduct happens in psychotherapy too, probably even more than in spiritual situations! So working with transference does not necessarily help with that. However, we do have ethical guidelines and educate our teachers about issues of transference.

CB: Still, do you not feel that a spiritual teacher working on issues of transference and countertransference with his students is setting a precedence within the spiritual traditions?

HA: Oh yes. I think it would be great if spiritual teachers in general would recognize the power of transference and countertransference because it is very useful for clarifying the teacher-student relationship. As you know, the relationship between teacher and student needs to be open and clear for there to be true transmission.

CB: Do you see psychology as an historic addition to the spiritual path?

Frequently, spirituality is seen as something set apart from life. But human beings have the potential to live a life of fullness, richness, and freedom. That happens when the spiritual dimension is brought into our everyday life.

HA: That's a good way of looking at it. I think of psychological knowledge as a necessary development within the Western spiritual current. Yet right now psychology is separate from the spiritual tradition; they are two fields. As time passes and we see their connection, however, the spiritual traditions will have new knowledge of psychology that they didn't have before. It will be very enriching.

CB: Do you feel that other traditions are beginning to open up to the psychological dimension of spiritual unfoldment?

HA: Some teachers are more open than others. It's a tricky situation, though, with many pitfalls because you cannot just take psychotherapy and try to add it to the spiritual. Many spiritual teachers and traditions are cautious about therapy because therapy can focus people on the self in such a way that it excludes their spirit. By attempting to solve problems mentally instead of spiritually, psychotherapy can become a deviation from the spiritual path. I think it's important to have a balance, to have the spiritual qualities established and then do the psychological as an assistance.

CB: By having the spiritual solidly established, do you mean spiritual practices and meditation techniques?

HA: That's part of it. But I mean the teaching itself, the teacher, and a spiritual orientation.

CB: As spirituality and psychology seem to be drawing closer together, a discussion has arisen around the necessity for ethical guidelines drawing certain boundaries between the two fields. For instance, some have wondered whether spiritual teachers should engage in therapy with their clients, or whether psychotherapists should meditate or pray with their clients. What are your feelings on this topic?

HA: Our school is about spiritual work, not psychotherapy. We use psychological methods as part of our spiritual work because our orientation is spiritual integration. One way that we make a clear distinction between our work and psychotherapy is that we sometimes recommend psychotherapy to some of our students: for instance, if someone has a pressing emotional problem. Our work is not oriented at solving that right away. Our work is understanding and integrating it into the larger self, and it might not be fast enough for the person who needs immediate healing. So we don't confuse psychotherapy with spiritual work because spiritual work is not a matter of repairing certain life situations. It has to do with repairing our disconnection or alienation from the spirit. Although in time spiritual work would repair a person's life situation, it's a much longer life development.

CB: One area where you offer spiritual insight into a difficult psychological disorder is with regard to narcissism, which you describe as a primary spiritual disorder. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

HA: Most people understand narcissism from the perspective of how it developed in childhood. I look at the basic distortion that causes narcissism, which is a disconnection from one's spiritual nature. When one is disconnected from one's spiritual nature, instead of having a true center, one has a gap within oneself. One's sense of self is unstable. If we're not connected with our true spiritual nature, we don't have an authentic self; we have a false, made-up self. That's exactly what narcissism is: an attempt to support and express a fake self. It's not seeing other people, yet always wanting to be seen. Why is that? Because a person is not sure of his or her separate self. Because they don't have that inner security, they're always self-focused.

CB: As we go forward into the next millennium, how will spirituality differ from the way it has been understood in the past?

HA: I think there are several trends. One is to not separate spirituality from daily life; another is that psychological knowledge will be integrated more and more into spiritual work. And cyberspace will be increasingly used to

disseminate teachings. However, I also think there will undoubtedly be strange developments, both wholesome and not, whose combinations we cannot anticipate yet. These are only intuitions, not knowledge.

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