

## **The Diamond Approach**

### **A.H. Almaas discusses his unique synthesis of psychology and spirituality.**

by Richard Smoley  
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*A.H. Almaas (the pen name of A-Hameed Ali) originated the Diamond Approach, a spiritual path that integrates contemporary psychology with spirituality.*

*Born in Kuwait in 1944 and educated in a traditional Muslim family. Almaas came to the United States in 1963 to study physics at the University of California at Berkeley. He arrived at the point of getting his doctorate, but abandoned it when he found that science didn't offer the answers to the deep questions of life. Nonetheless he still values his scientific education, which he says trained his mind to be "precise and experimental."*

*Pursuing his own investigations in psychology, Almaas was eventually led to an appreciation of what he calls "essence," a human being's intrinsic nature as opposed to "ego" or "personality," the sum of traits acquired through experience and education – a dynamic that is perhaps the main emphases of the Diamond Approach. He has been teaching since 1976 and now has centers both in the San Francisco Bay Area and Colorado, with approximately sixty to seventy trained teachers. He is the author of several books, including *Essence: The Diamond Approach to Inner Realization* (Samuel Weiser, 1986), the *Diamond Heart* series (*Diamond Books*, 1987-90); and *The Pearl Beyond Price - Integration of Personality into Being: An Object Relations Approach* - (*Diamond Books*, 1988).*

*I wanted to interview Almaas for two principal reasons. In the first place his emphasis on the dynamic between "essence" and "personality" is central to many spiritual teachings, nearly all of which emphasize the need for distinguishing one's intrinsic being from one's conditioning. Moreover, it seems to me that the present age in particular calls for fresh syntheses of traditional teachings, and Almaas' work offers an interesting reformulation of insights from depth psychology, Sufism, the Gurdjieff Work, and Buddhism, among others.*

*I interviewed Almaas at his spacious brand-new house (the contractor was still working on the landscape) in the hills of Berkeley, California, in April 1992. I found him to be a quiet, matter-of-fact man with a stable presence and a penetrating mind. I had problems with my tape recorder and a good chunk of the interview had to be redone – an inconvenience to which he responded with patience and calm.*

**Richard Smoley:** Perhaps you could begin by telling us about the Diamond Approach.

**A.H. Almaas:** The Diamond Approach is a spiritual teaching, a method of connecting with our spiritual nature and bringing it into our life. It is spiritual work in the sense that it has to do with the part of our nature that is timeless, that is beyond the products of our present life, and beyond our thoughts and beliefs and ideas and concepts of our selves and the world. So it has to do with direct recognition or gnosis of our consciousness, of our beingness. When I'm being myself freely and simply, without trying to do something to myself, without trying to be something but just being, we call that recognition of true nature. By bringing that spiritual nature in, our life becomes authentic.

The Diamond Approach is a teaching about that true nature, how to connect with it, and the method that goes along with that teaching. The method is a Socratic inquiry, you could say, in the sense of asking questions, being curious. A question implies an acknowledgment of not knowing, but it also implies a curiosity in wanting to know. So inquiry means really questioning, wanting to find out, being curious about life, about personal experience, about experience in general – any experience. I'm sad or hurt or angry or disappointed or have problems in a relationship – anything that arises can become the object of inquiry. So the inquiry is based on a curiosity, you see, just like the spontaneous curiosity of children.

That's why I say it has to do with love, love and truth, a love of knowing. I'd love to know myself, you, the world. And I'd love to know in the sense of having a direct, living knowingness of whatever it is. So the Diamond Approach is a teaching both about being and about the relationship of being to the personality or what is called the ego-consciousness. Some of its details are taken from object-relations theory, depth psychology, and seeing how these details fit in with the richness of being. Being could be manifested in many different ways and with many different qualities. So from that teaching, that body of knowledge, emerges a way of approaching

spirituality, which is a way of involving oneself and one's life and one's experience in a personal way. You are personally interested in knowing, not because somebody told you it's good to know.

**Smoley:** All of this assumes something that seems very true but very problematic: you would think that the one thing that we would know would be ourselves. Yet it's quite obvious that that isn't the case. This whole question of who we are, finding ourselves, suggests that we start with a certain inauthenticity of being. How does this happen? Why do we start in such a mess?

**Almaas:** This is one of the things that students come to as part of their process. They realize they are very angry, very pissed off, at God for doing it that way. "Where have you been all this time, if you're so perfect and wonderful and the master of all things, how come it is such a shitty thing?" It's a real question that people come to. And usually there isn't much of an answer. I'm aware that different teachings have answers. Buddhism has answers, such as karma: Sufis or Christians have an answer – God's will – and psychologists have an answer about conditioning and childhood experience, but when I myself investigate and want to find out why it happened that way, I don't really find a reason.

I don't mean there isn't one, but I don't find it. And all these things I hear are stories, really, to explain the situation. Different people come up with a certain explanation that makes sense, and it's a story in some sense, but I myself don't have a story, because I don't feel I understand it. Maybe there is an understanding to get to, and maybe there isn't. I'm still open, inquiring into that. There are also all the little details that happened in your life that are meant to explain your situation, as psychology does, but I don't think that truly answers it either. How come such things happened to you? How come such things that happened to you had such a result? Why isn't a human being wired in a different way? When you ask it that way, nobody has an answer, really. It's like asking why apples rot: it's just what happens.

That's how I look at it. And I'm also aware that I might not really know. But I also allow myself to think that maybe it's not something we can answer. It's the same thing when somebody starts opening up, when somebody starts experiencing reality, starts maturing, and their life becomes fulfilled. Why does this happen? We can give all the reasons we like, grace from God or good karma or good efforts – I don't really know if any of those explain it. So the way I look at it is we do our best and we do whatever we can with our situation. Who knows why it happened?

**Smoley:** A lot of your work involves a dynamic between personality and essence, conditioned self versus being. The personality seems to be something false, yet from what I understand of your writings, it can point to something authentic in essence. How does that work?

**Almaas:** What is the relation between the personality and essence? Of course the dichotomy has been recognized and conceptualized in many teachings, Gurdjieff's for instance, the Sufis', and many others. The way I understand it is that personality and essence are not separate. There's a connecting link between personality and essence. I use the concept of "soul" for this connecting link. And I think that was the way this concept was used classically, in, say, Christianity and Judaism. This is the consciousness that experiences, the consciousness where experiences happen, the consciousness that thinks, responds, wills, metabolizes experience, remembers, decides. It is the you that is always you, whether you're experiencing essence or personality, it doesn't matter. That is your awareness, your consciousness, your feeling, your sensation, your experience as a totality. It's always there. Wherever there is experience, that experience is related to that consciousness.

Now that consciousness has many characteristics, one of which is that it can experience itself through representations, through mediation, through structures in the mind – images, concepts, beliefs, ideas we developed from our history. The Sufis call these filters "veils"; Buddhists call them "obscurations." When we look through them, we lose the immediacy of the experience of the soul. Experience becomes indirect. When we experience ourselves that way, we call it personality. When the soul experiences itself immediately, without the intermediacy of concepts or structures or beliefs that we've gotten, from previous experience, it recognizes itself as an ontological presence, as an *is-ness*, as a fundamental reality that *is now*. And that we experience as essence.

**Smoley:** How would you point someone toward essence?

**Almaas:** Hard work, definitely – continued dedication, not giving up for a long time. The method is not as important as the actual attitude, the dedication, the devotion, the sincerity. If we could enlist the qualities of essence themselves – love, curiosity, clarity, commitment (and each human being has them to some measure) – I think these will take us to essence because they are manifestations of essence. They are how essence affects us and

our normal experience. So when a person is truly dedicated to practice, where does that come from? It doesn't come from personality, because personality is dedicated to its own structures; it will work on supporting and perpetuating those structures.

There comes a dedication that will continue regardless of the structures, even if the ego says, "No, no, that's not interesting, I don't like this, this is painful." Still you continue. What keeps you going? That dedication comes from a place that is beyond those structures. So if you continue with your work, that dedication in itself will reveal its source, which then we see as the will-essence. If you take love, devotion, and follow that all the way, it is essence acting. And thus essence – reveals itself more and more, until at some point we recognize it: "Oh, yes, that is my true nature."

**Smoley:** You mentioned things like love, curiosity, will, as attributes of essence. Can they also be veils or obscurations of essence?

**Almaas:** That's a complex question, because the personality also has love and dedication. There is a difference, however, that makes it possible to discriminate between the two. The commitment of the personality is rigid, it's unintelligent, it's fixed. It doesn't respond to the situation in a flexible, malleable way, while the dedication of the essence, the will of the essence, could be very definite and strong and powerful in one instance, and in another instance could be vulnerable, delicate, flowing. But each personality is different. The will of some people is an iron will. That is the will of the personality, Some people are always submissive; they're always surrendering, even when they encounter something that's harmful to them. They need to respond with strength, with solidity, and they don't. That's rigidity again; that shows it's not a true quality.

Of course those qualities, such as love and will, can become barriers even when they're essential. That's possible because, although true nature manifests as will and as love and all that, it also goes beyond those: true nature can also manifest itself nonconceptually. You can't call it love, and you can't call it will, you can't call it any of those things. Love and joy and compassion are what I call universal concepts. There are concepts created by my personal life, but there are also universal concepts in the sense that all humanity shares them. When I experience essential love, it will be the same thing as someone else experiencing essential love. If I speak of compassion, when someone experiences compassion, we can feel the similarity. In the sense that wherever you go, to Tibet, China, India, the United States, Brazil, compassion is always compassion. It exists beyond personal history. That concept is a real concept in the sense that we find it, we don't create it. But true nature goes beyond even that.

So these qualities could become veils or barriers, if the person takes them and says, "That's ultimate." In my experience, when essence keeps revealing itself, it also keeps revealing that you cannot capture it. Your concepts get finer and more subtle. And they're needed in some sense for the process to progress. But essence keeps revealing that whatever notion arises is temporary; it's useful within a context, but there are bigger contexts. In fact one of the clues that somebody's process is really maturing is that they're not stuck with a particular perspective, even if it's a true perspective, if you're a Buddhist, you take the perspective of emptiness and compassion and awareness. And that's true, you do find these; they're not made up by somebody. But if you continue to think of those only, in time it constricts the process. It becomes conceptual in a way that is not real. Then they talk about nonconceptual awareness, and then it goes on. After that, you have to give up even that, until you get to a more mysterious reality.

**Smoley:** Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the essence and God?

**Almaas:** I can't say objectively; I can only talk about my personal experience. The concept of God is variable from one religion to another, from one teaching to another, from one individual to another. I use the word "God" for the experience of the universe as one living, dynamic organism. And it is possible to experience everything – trees, birds, people, air, the sky, the planets, the galaxy, all of it – as a living presence. Not only conscious, aware, but living, alive, just the way our body feels alive – living, pulsing, almost breathing. Not only that, but it has a dynamism, a force, that is constantly metamorphosing and appearing as the universe we see. So that the changes we see, the cars moving, the birds flying, the sun rotating, the trees growing, all of those can be experienced as a transformation of this living presence, as one thing, undivided. I call that God. And I know other people call that God too. But not everybody.

So for me God is not some kind of entity that exists someplace in some heaven. It is whatever exists, whatever is experienceable, experienced in its true nature as a live consciousness, dynamic and intelligent, without necessarily

functioning the way a human being does. Even when people say they see God as the oneness of existence, they still try to make it anthropomorphic, in the sense that it thinks, then does; decides, then does something. I don't see that. I see more of a natural intelligence that's evolving and dynamic. When I see God that way, then essence for me is the recognition of that unity as it manifests in the individual soul. That purity, that pure consciousness, I call the essence of the soul. But the soul is not independent from God. The soul is just one manifestation inseparable from the larger presence. And essence is revealing the actual attributes of God, in a sense as the pure attributes of the soul.

**Smoley:** In your work you use a lot of the insights of contemporary depth psychology, and I'm wondering if you could explain how you apply these to the spiritual path.

**Almaas:** That's an interesting question, interesting for me at least. That's one thing I want to critique many of the spiritual traditions for. Modern depth psychology has so much insight, not only about the details of our personality, but about how it developed. How does it get its structure? The old traditions tended to look at things more epistemologically, more phenomenologically; how is the personality in the moment? But it doesn't say where all that came from. How did that happen? What's the process that developed it in time? I think Buddhism contributed a lot to seeing how this process is happening right now, by understanding it in terms of the five skandhas. (Skandhas, meaning "heaps" or "aggregates," are, in Buddhist philosophy, categories used for investigating experience. The five skandhas are form, feeling-tones, perceptions, karmic dispositions, and consciousness.) But it doesn't say how what's happening now really started many years ago. And what is the relation?

I think depth psychology gives us that knowledge. And it's new; it never happened before in the spiritual traditions, never. I think Freud pioneered it, and Jung and other people contributed to it, and it's still happening. We are in some sense still in the beginning stages of it. It's not necessarily absolute knowledge, it's a developing science, but there's a lot of understanding, a lot of insight, a lot of knowledge about how the personality develops, with a tremendous amount of detail. So in my work I took that knowledge of those details, and I saw them interacting with manifestations of true nature.

So when the essential will arises, for example, it brings determination and commitment and steadfastness. I recognized that this was very much connected with psychological issues like castration issues, issues of how one's own will was cut off by one's father or one's mother or circumstances, and how that created deep wounds, how the person didn't want to deal with the deep wounds and suppressed them. By suppressing the deep wound, the person forgot how the will got cut down, so now that essential quality is not available to them.

Seeing that psychological content, one's relationship with the environment, with the father or the mother, the situation of one's life, and how it affected one's experience, how it created wounds, how it created certain beliefs – exploring that will tell us how it cut us off from something basic in us like will. If we can experience that, we can experience the actual cutoff. And that's what I call a deficiency or a hole, which is the absence of an essential quality. When we experience that, the quality just arises on its own. And when you feel that will, after a while, you can explore it and you recognize it as a manifestation of spirit.

**Smoley:** In your writings you mention that contemporary depth psychology lacks this notion of essence. One psychologist who talks about something like that is Jung. But I sense that you rely less on the insights of Jung than on some of the other psychologists. I'm wondering what you think of Jung's work as a whole, and how he deals with essence.

**Almaas:** The way I look at Jung's work is that Jung's work is more complete than Freud's work or the work of the traditional psychoanalytic movement, because he included in it the spiritual dimension. He didn't use the concept of essence, but he did use other concepts, like the archetype of the Self. So he brought in the spiritual dimension and he made what is fundamentally a spiritual psychology. However, I don't use Jung as much. The reason is that his way of looking at the spirit is different from the way I experience it. Because it is different, I can't use his psychology; his psychology is inextricably linked with his conceptualization of the Self, the archetypes, and the way he looks at being.

**Smoley:** Where do you differ?

**Almaas:** That's a controversial question, because there are various understandings of Jung. Different Jungians see it differently. I read Jung at the same time I read Freud and other people, and I didn't resonate with his description as much. As a result, I didn't get as interested, and I don't know it as much. But from what I know, and from discussions with friends who are more familiar with Jung, is that he relies a lot on dreams, for instance, the symbolism of dreams. He relied a lot – at least his followers believe he relied a lot – on myth and folklore and images, and the stories that go with those. So there are a lot of mythological figures, and there is reliance also on the archetype. Now what is the archetype but an adaptation of the Ideas of Plato? The archetype is some kind of energy, some kind of source that unfolds a certain content, a certain story, a certain force. But it is never something very specific, very definite, so that you could look at it and say "that's it."

For me, Jung lacks a certain precision, a certain definiteness, a certain directness. My way of understanding is that there is a precision, an immediacy, to being that has nothing to do with stories or mythological figures. In fact, the way the Diamond Approach works is to be free from the stories, the mythology, the symbols. If symbols arise, they arise. We work with dreams and of course with a person's life story, but we work with them as a mental content that at best point beyond themselves. Then something is actually experienced that is definite, that is clear, that can be described in precise details. Another person might not understand it, but it could be described in precise details. Essence for me is something that is experienced as immediacy, right now. I'm not saying that Jung's work didn't include that; I'm sure that in some of his writing he does mention that. Except that's not the emphasis, that's not the flavor of Jung's work. As a result I appreciate Jung's work, but I see it as looking at things from a slightly different perspective that keeps me from using it.

The other important thing is that Jung saw himself as a psychologist. It's true he became more spiritual in his approach, but he remained a psychologist. And Jungian therapists do psychotherapy, basically. Whereas I don't see myself as a psychologist. I see myself as a spiritual teacher or explorer. And psychology is just one of the things I find useful. I see my work as spiritual knowledge that somehow connects to psychology and psychological insight, this gives my work a wholly different flavor, and the relation of teacher and student with me is different from that between Jungian analysts and their clients.

**Smoley:** What would you say that difference is?

**Almaas:** Well, for instance, we don't just have private sessions when we work. We use group situations, and we use action in various ways. Also, apart from merely understanding the mind of the student, the teacher is a source and manifestation of essence and the qualities of essence. The teacher has to be an embodiment of those qualities. These have to come not only in the teacher's interaction and life, but when the teacher is teaching, he's not only saying the words, but also emanating the quality. That's what a spiritual teacher does. Now a psychotherapist wouldn't say that that's what they do. In fact psychotherapists are very suspicious of that kind of thing. It would be seen as influence, suggestion, even hypnosis.

So one difference between the Diamond Approach and Jungian work is the difference between spiritual work and psychotherapy. Another difference is in their perspectives on spirituality. But the question is not completely clear-cut, because many Jungians think of themselves as spiritual teachers.

**Smoley:** And some Jungians see Jungianism as a religion.

**Almaas:** I have dialogues with some of my friends who are into Jung, and it's obvious that there are different interpretations of him. So I don't profess to know the real Jung. That is why what I'm saying should be taken with a grain of salt. But my impression from his writing and the writings of many Jungians is that it does have a different flavor, a different orientation. For me, it takes me away from the immediacy of the experience of essence. For other people, it might be a way for them to connect with their essence.

**Smoley:** You mentioned group work specifically. What does a group do that an individual can't do? What are its specific uses and purposes?

**Almaas:** That's something my students ask frequently. An individual session, what we call a private teaching session, provides something the group doesn't provide, and vice versa. In the private session there is a possibility

of intimacy and vulnerability and openness, because there is a one-on-one relationship of trust that deepens. And also there is focus on the actual person and their psyche and their life. That can't happen in a group.

In a group – a small group situation, twelve to eighteen people – the teacher works with students one to one, and other students are present and observe. They support the process the student and teacher are going through, but they also learn from the process, by seeing how the teacher works, and how that student's process happens. So they could relate to it, respond to it, and ask questions from the teacher and the other students. The teacher can also elaborate on certain things. Let's say a student is experiencing a sense of timelessness, for instance, as the result of a certain investigation. The teacher can take that as a departure point to discuss timelessness in relationship to being. He can also expound on it for ten or fifteen minutes and create a discussion among the whole group, their various experiences, and what that all means, which can't happen in a private session. So in the group the students learn from each other. And of course there are exercises that are done in group, interpersonal exercises of exploration and confrontation, and the clearing of interpersonal friction in itself is a tremendous process for working on one's prejudices and fixations.

Then of course there's what we call the large group, which we do on weekends. That's the time when the teacher has the opportunity to do what's called in some traditions empowerment or initiation or direct transmission, where the teacher introduces being or a quality of being, both verbally and energetically, and provides the necessary understanding where the students can look at their situation and relationship to it. The private session doesn't allow that as much. And when there is a group, how much a teacher puts out has to do with how much the group needs. So if the need is bigger, the teacher, if the teacher has some development and openness, will be able to meet it in a deeper way.

**Smoley:** To look at these questions in a larger context, society at large doesn't necessarily support or reinforce work like this. How does one use this work to nourish society? Or is that even a useful way of looking at it?

**Almaas:** I think it is useful. My personal understanding is that work is not just for oneself. It is for one's society and for humanity as a whole. If you look at the Sufi system, for instance, many of the Sufi orders refuse to work on the individual. They think the work is for the development of humanity. Whether a person is enlightened or not is not as important as the progress of the whole race. The corresponding view in Buddhism is to liberate all sentient beings.

I feel that when I'm working on myself, I'm benefiting myself and others, and the reason I work on myself is to benefit myself and others. The deeper I am in my experience of my spiritual nature, the more that becomes a more spontaneous, natural happening, a flow in terms of experience, action, and understanding. The more you're in touch with your essential nature, your spirit, the more your heart is open. And the more the heart opens, the more we're aware of the other person, we're in touch with the other person's pains and hurts and longings, and the more we will naturally want to do what we can.

And that's a spiritual quality that we all have. Because at a deep level we are connected, we are one thing in some sense. So after a while I'll be helping you, but while I'm helping you, I'm helping myself. At some level there are two people who are helping each other; at a deeper level there aren't two people, there's one thing. I see the love and compassion as expressing the unity of being. When we experience this unity of being as separate individuals, we experience it as compassion and love.

I also think people who work on themselves contribute to society by being authentic, being real, not necessarily by what the person gives to society overtly. A person could become more spiritual, more realized, more compassionate, and will overtly be giving and generous, even materially, in terms of attention and time. But the contribution also comes in the quality of action, the quality of being, the quality of relating. If I relate to you with integrity, respecting my integrity and your integrity, I'm contributing to myself and to you at the same time. I am contributing to true nature in general. If I interact with, say, the contractor who's working on our house with genuineness, with authenticity, with concern, not because it's a good thing to do, but because it's natural, that is contributing to society.

But then I think each spiritual teaching provides humanity with a vision, a vision of what a human being is, what a human being can be, what a human life can be. And I think one thing a teaching or a teacher or a student can

provide is a vision for society. Because in some sense society has lost the notion of what a human being is. People interact through economics and through political systems, through self-interest: the spiritual part in it isn't always necessarily recognized or understood. So I think a person who has some understanding of the spiritual dimension can make a contribution as an embodiment, as an exemplar, by providing some kind of vision that guides people.

**Smoley:** What do you see happening in the United States as a whole in regard to spiritual growth? There's such an enormous amount of interest in it right now. Do you see a direction for this, and do you see a lot of use to what's coming out?

**Almaas:** I don't know if I'm qualified to answer that. When I try to think of my work in the context of the present time, and try to understand it in historical perspective, the intuition I get is that in the West, including the United States, there is a reemergence of something that has previously existed but has gone underground: a genuine spiritual tradition that is Western in flavor, that responds to the situation and aspirations of Western people.

That actually existed. I'm referring to people like Socrates, Plato, the Neoplatonists, Plotinus, Philo. I'm referring to the kabbalists, to St. Augustine and St. Francis of Assisi; to the Sufis. I see all of those as being within a continuous tradition that at certain epochs of time was purer and clearer than at other times. Since the coming of the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution, that tradition has gone underground and the rational, scientific, and logical have become dominant. Now these too are part of the spiritual heritage of the West; however they've been divorced from the spiritual side. And I think that spiritual force is still there, and it's reemerging little by little.

I see its reemergence partly in depth psychology in the West. I see Freud and Jung, for instance, as an attempt, not by those individuals, but by the tradition itself, to find new forms that are appropriate for our time. So I'm thinking that the spirituality and psychology that are happening now are part of an overall historical process that will in time become a genuine, full, and more complete Western spiritual tradition, where Western psychology and spirituality become one thing. I see my work as a contribution to that, just as Jung made a contribution.

There are of course all the other traditions, Buddhism and Taoism and the Sufis; I think all these things will be here too, but I think the main force that will arise in time will be something indigenous. There might be an integration of those various traditions, like the Tibetan and the Indian, but I don't think it will be carried out by the Tibetans or the Indians, but by Westerners, by Americans who have learned these traditions and will translate them into new languages and new forms. I think this will also happen in a way that will take into account our spiritual heritage, including our scientific and technological heritage. Of course there will be different ways and different individuals and different movements. But I think it's already happening.

The thing that most people are not aware of is that there is a true spiritual current that is Western, that has its own flavor, its own emphasis. For instance, in the West we're not interested in being liberated so we won't be reincarnated again. That's an Eastern phenomenon, it has to do with an Eastern way of looking at life. Here in the West we want a spirituality that will make our life authentic and real. We don't want to leave life; we want to live life in a real, authentic, and truthful way.

**Smoley:** And yet even Socrates' last words were "I owe a cock to Asclepius," implying that his death was a cure from the illness of life. There is Plato's statement "the body is a tomb." So there is that flavor in the West too.

**Almaas:** And we see it in Christianity and Islam, for instance, where there is more movement toward life, but there is still a preference for the afterlife. The afterlife is where you find the fulfillment, and the Christian mystics say that final union happens only after death. Nevertheless I think in the West there is more emphasis on this life, on the individual, on personal life. There is more emphasis on these things both in the spiritual traditions of the West and in the society itself. People in the United States prefer to be autonomous, Independent, making their own living. They want to be successful and to provide for themselves and other people.

That can be very materialistic and very devoid of any spirituality, but it could become very spiritual, right? Something in it points toward a truth that we can't find in the East – that it is possible to be a real individual. You have your own personal life; you're married and you work and you have your interests, but you're really authentic,

you're real, you're essential. You even do business, but you do it with fairness, with integrity, with respect, with compassion, with awareness. A person doesn't have to become a monk or a nun to live a true spiritual life. I think in the West there is more possibility of that happening than in the East.

I'm not saying the East doesn't have that part, it's just not emphasized as much. And I think that's the way that the West and East are different. In the Eastern tradition, the emphasis is on what is true nature, what is transcendence? If you look into the Christian tradition, or the Kabbalah, or the Sufis, for instance, it's more a question of what is the human being in relationship to that? It's true that true nature is important, but what is a human being? That's why in the Kabbalah you have the Tree of Life, for instance, which tells of the various qualities of the true spiritual human being,

I think the East contributed to a much deeper understanding of what is transcendent nature, but the West has contributed an understanding of our relationship to it. How do we live in this world? How do we relate to life on earth? Which brings us to the present situation, which has to do with our environment and the earth, as well as the relationship between people, the abuses of power. So I think spirituality will have to deal with all of these things. It's not like "I'll go work on myself so I'll be free, liberated." No. I want to be liberated so I can live as best I can and benefit other people. And maybe when they die they will all come back. I don't know. For me personally I don't know whether people come back or not, that's not something I know from experience.

**Smoley:** Where would you suggest someone go, where would you suggest someone embark on a quest for an authentic spirituality?

**Almaas:** Obviously this question is discussed by many teachings and various texts. In my personal way of relating to it, which of course has a lot to do with my work, with what I teach, is not to go looking for ultimate nature, but to look into what is the truth of my personal experience right now. The Buddhists say, "Find out whether there is an ultimate self." Fine, that's a good method, but my method is to say, "Let's find out what my experience is right now." At some point in my exploration the question of the ultimate will arise, but in the beginning, when I have just had a fight with my wife, that's not exactly relevant. And even if it is, it's hard for me to grapple with it. It feels like an intellectual enterprise. But I can grapple with how I feel about my wife. Why do I get angry with her? How can I deal with the situation in a way that becomes real, and with less harm for both of us? If I do that, that will bring in the spiritual qualities and at some point will manifest selflessness, the way the Buddha would talk about it.

So my recommendation is to try to be authentic in personal experience, to try to have one's everyday experience, one's everyday interaction, one's inner atmosphere, one's relation with the environment, be investigated, inquired into, opened up, understood, transformed. And in my experience, when I do that, that will bring about transformation. But of course this needs a tremendous amount of sincerity and dedication, and will require a person to have the luxury to investigate it, because, as we know, in our present time many people don't even have time to make enough money to live. So this question also interacts with the social and political system. But I think what an individual can do is to really inquire into their life, inquire in the sense, of seeing what is real and what is not real, what is it that's truly authentic? And to inquire into my position, beliefs, attitudes, to see if they're valid or not.

And that is an inherent characteristic of our heart – the heart really loves to know the truth. Everybody knows that. Even if you just investigate and find out something for yourself, there is a joy, a satisfaction. The heart really likes it! That is inherent in us, in human beings. Sometimes it's painful for the person when they realize something. But because they realize it's true, it's fine. So that's the challenge, to go with the quality of the heart, where the heart loves to experience the truth directly, authentically. And to open it up, I use investigation, inquiry, other people could use other things.