

UNCOVERING THE ESSENTIAL SELF

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As anyone who undertakes a search for truth and meaning soon discovers, the modern world offers two principal paths to self-understanding. One is psychotherapy-the attempt to understand and resolve the unconscious conflicts that stand in the way of our well-being. The other is the meditative or contemplative approach, which aims to help us transcend personality altogether and reach enlightenment by seeing through the ultimate illusion of a separate self.

Each approach offers distinctive insights and important pieces of a larger puzzle. But neither, I came to believe-after five years of traversing the country in search of wisdom-is sufficient for a complete and balanced life. In my own journey, for example, I derived a great deal from several years of daily meditation, including the exhilarating experience of deeply quieting my mind and body, the capacity to witness my thoughts and emotions without being so rocked by them, and a softening of the boundaries that ordinarily separated me from other people.

Over time, however, it became clear that meditation didn't fundamentally address the persistent psychological issues-conflicts, angers, and fears-that still stood in my way. Like most people I met, I found it difficult to sustain my meditative equanimity in the crucible of everyday life. By contrast, I found the best psychological work illuminated all sorts of unconscious conflicts and helped me deal with them ore effectively. Still, psychotherapy never led to the spacious freedom I'd experienced intermittently through meditation.

In an effort to reconcile these contradictory paths, I sought out-and in many cases worked with-more than two hundred psychologists, mystics, philosophers, physicians, sages, and scientists who have made the search for meaning primary in their lives. But nearly all of them, I discovered, had long since chosen sides between the psychological and spiritual, the personal and the transpersonal, emphasizing one path while giving short shift to the other. In five years, I came across only one practice that explicitly treats psychological and spiritual exploration as inseparable: the Diamond Approach developed by a fifty-one-year old Berkeley-based teacher named Hameed Ali. For the past two decades, Ali has been quietly offering his multidisciplinary technique to a small but growing group of students, most of whom come to his work after considerable psychological and spiritual inquiry.

Ali lives with his wife and teen-age daughter in a sprawling pink Mediterranean home high in the hills of Berkeley, where he does some teaching and all of his writing, under the pen name A. H. Almaas. Soft-spoken, direct, and unaffected, he exudes a sense of lightness and ease that belies his powerful presence. We met for the first time in a workroom in his house that has benches along the walls for group meetings and a large open area in the middle, where he does body-oriented work with individual students. On the walls, there are photographs of eclectic thinkers from both East and West who have influenced his work-among them Sigmund Freud, the Dalai Lama, the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff, the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, and the Japanese Zen master Suzuki Roshi.

Ali's Diamond Approach (also known as the Diamond Heart work or the Ridhwan work) reflects his belief that by systematically using modern psychological techniques to work through issues of personality we can begin to recover our deepest self, what he calls our underlying essence. The view sets Ali's work apart both from the major contemplative traditions, even as he draws deeply on each. "The way we get to our essential nature," he explains, "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."

Drawing on both Sufi tradition and the work of Gurdjieff, Ali defines essence as our true nature-an unconditioned part of the self that lies buried beneath the acquired traits, characteristics, and habitual patterns of our personality. Essence, like a diamond, is multifaceted, he says, and expresses itself in certain ideal qualities such as strength, will, joy, and compassion. Ali maintains that we have access to a nascent form of this pure state of being at birth, but lose it as we mature, develop a personality, and enter society. "Essence is replaced with various identifications," he explains. "The child identifies with one or the other parent, this or that experience, and with all kinds of notions about itself. The child, and later, the adult, believes this structure is its true self. Being who you really are means being free of all the identifications from the past that have built your false sense of identity."

My first direct experiences with Ali's work came when I attended a two-day introductory workshop on the Diamond Approach held in San Rafael, California. It was taught by Sandra Maitri, one of Ali's senior teachers, whose style is understated, unpretentious, and exceptionally lucid. I felt comfortable with her immediately.

The Diamond Approach to recovering our essence built around a very straightforward form of inquiry into experience. In between Maitri's talks, we broke up regularly into groups of two or three in order to answer a specific question-sometimes in monologue form, sometimes after having the question posed to us repeatedly by a partner. Maitri requested that, as listeners, we refrain from commenting or reacting in any way to what a speaker was saying.

"The idea is to explore the truth about a particular issue," she explained, "and the biggest assistance we can give each other is to be present, open, and allowing. When you're speaking, don't worry about how you are perceived or what happens to you. Just be with your own experience. We start with whatever is arising in the moment. The method is to see and experience where we are. We bring a spirit of curiosity and openness to the process, and the mind is used only as a tool to help us do that more deeply.

The first exercise was framed as a repeating question: "Tell me something that stops you from being here now." To my surprise, I soon discovered that most of my answers focused on my concern about how what I say is received. I had never thought of myself as being highly dependent upon the approval of others. However, forced by the nature of the exercise to dig deeper than usual, I began to uncover all the subtle ways that I adjust what I say to make it more acceptable. I also saw that my underlying motive is not simply to win approval, but also to make sure that I won't be rejected or seen as wrong and thus feel endangered or even obliterated. It became clear that I rarely simply connect to what I feel most deeply-and say it straight out.

The second repeating-question exercise was even simpler: "Tell me something you are experiencing now." This time I saw quickly how many conflicting concerns, preoccupations, and habits stood in the way of my simply getting immersed in the moment. I also discovered that the more I exhausted the answers that came immediately and glibly to mind, the more I felt pulled into the frightening territory of the unknown-the domain of a deeper level of truth.

The broad focus of this particular weekend was what Ali has termed the "theory of holes." Maitri explained that we experience essence from birth, but in our earliest years we lose the capacity for self-reflection. As infants, in short, we are not aware of our own essence. In theory, adults can develop a deeper, richer, and more powerful experience of essence, in part through the capacity for self-observation. But in practice, Maitri told us, our essential development almost invariably gets aborted early in life.

"As consciousness begins to form, we take on a personality, and in the process, we lose touch with our essential qualities," Maitri explained. "Because our parents are usually so 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."

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." Ali has theorized that most of us build our lives-usually unconsciously-around finding ways to avoid feeling these holes. "What you fill the holes with," he has explained, "are the false feelings, ideas, beliefs about yourself, strategies for dealing with the environment. These fillers are collectively called the personality, but after a time, we think that is who we are." 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.

The culture, in turn, conspires in this process by offering endless external ways to keep us from feeling our holes: through taking drugs, or drinking excessively, or overeating, or watching endless television-and above all by discouraging inner exploration.

This self-anesthetizing, Ali suggests, can also take subtler, more socially productive forms: working obsessively, meditating for long hours, or even devoting ourselves to others to the exclusion of focusing on our own deepest needs. "Society does not support the experience of essence," Ali says. "Everybody around you, wherever you go, is trying to fill holes, and people feel threatened if you don't try to fill yours in the same way. When a person is not trying to fill his holes, it tends to make other people feel their own holes. This occurs because you are going against the current, and the contrast will be felt. You don't go along with many of the things people want to do and like. And that makes people feel uncomfortable.

Much of Maitri's workshop-and the questions we addressed in our dyads and triads-focused on this issue. "We need to dive into these holes-not fill them, but feel them" she told us. "When you let yourself experience a hole-stop rejecting and just let it be-a sense of openness begins to emerge, a relaxation, a spaciousness. The quality of essence that this hole developed in response to then begins to arise spontaneously."

A simple example might be what typically happens to the essential quality of value. By Ali's reckoning, if parents fail to value a child as intrinsically worthy from early on, responding readily to his or her needs and letting the child know that he or she really matters, then eventually the child will lose touch with his or her own sense of essential value. A hole will arise—a sense of deprivation and insecurity—and the natural inclination will be to try to fill it from outside, by seeking love, or making money, or winning acclaim. These are the components of self-esteem, but even at the highest level they serve only as a pale version of the lost quality of essential value.

This same process can be seen from another angle. Take the emotion of anger—a quality of personality, rather than essence. "Anger is a limitation," explains Ali. "there can be real aggression, which grows out of essential strength. When the quality of strength is frustrated, it appears as anger. Indeed, when any given essential quality is blocked, it appears instead as a specific emotion. . . .We have to go through the hurt at the deepest level, get close to the hole itself, and then we will see the memory of what was lost," Ali explains. "When we see (that), the essence. . . will start flowing again."

Qualities of essence can be recovered, Ali has found, by steps and degrees, through work on specific sectors of the personality, reversing the process of childhood in which essence is lost aspect by aspect. Moreover, as essence is recovered, the need for the personality diminishes. "A person who is this essence," Ali says, "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."

This insight sets Ali's work apart from most schools of Western psychology, few of which acknowledge the existence of anything akin to essence. "Psychotherapy is oriented toward making the personality healthier and stronger, making it function better," Ali explains. "The empty hole is almost never approached. Rather, the person learns to find better and more effective ways to fill the hole. In our approach, we use psychodynamic understanding to see through dark spots and dissolve them. We open each know and shed the light of awareness on its content. We don't need to go around or avoid anything. This method is a direct confrontation with the personality."

Ali contrasts this technique with the meditative approach to recovering essence—which he argues is rarely successful. "This is because the personality is everywhere in the body and mind, and its barriers are omnipresent.," he says. "Most practitioners get bogged down without quite knowing what has stopped their process. . . .Not one in ten thousand students makes it through the Zen approach, and then only after sitting and staring at a wall ten hours a day for years."

This is not to say that Ali's goals are primarily psychotherapeutic—important as he believes such work may be before attempting to go even deeper. The more psychologically healthy you are, he told me, the more balanced your development will be.

Nonetheless, he is ultimately more interested in the nature of reality itself than in the nature of the self, or personality. "Psychotherapy's attempt is to try to give the person freedom from the difficulties and pain and negative influence of the past," he says. "In our approach, the point is to be free from the past as a whole from all conditioning."

"Doing the work of the Diamond Approach may or may not address the psychotherapeutic needs of the student," he says. "Some individuals need psychotherapy to be able to deal with their everyday life without incapacitating pain or inner conflict. Frequently the psychotherapeutic problems make it difficult, sometimes even impossible, for the student to engage the spiritual work effectively."

The value of Western psychotherapeutic approaches in his own work, Ali believes, is that they provide a very sophisticated understanding of specific personality deficiencies that he came to correlate with lost qualities of essence. Freud, for example, paid particular attention to issues such as castration anxiety and fears about aggression. Ali has found that by experiencing these deficiencies deeply, students could be led to the recovery of the related essential qualities: will and strength, respectively.

Ali was also influenced by Wilhelm Reich, who body-oriented therapy focused on the loss of the capacity for depth of emotion—and particularly pleasure. Reich recognized that we all build up a certain rigid physical armor to protect ourselves from feeling pain. Ali, in turn, found that the qualities of essence can only truly be experienced in the body, and not in the mind, abstractly.

To illustrate this point, he describes the process that follows a child's early loss of intimate connection to the mother. This is inevitable in development, and always painful, but 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 explains, "we

deaden a certain part of our body, and that away we are cut off from that sweet, essential quality of love in ourselves. Where that love should be, we have an emptiness, a hole. What we do then is try to get the love we feel is lacking from outside ourselves. Inevitably, we are frustrated, since the true source is within."

As the weekend with Maitri progressed, we continued to explore dimensions of this experience of deficiency. The questions ranged from "What pattern is repeated over and over again in your life?" to "How do you fill your holes?" to "Explore your experience of emptiness and deficiency." One of the final questions we engaged was "What's right about avoiding feeling empty?"

This was perhaps the most surprising and enlightening of the exercises for me. I could name plenty of reasons for not wanting to feel empty, among them that I associated this experience with loneliness, sadness, disconnection, hopelessness, and fear. Beyond that, no one had ever suggested to me that there was any value in feeling empty. Filling myself up through work and relationships and being a parent, playing sports and going to movies, worrying and planning-had long seemed the only logical course. It never once occurred to me that a feeling of emptiness might be associated with something deeper and richer within.

"Emptiness can be experienced in very different ways," Maitri explained, once we'd finished the exercise. "Often you almost literally fear that you'll die if you stay in that emptiness, and in a sense that's true. A given sector of the personality will die if you don't keep trying to fill it up. But there is something deeper. Emptiness feels like a black hole when it's viewed through the prism of the personality. But that same hole is experienced as open and pristine and very peaceful when you are in essence. This emptiness is the beginning of opening up to our true selves-to the empty space in which everything arises, to the ground of our fundamental nature."

These exercises had a subtle but cumulative impact on me. Each one gave me a slightly clearer sense about where I was still stuck, and how my fixed beliefs fed those patterns. As Maitri put it: "When a machine knows itself, it is no longer possible for it to be a machine." There was also something wonderful about having another person present during the inquiries, listening closely but not offering opinions, or analysis, or even praise. It made me realize how rarely I felt fully heard, and how infrequently I listened to others carefully, quietly, and without interruption or judgment.

As the weekend came to an end, Maitri made it clear that the work we'd done wasn't much concerned with cathartic breakthroughs, 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 explicitly: "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."

Ali's own path to these insights was a circuitous one. Born in Kuwait, he grew up in a middle-class Muslim household, the oldest of eight children. His father was a successful businessman, his mother a homemaker, and he remembers his childhood more for its nurturing qualities than for its deprivations. "I was fortunate that I had parents who truly wanted me as a child and gave me a great deal," he told me. "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 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, he explains. "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."

Ali arrived in California in 1963 to study physics at Berkeley. "I was interested in knowing What is reality? and What is truth?" he told me. "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." By the late '60s, he was attending workshops as Esalen in various disciplines, and, in 1971, he joined an ongoing group taught by the Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo in Berkeley. The work was a blend of bodywork, Gestalt therapy, meditative practices, and the personality typing system known as the Enneagram.

Ali went on to study with a variety of other teachers investigating everything from Buddhist meditation to breath work to psychoanalytic exploration. During this period, he began to have experiences that he felt none of his teachers fully understood, and which he eventually recognized as the spontaneous arising of his own 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 my true nature—a felt experience beyond words. Over time, this apprehension of essence, of being fully myself, became more and more established."

Ali didn't experience this essence as a broad transcendence or a sudden enlightenment. Rather, he discovered that essence has many individual qualities—among them love, strength, will, joy, understanding, compassion, awareness, clarity, truth, value, and pleasure. Eventually, he realized that these interconnected qualities of essence represent the components of a complete life. "They are all necessary, and the being is incomplete without any of them," he explains.

At the same time, Ali concluded that the personality or ego is a necessary component in cultivating a mature essence. "One of the purposes of developing an ego," he told me, "is that it make possible the capacity for self-reflection. A person needs to be able to reflect to understand and value his experience. But this 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 the qualities of 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 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. Doing some psychological piece of work—understanding and penetrating a particular aspect of the personality—lead directly to experiencing essence in some form. This, in turn, transforms part of the personality."

In 1975, Ali founded the Ridhwan School, in Boulder, where he began to teach his Diamond Approach. The name reflects his belief that our essence has many facets and dimensions as well as his view that the work possesses the precision and clarity of a diamond. He opened the Berkeley school the following year.

Today, more than three dozen teachers offer the Diamond Approach, having gone through a training that takes at least seven years. Some two thousand students have done the work, and approximately eight hundred continue to meet in groups in Berkeley, Boulder, Hawaii, Germany and, most recently, New York City.

At least twice a year, students meet for intensive eight-day retreats led by Ali himself. Students also gather in groups of up to seventy-five for one full weekend once a month. These meetings are built around lectures and the inquiries in dyads and triads, and include other forms of self-inquiry and self-awareness techniques, as well as meditative exercises that evolve as the work deepens. In addition, small groups of up to fifteen people meet once every two weeks, and there the teacher works with one student at a time on a particular issue—typically by focusing first on how it manifests in the body. Students are also expected to do certain exercises on their own, between meetings.

Finally, teachers offer private sessions with students, often using breathing exercises aimed at loosening defenses and recovering access to their deepest emotions—and only then, to the qualities of essence. As Ali puts it: "Understanding emotions can help untangle the knots of defenses, which are attempts to avoid experiencing the holes and which maintain our separation from essence. However, some people are not only cut off from essence, they are cut off from their emotions."

Several months after my first weekend in California, Ali—responding to a growing number of inquiries from the East Coast—decided to see whether the demand was sufficient to support an ongoing group. In December, Ali Johnson, one of his most senior teachers, traveled to a small inn in upstate New York to offer the first of several weekends in Ali's work. To my surprise, more than sixty people showed up on a cold Friday evening.

The form was similar to the one I'd attended earlier—a mix of talks and smaller inquiries—but Johnson had a distinctly different style than Maitri. Where Maitri is crisp, intellectually precise, and slightly cool in demeanor, Johnson is a large animated woman with palpable warmth, a whimsical sense of humor, and a much less linear way of presenting material. What they both communicated was a sense of integrity and authenticity. Even before Johnson said very much, I felt very safe in the room. While I wasn't always certain where she was headed during the weekend, I felt surprisingly comfortable just letting the experience unfold.

Johnson's primary focus was on helping us to explore some of the central qualities of essence—most notably, strength and joy. To develop this aspect of his work, Ali drew upon some of the Sufi conceptualizations of spiritual qualities. The Sufis characterize some of 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.

"You don't have to change anything to get at these essential qualities," Johnson told us. "What is so precious about this work, and so valuable, is the understanding that the essential aspects are natural, inherent aspects of the human soul, and that they are blocked because of emotional and psychodynamic issues. By blocking the emotional pain around the loss of joy, for example, you are shutting off the whole system. If you cannot feel pain, you certainly can't feel joy."

With that in mind, we approached joy by inquiring first into suffering. Joy is associated, Johnson explained, with the deep desire for truth, the delight that comes from knowing who you really are. Suffering arises in response to feeling blocked from moving toward this truth-most often out of a fear that doing so will be too painful. In the course of the weekend, we did inquiries into our stance on suffering in our lives; what's right about suffering; what makes us happy; and how we move toward what we want. In each case, I found myself seeing more clearly what stood in the way of feeling my deepest desires-and how rarely I'd allowed myself even to experience them.

It was during a small group, working one-to-one with one of Johnson's co-teachers, that I pursued this inquiry to another level. As I was guided in following the sensations in my body, it became clear that when I allowed myself to feel my deepest desires, what arose was a feeling of terror that they wouldn't be fulfilled. It seemed almost unbearable to want something so much-love and acceptance, most explicitly-yet to have to tolerate the possibility of not getting it. Still, by simply staying with these feelings of desire, my fear and apprehension eventually gave way to something sweeter and fuller in my chest.

I wasn't sure, at first, whether this was the essential joy Johnson had told us tends to arise when the blocks against it are removed. But as the weekend went on, and the work continued, I noticed that this sweet inner experience persisted, sometimes subtly, occasionally more explicitly. Others described something similar, and eventually I grew convinced that addressing the issue of joy and desire so persistently had let many of us to share the experience together. I left not knowing quite what had happened, but convinced that I'd touched something important.

Several days later, it hit me with a particular and unexpected force. I'd just finished a meeting and stopped for lunch at a local coffee shop. No sooner did I sit down than I suddenly felt suffused with a spontaneous experience of joy. It was unmistakable: I broke into a big smile, and I felt my heart open and expand. There was no apparent cause. Clearly, the experience had arisen from within, a residue, I suspect, of the previous weekend's work. It lasted for several hours, but the memory lingered much longer. In the intervening months, I've decided to make a long-term commitment to Ali's work.

But simply doing the practices is only part of the challenge. For Ali, the complete life must finally be embodied in everyday experience. Insight-even inner transformation-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. 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. It means learning to make your inner understanding the source of your external actions."

To take that leap, Ali believes, no single quality of essence is sufficient by itself. "Love is just one of the aspects of essence," he explains. "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."