

Excerpt from: **What Really Matters**
by Tony Schwartz

Ali grew convinced that because the ego or personality is so incredibly entrenched—because people's unconscious fears and conflicts so stand in their way—meditative practices are rarely sufficient as a route to recovering one's true nature in everyday life. Many people do a great deal of meditation, he found—only to remain stuck in their personalities, and unable to let go of their fixations. "I look at the interplay between the psychological and the spiritual, the personal and the transcendental," Ali told me. "The way we get to our essential nature is not primarily through spiritual exercises but through psychological work to penetrate parts of the personality that are connected to underlying essential aspects of ourselves. Psychological inquiry leads to spiritual realization. Meditation supports this inquiry and sharpens it, but the psychological work is inseparable from the spiritual practice. This makes my work particularly Western."

To do his work, Ali employs a wide variety of techniques in addition to the Enneagram, ranging from breathing practices aimed at loosening the defenses, to more intellectual inquiry into the nature of one's conflicts, conducted in small groups.

Cultivating the inner observer and developing the capacity for focused attention, Ali found, were valuable less as a way to transcend the personality than as a means of exploring more deeply the nature of one's fixed beliefs, habitual behaviors, and areas of resistance. "The effectiveness of the [meditative] schools, has been limited by a lack of knowledge of the specific unconscious barriers which prevent us from experiencing the corresponding essential states which make up our true nature," he has written. "The effectiveness of psychotherapy has been limited by its ignorance of essential states, so that resolutions occur on the levels of ego and emotions, which are not the level on which we are ultimately satisfied."

Ali was nearing fifty when we met for the first time toward the end of my travels. I had been drawn to his theories and practices by reading his books, which he writes under the pen name A. H. Almaas. They describe an approach to the complete life that I found as broad, clear-headed, and practical as any I've come across. We spoke at length by phone several times before I finally went to visit him at his sprawling pink Mediterranean home high up in the hills of Berkeley. Soft-spoken, direct, and unaffected in his manner, he put me immediately at ease. I'd found him youthful looking in the videotapes I'd seen of his talks, but he'd just grown a gray-flecked beard that made him look some-what older. Sure enough, the beard's purpose, he told me with a smile, was to make him feel more like the grandfather he was about to become. I was drawn most to his eyes. From the moment I walked in, I saw in them a lively alertness and a focused intelligence but also a certain twinkle—a sense of lightness and fun. He struck me as a reserved and serious man but not self-serious. We met in a large room that he uses for his work. It contains bench-style seating along the walls for group meetings, and a large open area in the middle with mats where he can do body-oriented work with individual students. Hanging on the walls were photographs of the eclectic thinkers who have influenced his work—among them Sigmund Freud, the Dalai Lama, Gurdjieff, the mystic Ramana Maharishi, and the Zen master Suzuki Roshi.

Born in Kuwait, Ali grew up in a middle class Muslim household, the oldest of eight children. His father was a successful businessman, his mother was a homemaker, and he remembers his childhood more for its nurturing qualities than for its deprivations. "I grew up in a traditional culture where family was important, respect for one's fellow human beings was valued, and materialism hadn't yet arrived," Ali told me. "I was also fortunate that I had parents who truly wanted me as a child and gave me a great deal. Even so, I developed my own personality fixations. The way I understand it, developing an ego structure, a personality, is a necessary part of the development of the human soul. It's not abnormal. The problem is that most of us get stuck in this ego stage. It's a form of arrested development."

One of the most powerful shaping events in Ali's life occurred when he was eighteen months old and contracted polio. No vaccination had yet been invented, and he was left with one leg paralyzed and

virtually useless. Today, he uses a single crutch to get around. "At the beginning, I had a lot of difficulty with the disability, the limitations it caused, and its effect on my self-esteem," Ali told me. "I had to struggle with that a lot in the psychological work I did, but at some point, it became an asset. Because I couldn't be that active in the world, I became active inside. Also, because I walk with a crutch, my body is not symmetrical, and that affected my physical tension patterns, what Reich called character armor. Most people get adjusted to the tension and holding patterns in their bodies and don't notice them after a while. But I always had a little discomfort and tension in my body, and I learned to work with it to inquire into what it was about."

Ali arrived in California in 1963 to study physics at Berkeley, the same path that Elmer Green had once taken, and for many of the same reasons. "I was interested in knowing 'What is reality?' and 'What is truth?' " Ali told me. "At the time, I thought physics was the best way to study these questions. It wasn't until graduate school that I realized the reality I was learning about in physics wasn't exactly the one I was after. It was called 'objective reality,' but I could see that it wasn't really objective." With the human potential movement beginning to take shape around him, Ali started attending workshops at Esalen in various disciplines. Shy, somewhat withdrawn, and very much centered in his mind, he soon realized that he was disconnected from his body and his emotions. "I began to study bioenergetics, which had grown out of Alexander Lowe's work with Wilhelm Reich," he explained. "It was very powerful for me to work at letting my physical armor down, opening to my body. In the process, I began to feel my own emotions more deeply and to express them in a freer way." Awakened to this deeper experience of himself, Ali was inspired to keep digging.

The classes that Claudio Naranjo offered when he returned from his Arica training in 1972 were a blend of bodywork, Gestalt therapy, meditative practices, and above all, the Enneagram. For Ali, the Enneagram became a vehicle through which to explore intensively his childhood experience and how it had shaped his personality. He quickly discovered that he was a Five-the most self-contained, cerebral, and emotionally withdrawn of the Enneagram types, the type most drawn to intellectual models and systems that explain human behavior. Typically, the five-fixation emerges in response to a sense of being abandoned by one's caretakers in childhood-plainly not Ali's experience-or from being overly intruded upon. This was certainly plausible, given the size of his family. Fives, in turn, become fearful of emotional demands and respond by cultivating detachment and privacy in their lives. Perhaps fittingly, Ali wasn't inclined to talk with me in any detail about how precisely these defensive patterns developed. Nonetheless, between bodywork, Gestalt, and the Enneagram, he moved very directly against his central fixation. "I spent two or three years doing this work in Navajo's group," he told me, "and it was very extensive and deep."

Ali went on to work with a variety of other Eastern and Western teachers. He studied meditation with Tarthun Tulku Rinpoche, a renowned Buddhist teacher, and did a subtle form of breath-work with a Reichian therapist named Phillip Curcuruto. He also worked with Henry Forman, who blended Freudian psychoanalytic exploration with Gurdjieffian techniques. During this period, Ali began to have experiences that none of his teachers seemed to fully appreciate but that he himself eventually recognized as the spontaneous arising of essence. "They would happen when I was meditating or walking or sometimes even when I was relaxing by watching TV," Ali told me. "What came to me full force, was the recognition that this was me, my true nature-a felt experience beyond words. It became clear to me that my teachers weren't familiar with what I was experiencing. Over time, this apprehension of essence-of being fully myself, a state that was finally beyond words-became more and more established, more and more permanent."

Ali didn't experience essence as a broad transcendence or a sudden enlightenment. Rather, he found that there are many individual qualities of essence-among them love, strength, will, joy, understanding, compassion, awareness, clarity, truth, value, pleasure, and consciousness. Sufism, he concluded, had the clearest and most precise understanding about the nature of these qualities and their application to everyday life. The Sufis describe the aspects of essence through a system called the *lataif*, which refers to five centers of perception, each associated with a specific physical location in the body and a different

color. Yellow, in the heart, is associated with essential joy and delight; red, on the right side of the body, with strength and vitality; silver, in the solar plexus, with will; black, in the forehead, with clarity and objective understanding; green, in the chest, with compassion and loving kindness.

Ali theorized that these interconnected qualities of essence represent the components of a complete life. "It is as if they are different organs of the same organism," Ali has written. "They are all necessary, and the being is incomplete without any of them." At the same time, Ali concluded that the personality-and the mind-are necessary components of the mature development of essence. "One of the purposes of developing an ego," he told me, "is that it makes possible the capacity for self-reflection. Infants don't have that, and without self-reflection there can be no passing on of knowledge nor any evolution of consciousness. A person needs to be able to reflect to understand and value his experience. Still, it is a double-edged sword. Self-reflection can also separate a person from his true nature. We need this capacity in order to grow, but it often gets misused."

A central breakthrough for Ali was his realization that it isn't necessary to seek essence all at once. "Most spiritual disciplines talk about our lack of true nature or essence in a general way," he told me. "In our approach, we talk not about an overall lack but about very specific ones. We work with the idea that each essential aspect-love or peace or will or strength--is blocked by a certain part of our personality. Right away people have something that they can relate to. Doing some psychological piece of work understanding and penetrating a particular aspect of the personality leads directly to experiencing essence in some form. This, in turn, transforms some part of the personality. The person who is shy stops being scared. The one who is angry becomes compassionate. It's a very interconnected process." In the course of his own work, Ali also saw that before it is possible to experience the true self, it is first necessary to get in touch with one's feelings. "Many people do not even experience their emotions, and the ones who can usually don't experience them deeply or fully. The emotions are usually so distorted and dominated by negativity that it takes a lot of hard work to start feeling them both deeply and in a balanced way," he has written. "Balanced emotional growth is necessary for finding and developing one's essence. However, the emotional life is not the essential life. The emotionally developed normal person is superficial, in-complete and still a child in terms of the potential of the human being."

At any level of work, Ali came to believe, one must respect the enormous intelligence of the ego and its determination to remain dominant. "The personality will do anything in its power to preserve its identity and uphold its domain," he explained. "This need is literally in our flesh, blood, bones, even our atoms. The power of the personality is so great, so immense, so deep, so subtle that the person who contends with it for a long time will have to give it its due respect." In effect, Ali believes that the personality never simply throws up its hands and cedes territory to essence. "Ego death is a repeated and in time a continual experience," he concluded. "There is no end to the development and unfolding of essence. This development proceeds by exposing more and more, perhaps in time very subtle aspects of the personality... It is not that the personality is gone and now essence develops. It is rather that the more essence develops, the more personality is exposed and its boundaries dissolved."

Ali named his work the Diamond Approach, partly to - reflect the notion that like a diamond, essence has many facets, and partly because he wanted the approach to have the precision and clarity of a diamond. One of my first direct experiences with Ali's work came when I attended an introduction to the Diamond Approach in San Rafael. Held on the campus of a small college, it was taught by a woman named Sandra Maitri, who is one of Ali's senior teachers. Like Ali, her style is under-stated, unpretentious, and exceptionally lucid. I felt comfortable with her immediately. The weekend was built around what Ali calls the "theory of holes."

As Maitri explained it, we experience essence from birth, but in our earliest years, we lack self-awareness or the capacity to see who we are. Infants, in short, are not aware of their own essence. In theory, adults can develop a deeper, richer, more mature and powerful experience of essence that is only a potential in babies.

In practice, Maitri told us, our essential development almost invariably gets aborted. In the course of growing up, physical and emotional survival become important, and so does building an individual identity and winning social acceptance. "As consciousness begins to form, we take on a personality, and in the process we lose touch with our essential qualities," Maitri told us. "Because our parents are usually hopelessly out of touch with their own essential depths and have never experienced these qualities in themselves, they can't mirror them back to us. When a certain essential quality is not seen in us, or it's devalued, we tend to lose contact with it."

In turn, this lost connection is experienced as a hole. "It is an absence, a lack, a sense of something missing, and it literally feels like a hole," Maitri told us. "What happens is that we end up filled with holes." As Ali came to see it, we build our lives—mostly unconsciously—around finding ways to compensate for our sense of deficiency. "What you fill the holes with," he has written, "are the false feelings, ideas, beliefs about yourself, strategies for dealing with the environment. These fillers are collectively called the personality—the false personality or what we call the false pearl.... But after a time, we think that is who we are. Everybody thinks that's who they are, the fillers. The false personality is trying to take the place of the real thing." Or, as Maitri elegantly summed it up: "After many losses of contact with who we are, we begin to take ourselves to be what we are not."

Most people, Ali found, go to enormous lengths to avoid feeling their holes at all. "They think the hole, the deficiency, is how they really are at the deepest level and that there is nothing beyond -it," he explained. "They believe that if they get close to the hole, it will swallow them up." The culture, in turn, conspires to help people avoid their holes by offering endless external ways to fill them: through taking drugs, or drinking excessively, or overeating, or watching endless television. But it is also possible to fill holes, Ali concluded, in subtler ways that aren't so obviously pathological and may even be relaxing or socially productive: meditating for long hours, working obsessively, or even devoting ourselves to others to the exclusion of focusing on our own deepest needs. "People don't know," he wrote, "that the hole, the sense of deficiency, is a symptom of a loss of something deeper, the loss of essence, which can be regained."

Much of our weekend workshop focused on this issue. "We need to dive into these holes—not fill them, but feel them," Maitri told us. "When you let yourself experience a hole—stop rejecting it and just let it be—a sense of openness begins to emerge, a relaxation, a spaciousness. Whatever quality of essence this hole developed in response to begins to arise spontaneously." Or as Ali put it: "If you go all the way into that sense of emptiness, through the fear of feeling it all the way you will get to the quality which has been lost to you."

As an example, Ali pointed to the common feeling of anger—an aspect of personality. Begin looking into why this emotion recurs, Ali told me, and one might discover that at the surface level it is simply a way of asserting strength—of feeling separate and independent from other people. Explore a little more deeply, he elaborated, and it will turn out that the anger covers up an underlying experience of fear and weakness. "If you stay with that sense of weakness," he explained, "you'll begin to experience a hole in the belly, an emptiness, the feeling that you can't stand your ground, that something is missing. And if you feel that emptiness, [and] you don't fight it or react to it but just stay with it, the hole will begin to fill with a certain quality of essence. It feels literally like liquid fire. And then what you will feel is a real strength. Just by truly being yourself, you are strong. And that essential strength gives you the capacity to be truly independent without feeling angry."

Qualities of essence can be realized, Ali concluded, by steps and degrees, through work on specific sectors of the personality, just as essence is lost in childhood, aspect by aspect. As essence is recovered, he argues, the need for the personality diminishes. "A person who is this essence," Ali has written, "does not need to use the linear mind and rack his brain over certain important situations. The direct knowing is just there, available [with] clarity and precision."

As he studied other schools of Western psychology, Ali found that few of them acknowledge the existence of anything akin to essence. "Psychotherapy is oriented toward making the personality healthier and stronger, making it function better," he told me. "The empty hole is almost never approached. Rather, the person learns to find better and more effective ways to fill the hole." Nonetheless, certain Western therapeutic approaches provide a very sophisticated understanding of specific personality deficiencies that Ali came to correlate with lost qualities of essence. Freud, for example, paid particular attention to issues such as castration anxiety and fears about aggression. By drawing on Freud's insights in these areas, Ali found that students not only got relief from their pain—the traditional psychotherapeutic goal—but could be led to the recovery of the related essential qualities: will and strength, respectively.

Ali was also influenced by Wilhelm Reich, whose body-oriented therapy was concerned with the loss of the capacity for depth of emotion and particularly pleasure. Reich recognized the need to break through the physical armor that we build up to protect ourselves from pain. Ali, in turn, discovered that — the qualities of essence can be experienced only in the body and not in the mind, abstractly. To illustrate this point, he described for me the process that follows a child's early loss of intimate connection to the mother. This is inevitable in development and always painful, but it is especially traumatic for the child who is not sufficiently valued by the mother or who is explicitly rejected. "To avoid experiencing this intolerable hurt," Ali told me, "we deaden a certain part of our body, and in that way we are cut off from that sweet quality of love in ourselves. Where that love should be, we have an emptiness, a hole. What we do then, to get the love we feel lacking, is to try to get it from outside ourselves. Inevitably, we are frustrated, since the true source is within."

The Diamond Approach is built around a very straightforward form of inquiry into experience. "We start with whatever is arising in the moment, our lives as they are without trying to change them," Maitri told us. "The method is to see and experience where we are, opening to the whole realm of our experience instead of narrowing it. We bring a spirit of curiosity and, inquiry and openness to the process, and the mind is used only as a tool to help do that more deeply. Patterns don't change by pushing or prodding but by seeing why we think we need to do what we do; by really feeling the part that holds on and what we're getting from it; and by understanding why we believe it's not okay to behave any differently." What we suffer from, Maitri told us, is finally a case of mistaken identity and a limited worldview. "The personality is based on a fixed set of beliefs about what reality is," she said. "It's a trap, a jail, a confinement in a particular band of reality. When we stay with what is happening moment to moment without beliefs, images, and conceptualizations about who we are then we begin to experience a miraculous unfoldment. The heart knows when we're getting closer to the truth."

As the weekend came to an end, Maitri made it clear that the work we'd done wasn't much concerned with cathartic break-throughs, or instant transformations, or even easing our burden. "This path is not about rising above or transcending," she told us. "It's about moving through what is, and a lot of that isn't real pleasant. It's very difficult, it's painful, and there's a lot we'd rather avoid." Ali makes the point even more directly: "We could do meditations, certain exercises and everybody could feel wonderful things. However these will not last unless the person actually confronts his deficiencies, his holes and goes through them. It is not a simple process, nor a short or easy one."

"We're not interested in making people feel better," he told me later. "We're interested in helping them find the truth about themselves. In the process, everything gets deeper." This made enormous sense to me. I was no longer looking for instant catharsis, which experience told me was sure to fade in a matter of days. This work didn't leave me feeling my world had trans-formed. Rather, it had an impact that grew over time and required patience and attentiveness.

For Ali, the complete life must be embodied in everyday experience. Insight is not sufficient. Conduct matters, too. "Indulgence means permitting what is unhealthy in you to control your actions, even though you already recognize it is unhealthy," he told me. "Spiritual work has to do with actualizing your potential. It needs to, be done while we are in the world. Experiencing essence is not that difficult. You

can do it through meditation, or by taking psychedelics, or even through an intense experience in life. A lot of the Eastern traditions aren't that much interested in living in the world. They just want to connect with the divine. But to truly own your essence-to experience it as who you really are and to behave accordingly-requires moving through the barriers of the psyche, integrating the heart and the mind. This is what I call realization. It means learning to make your inner understandings the source of your external actions. Being accomplished, creative, successful and contributing usefully to the world are expressions of a particular aspect-of our essential nature. Finally, it's about living your life from a certain inner center-with love and integrity, openness and awareness. Ultimately, that becomes the work."

Even as this work proceeds, Ali says, a distinctive personality persists. What changes is its character. "In my case, he told me, "I used to be shy and passive, and now I can be quite aggressive. I used to be more afraid of people, and now I enjoy them. I used to be very lazy, and now I'm very active. Even so, it's not like you work on the personality and then go on to something else. Personality obstacles are infinite, and you keep coming back to them."

Like Michael Murphy, Ali concluded that no single virtue or quality of essence is sufficient by itself. Completeness depends on balanced development. "Love is just one of the aspects of essence," Ali explained. "We don't want you just to be loving. If you have love but you have no will, your love will, not be real. If you have will but no love, you will be powerful and strong but without any idea of real humanity. If you have love and will but no objective consciousness, then your love and will may be directed toward the wrong things. Only the development of all the qualities will enable us to become full, true human beings."

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