

The Pearl Beyond Price

By Don Flory

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The human spirit is a many-faceted diamond, according to author and teacher A. H. Almaas. But most psychological and spiritual systems polish only one or two facets of this precious jewel. Drawing on his own introspection and more than a decade of work with hundreds of students, Almaas has developed the Diamond Approach, a technique for self-realization that embraces both modern depth psychology and ancient spiritual traditions in an attempt to address every aspect of the human soul's development.

"In the Diamond Approach, the psychological and the spiritual are so interlinked that they're really indistinguishable," explains Almaas. "It's not like you do psychological work for psychological issues, and spiritual practice to attain spiritual states. The psychological work is the actual practice that brings about the spiritual states."

Almaas looks at spiritual awakening as part of a developmental continuum that begins at birth, includes the various stages of ego formation and deformation, and can continue beyond ego to the highest states of mystical consciousness. His teachings blend esoteric spiritual terminology with the technical language of clinical psychology.

However, Almaas is a clinical investigator as well as a theorist. To understand the unfolding of spirit in human life, he has spent thousands of hours helping people work through the psychological and spiritual issues that arise in daily living. In particular, he has investigated the psychological structures that block our awareness of our deeper nature and the specific spiritual qualities that are needed to transform our personalities so that we may become absorbed in Being.

Although the Diamond Approach uses a wide range of psychological and spiritual tools Almaas--who now lives in Berkeley, California, but was born and raised in a traditional Moslem family in Kuwait-- has not been formally trained in any spiritual tradition or school of psychotherapy. Rather, his insights result from his own passionate inquiry into the nature of things. "From very early on," he says, "I remember wanting to know what is the truth: What is the actual state of affairs? What is reality? What is me? What is happening? What is the world? And I wanted to know it without the influence of everybody else's ideas. I wanted to find out myself."

This passion for knowledge led Almaas to science, because he believed that "science is the most objective thing; it doesn't depend on what you believe or feel." But as he neared completion of his Ph.D. in physics at the University of California at Berkeley, he began to doubt his belief, realizing that "what is called 'objective knowledge' is not that objective, really." This realization "little by little eroded my belief that science would do it. Although I had been very much into it and had been very good at it, it lost all interest for me." Almaas dropped out of school and turned to inner experimentation instead.

"In the beginning, I thought of [my search] psychologically, because that's what I was aware of the psychological content of my mind," Almaas remembers. "But the deeper I got into things psychologically, the more things started happening of a spiritual nature, an Essential nature. When the psychological content gets very deep, it's bound to become spiritual, because that's what's in the depths. So the inquiry became a very personal, heartfelt attempt to know myself, to know the nature of who I am and the nature of reality."

Almaas's internal explorations led him to his understanding of "Essence," the term he uses to distinguish the intrinsic core of our nature from our acquired attributes. According to his model of human development, our Essence gradually becomes encrusted in a structure we call personality or ego, developed to protect it in a world that does not support or even recognize our true nature. As each layer of ego develops, more of our Essential nature is hidden. The process of self-realization or liberation requires that we dismantle our ego, one layer at a time, to recontact our Essential core.

In the Diamond Approach, this classic mystical goal is accomplished using many of the tools and theories of modern Western psychology. Unlike [Ken] Wilber, who sees the personal and transpersonal stages as sequential (at a certain point we finish our psychological work and move on to spiritual issues), Almaas views the personal and transpersonal as entwined all the way to the highest states of consciousness. At the beginning of our

psychospiritual quest, we struggle with the current crises in our lives. As we develop spiritually, we must uproot habits and beliefs acquired at earlier and earlier periods in our development

"More expansion on the Essential level means more regression for the ego," Almaas says. "The ego is only trying to preserve its identity. Every time a structure of the ego is dissolved because a person is going further into Essential realization, the ego tries to look for another one. So it goes to earlier and earlier and earlier structures, looking for a place to put its foot."

The closer we get to our spiritual Essence, the more central to our personality are the issues we must confront; thus, the journey can bring both ecstasy and terror. At our most expanded levels of consciousness, the terrors we must face derive from our earliest experiences with our mothers. Almaas quips that the last thing we see as we dissolve into the Absolute is the breast.

To guide his students on this voyage, Almaas leads them in an inquiry into the nature of their immediate experience. He begins with whatever occupies the student's attention at the moment, which for the beginning student is usually some problem in daily living.

Watching him work, it is easy to see why many regard Almaas as a psychotherapist. He investigates the student's thoughts, images, memories, emotions, breathing, and body sensations and directs the student's attention to resistance, transference, and defenses, just as a therapist might. If body armoring seems to block the inquiry, he uses Reichian techniques to help the student experience and release the block. Typically a session uncovers some unconscious fragment of early childhood experience that has been distorting the student's perception of the current situation.

But after the student seems to have resolved an issue psychologically, the inquiry ceases to look like therapy. Rather than stopping, Almaas continues to ask questions about the student's experience. Gradually, the student's awareness becomes more subtle, until the states that are being described sound very similar to those encountered in deep meditation.

For example, as a student relaxes after apparently finishing her work on an emotional issue, Almaas asks what she is experiencing in her chest. She answers, "Nothing." Almaas's questions about that nothingness--its precise texture, luminosity, and density--help the student recognize that what she is experiencing is not a lack of awareness, but an actual perception of empty space.

As Almaas repeatedly draws the student's attention back to this space and helps her overcome her resistance to looking at it, her experience gradually transforms into a sense of fullness and presence. Almaas's questions help her to experience this fullness as a quality of compassion, one of the many qualities Almaas terms Essential aspects.

According to Almaas's ontological model, a person's Essence can manifest in specific qualities, such as peace, compassion, strength, joy, and will, the qualities he considers most fundamental for a student's progress. (Clarity, brilliance, and love are a few of the many other Essential attributes identifies.) Left unobstructed, our Essence will spontaneously respond to situations in our life with precisely the quality that is needed, enabling us to function effectively. Our ego, on the other hand, often reacts inappropriately to avoid pain and seek pleasure at all costs. Ego has its own "fake" version of the Essential aspects--its 'goody-goody' version of compassion, its macho version of strength, its rigid version of will. By unmasking these forgeries, a person can learn to replace them with Essential qualities instead. Almaas trains his students to distinguish between ego states and Essential states and to recognize which they are in at any given moment.

"For instance, if somebody is getting in touch with the sense of autonomy that comes with the experience of Being--the sense that one's existence is autonomous from one's mind, from one's thoughts--that sense of autonomy may be perceived by the ego as autonomy from other people," Almaas points out. "If a married person is feeling autonomy, they may start wondering if they want to stay married. Or if they have a job, they may wonder if they should leave that job and start their own business. When what they really need to see is that they're autonomous just by being who they are. That's where a teacher can be important. Because if a person doesn't realize that autonomy is an Essential aspect of being, they will interpret it in their accustomed ways."

Students of the Diamond Approach also learn technical psychological theories about how the ego is constructed and how it works, in order to help them go beyond it. "For instance, a person might be working with the issue of narcissism--wanting to be recognized as wonderful and seen as special--and working with all the hurts and anger

that arise because the person doesn't get that kind of feedback about how important they are. In the work I do, we really go into this deeply and understand that need, understand that whole psychological constellation," Almaas explains. "In doing so, we do not just heal these things that happened in childhood, but we recognize that all these needs have to do with a lack of integration of a certain aspect of one's Being, an aspect I call 'true self.' And when that aspect of Being is recognized and experienced, the person experiences a sense of specialness and preciousness that is real and does not need a reflection from outside. So the symptoms appear psychological, but dealing with them leads to the spiritual state of self-realization."

Being able to use Essential capacities instead of ego to function in the world is a requirement for self-realization, according to Almaas. However, the value that Almaas puts in the self and in personal development sets his philosophy apart from most Eastern approaches, which tend to view the self as an illusion to transcend and emphasize only the impersonal aspects of Being.

"Ego is a natural part of one's development--it serves a useful function for a while. The Essence, or the soul, when it first comes to life, is purely spiritual but has no wisdom about the world. It needs to gain wisdom in the world so that Essential Nature can be brought into life here. And the way that happens is by the development of ego," he says. According to Almaas, problems only arise when people identify with their egos and allow ego states to override Essential aspects.

In integrating psychology and spirituality, Almaas sees himself as part of an emerging Western tradition, following in the footsteps of Freud as well as the Buddha.

"In traditional spiritual teachings, there has been some kind of rejection or disdain for psychological work. Many teachers actually say not to do psychological work--it's a waste of time, or a distraction," Almaas says. "A deeper understanding is that spiritual work includes psychology. It is about understanding the mind. But a person has to have the experience to really know what that means."

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