

The Diamond Approach

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INTRODUCTION

The Diamond Approach is a contemporary understanding and path for exploring the nature of reality as it is experienced through human consciousness, an exploration that leads to inner freedom and maturity. It aims for a full, free, and personal embodiment of one's potential in one's experience and one's life. Providing a systematic and psychologically-sophisticated method for exploring the nature of consciousness and reality, the Diamond Approach enables students to investigate their inner experience, discover and integrate the inner truth of their being, work through the obstacles to realizing and expressing that truth, and develop as authentic, creative, and fulfilled human beings. Since its origins in the mid-1970s, it has gained respect from a number of transpersonal psychologists and spiritual teachers, and the body of students studying it, both formally and informally, has grown rapidly. Its map of consciousness, articulation of the processes of spiritual development, and methods will be of interest and value to many transpersonal psychologists.

While the Diamond Approach is not a transpersonal psychology, *per se*, it responds to many of the questions central to transpersonal psychology: What is the nature

of optimal human development and spiritual maturity? What is the nature and fate of the sense of individual identity and self-transcendence? How can we most effectively work with the barriers and difficulties on a spiritual path? Many of its responses to these questions will be familiar to transpersonal psychologists and spiritual seekers. However, it also offers new and insightful answers to these questions, offering more effective ways of understanding and engaging inner development. Understanding, as an integration of concepts, direct experience, and lived expression, is at the heart of its methods. While its teachings offer richly detailed, broad-ranging, often subtle, and even profound psychological insights, it is primarily a spiritual path which entails living a life engaged with the world, not apart from it.

The Diamond Approach views reality as the eternal truth in a variety of manifest and unmanifest dimensions. Its view is multi-faceted, precise, and inclusive. As a modern Western teaching, the Diamond Approach values and cultivates the specific ways in which reality manifests through the individual person. It is grounded in a view of reality that is seen both as a shared field in which differentiated particulars arise and as an absolute nonduality beyond concepts and perception. Its understanding is nonhierarchical in the sense that it does not privilege particulars or the universal, duality or nonduality, being or nonbeing, the rich beauty of the world or the boundless purity of transcendence. All are expressions of the endless possibilities of the totality of reality.

The Diamond Approach embraces both *recovery* of one's connection to true nature and *development* of one's capacity to live as true nature. The first aim arises from the view that one's inner truth or *essence* becomes unavailable to consciousness due to conditioning, habit, psychodynamic defenses, structuring of the inherent openness of

individual consciousness, and other factors. With a gradual recovery of this connection, essence is increasingly experienced in differentiated qualities, among them joy, strength, compassion, passion, support, value, and a felt-sense of basic trust in the world, along with many others. Without access to these qualities, psychological and spiritual development is arrested or distorted, resulting in misidentifying oneself as a separate entity dissociated from the ground of being and its essential qualities. The resulting loss of contact with essence leads to suffering and compulsive attempts to regain essential qualities. Recovery of one's inherent connection to essence leads to fulfillment, self-realization, and the embodiment and authentic expression of these qualities. Its second aim recognizes that individual consciousness matures and transforms toward greater aliveness, openness, dynamism, sensitivity, clarity, and transparency to reality. Conscious access to essence enables one to re-engage the full potential of development. Aspects of this process, its stages, and vicissitudes have been described by developmental psychology, transpersonal psychology, and spiritual wisdom traditions. The recovery aspect of this work leads to a deeply satisfying sense of homecoming, while the developmental aspect is an adventure of personal evolution without end.

Over the last 40 years, A. H. Almaas has articulated an extensive body of written and oral teachings on the Diamond Approach. As with all wisdom traditions, it is difficult to reduce the subtlety, depth, and richness of this knowledge into a few pages. Furthermore, the Diamond Approach, being a modern Western teaching of human development, often borrows terms from other traditions. In some cases, these terms will have slightly different meanings from their traditional context. We have attempted to

explicate these terms as clearly as possible according to the conceptual paradigms of the Diamond Approach.

History and Development

The Diamond Approach has been developed and articulated primarily by A. H. Almaas (the pen-name for Hameed Ali) through several series of books and through his spiritual work school, the Ridhwan School. It is its own logos, understanding, and method, arrived at through phenomenological inquiry and testing through its teachings. While its insights arose on their own through Almaas and his collaborators, it draws on multiple sources of wisdom to articulate its findings, including both classical and modern psychodynamic theory and various spiritual wisdom traditions, including both classical and modern psychodynamics—among them Sufism, Buddhism, Gurdjieffian Fourth Way work, Vedantism, and contemplative Christianity and Judaism. However, Almaas has described the Diamond Approach as arising first through his direct experience that then found expression in various conceptual frameworks.

Almaas, who was born in Kuwait in 1944, has described his early training in physics as an attempt to understand the nature of reality (Schwartz, 1996). However, in the early 1970s, he began exploring various forms of psychological and spiritual work. Claudio Naranjo's group, *Seekers After Truth*, seems to have been an important influence on the early development of the Diamond Approach. For many years, Almaas collaborated with Karen Johnson and Faisal Muqaddam. Although Muqaddam left the Diamond Approach to found his own school, Almaas and Johnson continue to work together. In 1974, Almaas began teaching what he called the Returning Process, drawing from the Fischer-Hoffman Process. A group of students asked him to begin an on-going

group in 1975. That group grew steadily in Colorado and California. A few years later, he began training a small group of students to teach the Diamond Approach, the Ridhwan Foundation was formed as a church, and in 1983, the first group of teachers other than Almaas, Johnson, and Muqaddam was ordained. In 1987, the basic teachings of the Diamond Approach were organized and offered as the Diamond Heart Training, and the work is sometimes referred to by this name. Experiencing steady growth and expansion, (as of 2012) the Ridhwan Foundation offers groups in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand with approximately 4000 students, 120 ordained teachers, and active seminary training programs in the US and Europe.

Almaas has been prolific in presenting the Diamond Approach through several series of books. His first books described the orientation of the Diamond Approach and one of its foundational concepts, essence (Almaas, 1984/1998). The *Diamond Heart* books 1 through 5 (Almaas, 1987/2000; 1988/2000a; 1990/2000; 1997/2000; 2011) are primarily transcriptions of talks to students and present a deepening series of teachings. The *Diamond Mind* books (Almaas, 1986/2000; 1988/2000b; 1996/2000) present detailed technical explorations of the dynamics of spiritual development. *The Diamond Body* (Almaas, 2002; 2006; 2008) series outlines the methodology and practices of the Diamond Approach. Almaas has also presented a broad overview of the Diamond Approach path (2004), an autobiographical account (1995/2000), and the use of the enneagram in spiritual realization (1998/2000). A number of Almaas' books are also available in translation. Davis (1999) has written an introductory overview of the Diamond Approach, and several other Diamond Approach teachers have written books influenced by the Diamond Approach (Brown, 1999; Maitri, 2001, 2005). For more on

the history of the Diamond Approach, A. H. Almaas, and his writings, see his website (<http://ahalmaas.com>).

Methods of the Diamond Approach

The Diamond Approach uses a wide range of contemplative practices and experiential techniques, including classic forms of concentration and mindfulness meditations, body-sensing practices, chanting, visualization, movement, psychodynamic methods, and somatic work. While many of these practices are similar to those found in other contemplative and psychotherapeutic approaches, they are used in the context of the Diamond Approach in ways that are often unique to its logos and orientation. The books in Almaas' *Diamond Mind* series include case studies and examples of students working with him and give a flavor of the main methods of the Diamond Approach.

Inquiry

Inquiry is both the primary source for the Diamond Approach's map of inner experience and spiritual development and its primary method (Almaas, 2002). Described as the open and open-ended investigation into one's experience in the present moment, inquiry leads to greater awareness of present experience, a fuller understanding of that experience, and freedom for the unfolding, expansion, and evolution of consciousness. The practice of inquiry contains many subtleties and undergoes its own process of development as the student's soul matures. Initially, inquiry is taught and practiced as a specific method for exploring present experience with a teacher, with a fellow practitioner, or alone. With sufficient experience and understanding of the practice, inquiry becomes spontaneous, a way of being in the world. Although one still practices it as a specific method, it becomes recognizable as an ongoing process of exploring all

experience in a deeper, freer, and more open way. Ultimately, the Diamond Approach sees inquiry and the understanding it leads to as a co-emergence of individual experience and the dynamic unfolding of being.

At the beginning of the path, a student practicing inquiry is primarily exploring the surface layers of his or her experience: the thoughts, feelings, or sensations that arise in response to a particular question or topic. Insofar as one is identified with the ego-self, one's range of experience will be limited to those experiences that can be incorporated into its more-or-less predefined set of self-images. Inquiry systematically challenges this range. This practice calls for self-compassion, curiosity, resilience, steadfastness, sincerity, a love of truth for its own sake, and other qualities. At the same time, it reveals the limitations and impediments to these qualities, exposing the unconscious dynamics and imprints underlying and reinforcing them. This exposure allows understanding of these limitations and leads to the recovery and deeper integration of essential qualities. In this way, inquiry is a self-reinforcing practice.

With maturation, the practice of inquiry will naturally open up the student's consciousness to deeper states of being, more expanded capacities for experience, and more spiritually mature traits of consciousness. Two primary conditions allow inquiry to unfold in an optimal way. The first is the capacity for some degree of essential presence, and the second is a sincere interest in, and love for, the truth for its own sake. In addition, each essential aspect contributes unique capacities and support for inquiry, including, for example, the Will aspect (with its characteristics of resilience and steadfastness), the Compassion aspect (with an open-hearted tolerance toward all experience, including pain), the Curiosity aspect (bringing an interest and even joy in the process of inquiry),

and the Strength aspect (with a robust, courageous, and impassioned engagement with one's immediate experience). The practice of inquiry calls on these qualities of Being while, at the same time, developing the student's capacity to recognize these qualities as part of their own being. Almaas' book, *Spacecruiser Inquiry* (2002), describes the stages of inquiry and the importance of these and other essential aspects for inquiry.

The Practice of Inquiry

Inquiry is always focused on present experience. The attitude of inquiry is open to whatever might arise in experience, regardless of whether or not it is familiar, comfortable, or expected and however an experience might arise somatically, emotionally, and cognitively. This openness reveals the inclusive stance of inquiry. It is open-ended in the sense that it has no particular goal. While inquiry may lead to experiences of unconditional love, will, clarity, or joy (as well as many other essential qualities), none of these are given primacy. Rather, inquiry continually leads to greater presence, aliveness, understanding, freedom, and other open-ended qualities of experience.

Any experience can be the starting point for inquiry, although in the context of a Diamond Approach group teaching, a specific focus for an inquiry is typically given. These focused inquiries are intended to support students' personal exploration of the teachings. Whether it begins with a specific topic or not, inquiry tends to proceed in an integrative way which includes perceptions, memories, insights, emotions, body sensations, intuition, and awareness of subtle energies. When memories arise, they are explored in one's present experience; for example, through the sensations or emotions that the memories trigger. Associations to past experiences can deepen understanding of

patterns. As inquiry proceeds from one experience to another, awareness tends to open to deeper levels of experience and, eventually, direct and immediate experiences of true nature.

Among the barriers to realization inquiry exposes are psychodynamic imprints of early history, structural limitations such as identification with oneself as an ego-self or with primitive instinctual drives, or with so-called phenomenological issues rooted in misunderstandings of the perception and experience of true nature. As these issues are worked through and understood, the energy bound up in them is made available to consciousness, leading to a shift in experience. This shift may feel like an insight, a release of energy, a strong (or subtle) emotional state, or a spaciousness in one's awareness. However, these kinds of shifts are not its aim, and they are not final. Instead, they open one to a deeper experience of true nature or to a deeper issue or obstacle. Although inquiry follows a thread of experience, it is rarely linear and often surprising in what it reveals.

Developmental and Supportive Practices

The Diamond Approach also uses certain practices to develop specific capacities and to help illuminate distortions, obscurations, and opacities in one's consciousness. Since *presence* is the central doorway this path uses to access all aspects and dimensions of reality, there are specific practices that are particularly emphasized to develop the capacity to sense presence directly. Practices that fall into this category include Sensing, Looking, and Listening (a body-sensing practice that is practiced continuously at every stage of the journey), and the *Kath* meditation (a concentration practice which serves many functions but whose central purpose at the beginning of the path is to develop

grounded presence). Other methods are used strategically at various points of the teaching to invite specific essential aspects or dimensions of reality into one's awareness. These include various chants, visualizations, and concentration and awareness practices. These methods have the additional function of preparing one's consciousness to more fully engage the practice of inquiry. Body-centered practices are also important to the Diamond Approach as support for inquiry and unfoldment of experience. The use of somatic practices within the logos of the Diamond Approach is reflected in the name given to these practices, *Diasomatic Inquiry*, or, "inquiry through the body."

Formats

There are two main formats used by the Ridhwan School to disseminate the teachings of the Diamond Approach. It is taught primarily through personal contact in a private session with a teacher trained and ordained in the Diamond Approach. (Since the Ridhwan School is recognized in the U.S. as a church, teachers are considered ministers and, following a lengthy training and assessment process, are ordained to teach the Diamond Approach.) Focused on the student's immediate experience, these private sessions reflect the open and open-ended nature of inquiry most directly. Sessions may be, at various times and in attunement with the student's needs, supportive, confrontational, focused on the teacher-student relationship, or quietly contemplative. *Diasomatic Inquiry* is usually a central part of private sessions as well.

Generally, students are also part of an ongoing group within the Ridhwan School, and these groups include both large group teaching meetings and smaller open-ended groups facilitated by a Diamond Approach teacher. Teaching meetings are often scheduled over a three-day period or in a week-long retreat format and may be residential

or not. At a typical three-hour large group teaching meeting, the group will meditate together, the teacher will present a talk on the material, and students will engage in a focused inquiry exercise with others (usually in dyads or triads) to explore the topic first-hand.

While these formats have served as the central organizing structures of this path, they continue to evolve along with the teaching itself. It should also be emphasized that students continue their practice of inquiry, meditation, and, from time to time, other specific practices, in their daily lives. At the heart of the Diamond Approach is the recognition that one's ordinary, day-to-day life is the optimal context to practice and live fully one's realization.

Central Concepts

Before presenting some of the most important concepts in the Diamond Approach, it is necessary to reiterate the challenge of presenting the subtlety, depth, and richness of these concepts in a few words. It usually takes many days of teaching to introduce them to students and many years to integrate them into one's life and spiritual work. Also reiterated is the sense of the Diamond Approach as an organic and dynamic revelation. These concepts are central in the Diamond Approach at the present time, and as a living tradition, they are subject to revision and expansion. Perhaps most importantly, all are encouraged to test them in their own experience.

Essence and Presence

Almaas' first published writing dealt with *presence* and *essence*, their various manifestations, and the ways they become obscured from consciousness, and these concepts continue to be of central importance in the Diamond Approach (Almaas,

1984/1998). Generally, Almaas has used the terms *essence* and *true nature* interchangeably, but sometimes he has used *essence* to refer to the manifestation of true nature within the individual, and *true nature* to refer to the ontological nature of all experience and the fundamental ground of being. True nature is pure, unconditioned, unconditional, timeless, and boundless. However, it differentiates into specific qualities and dimensions much as white light differentiates into the full spectrum of colors. *Presence* refers to the central experiential property of essence, the self-aware inner nature of experience, and the ground of being. Generally thinned or nonexistent in ordinary experience, presence is often experienced initially as fullness and richness of experience, a present-centered immediacy, and a unified medium of consciousness. It is also often experienced as spacious or flowing.

Among the differentiated qualities of essence are Strength, Compassion, Will, Joy, Power, Intelligence, Curiosity, Personhood, Identity, and many others. The Diamond Approach offers a detailed understanding with precise experiential qualities and functions for each of them. For example, the Strength essence is the foundation for experiences of vitality, dynamism, energy, initiative, separation, and autonomy as well as strength. Initially, it may appear to inner awareness as a red color. As this aspect of essence arises in a more open and developed consciousness, it is also the foundation for discriminating awareness and living according to true nature rather than the fixations, reifications, and contractions of the ego-self. Each essential aspect has similarly unique and multi-layered experiential qualities and functions as well as emotional, cognitive, and somatic issues associated with it. The methods of the Diamond Approach help students recognize and work through the unconscious conflicts and issues that obscure the natural manifestation

of the essential aspects and facilitate maturation so that essence can be experienced and expressed more completely and freely.

Soul

The Diamond Approach understands the *soul* to be the living organ of consciousness; a field of presence, awareness, perception, knowing, and functioning. This use of the term *soul* is based on its use in ancient Western thought as the self rather than its use in many contemporary psychological systems. Roughly equivalent to individual consciousness, the soul is the medium through which all individual experience takes place and the vital energy of sentient beings. Thus, the soul is an organ (or organism) of consciousness and the expression of being. The soul's intrinsic properties include sensitivity, impressionability, dynamism, and potentiality. When the soul is influenced by essence, she embodies and expresses the qualities of true nature—spaciousness, freedom, and full aliveness, for example. [FOOTNOTE. Almas typically uses the feminine when referring to the soul. A thorough discussion of this choice can be found in his book *Inner Journey Home* (2004).] Furthermore, as a living organ of consciousness, the soul develops and matures. Its potential is to develop in accordance with reality manifesting through essential aspects, but because of its impressionability and potentiality, the soul can also be shaped by the structures of ego and the imprints of conditioning. Thus, the soul expresses her intrinsic properties in various degrees of distortion or transparency in every human experience and at every stage of development, whether one is living as the ego-self, essential presence, or transcendent nonduality.

Initially, the soul is patterned in distinct ways by early experiences, its manifestation as a physical body, and its interactions with complex social and cultural

environments. In the perspective of the Diamond Approach, these experiences allow the soul to develop the capacities necessary to become more explicitly aware of the faceted nature of consciousness itself and to realize and embody more of the full range of essential aspects and dimensions of being. Experiencing oneself as a bounded and contracted ego-self, while limited, is still an experience that is arising in the field of the soul. If the soul identifies herself as an ego-self, then the properties of the soul will not have the freedom to express themselves fully. The soul's sensitivity becomes dulled, impressionability becomes brittle, dynamism is deadened, and potential is unrealized. As unconscious material is understood and digested through the practice of inquiry, one becomes more transparent to to his or her essential nature. Furthermore, as needs for reflection, support, and nourishment on many levels are met, the soul evolves and matures, becoming increasingly self-aware and self-reflective, more integrated, more transparent to essence, more fully functional, and more free.

The Development of the Soul and the Theory of Holes

One of the most important contributions of the Diamond Approach is its comprehensive and systematic understanding of how early childhood experiences cause individuals to lose touch with the essential qualities inherent to the human soul and the implications of these losses for optimal mental health and full realization. These childhood experiences have a direct impact on spiritual development in adult life. No parent or early environment can fully recognize the essential qualities innately present in infants and children or provide the conditions for the child's soul to fully develop according to essence. When these various forms of essence are not supported—or actively discouraged—the child loses access to essence and a compensating ego structure

takes it place. This view does not blame parents and caregivers; it simply recognizes the resulting developmental arrests and “forgetting” that affect virtually everyone.

This loss of direct access to essence leaves a gap in consciousness, a dissociation referred to as a *hole*, and this hole remains largely unconscious because it is covered up by a compensating ego structure. The core of the ego structure is a *self-image*, a set of thoughts, feelings, embodied energy patterns, and relational tendencies with which the individual identifies. For example, a mother may discourage her infant’s natural attempts to separate. The infant perceives that his or her intensely strong energy is upsetting to the mother and restrains himself/herself, leaving an experience of weakness, frustration, and deficiency. In adult life, this can manifest as a feeling of deficient emptiness, incapacity, and lack of deep fulfillment in many life situations as the individual is unconsciously identified with the self-image of being small and weak. The adult compensates for this weakness, imitating or approximating the “lost” quality of essential strength and vitality with aggression, for example.

There are many such ways that direct contact with essence is lost or abandoned in early development and many attempts in the adult ego-personality to cope with this loss. However, all involve avoidance of the hole resulting from the loss of contact with essence. Therefore, the methods of the Diamond Approach encourage students to inquire into the self-image in order to experience the corresponding loss of essence that is always at the root of a hole. When the self-image and the hole are explicitly experienced from the perspective of present reality, the self-image and the experience of a hole dissolve. In this process, what felt like a deficient emptiness (the hole) is revealed as a contracted form of spacious consciousness, and the specific form of essence obscured by the ego

structure is free to manifest. To continue our example of the Theory of Holes, exploring one's aggressive reactivity and reactive anger leads to an underlying feeling of frustration, weakness, and deficient emptiness, which if explored with sufficient sincerity and openness, reveals an experience of space and release. Rather than stopping the process of inquiry here, the Diamond Approach encourages students to continue exploring. Typically, an experience of genuine, unconditional strength and robust vitality arises in this space. Each aspect of essence has particular issues associated with it and a particular experience of the hole that is felt when that aspect of essence is lost to consciousness.

Personal Essence, the Pearl Beyond Price

The Diamond Approach is oriented to living and expressing one's realization in daily life. Students and teachers are expected to engage in all the activities of contemporary culture, including relationships, family, work, service, and community life. The various issues, difficulties, and accomplishments that naturally arise from these activities become material for the practice of inquiry and the soul's maturation. The Diamond Approach views the common issues of engaging with the world, such as responsibility, autonomy, intimacy, power, sexuality, and physicality, not as problems to be transcended but as doorways to further realization and development of the potentials of consciousness.

The Diamond Approach helps individuals systematically recognize, disidentify from, and metabolize a broad range of ego structures formed during childhood. At the same time, students discover that any of the ego structures, self-images, and conditioned expressions of the ego-self (anger, fear, contraction, for example) can lead to essence.

This combination of disidentification and discovery is central in the processes of the Diamond Approach. Through these processes, an inner autonomy of being can be developed. True autonomy here means freedom from the restrictive influences of unconscious self-images, reactivity, and relational patterns. It is based on unconditional value for one's being and integrity in one's actions. Qualities of essence are integrated into one's personal being, and the qualities of essence enable harmonious and effective functioning. The soul naturally embodies and expresses respect, contactfulness, and personalness. Within the Diamond Approach, this result of embodying a mature, personal, integrated, functional, and consistent expression of essence in the world is referred to as the *Personal Essence* or the *Pearl Beyond Price* and is described in Almaas' (1988/2000b) book by the same name.

This essential aspect is often experienced as a soft, round, and full presence that feels luminescent and authentic. In contrast to other essential aspects that are whole and complete in themselves, the Pearl is the one quality of essence that develops. This means that the depth and breadth of the Pearl can expand throughout the spiritual journey by integrating more qualities and dimensions of essence in more areas of life. This allows the soul to experience multiple aspects of essence simultaneously. Through this development, the soul feels increasingly personal, dignified, and heartfelt. Furthermore, this personalness is not based on self-images or imprints of the past. As the soul opens to her boundless nature, the Personal Essence integrates more and more dimensions of being, bringing these riches into the world through personal and human expression. In this way, the Personal Essence resolves one of the great paradoxes of spiritual work: how to be personal and boundless at the same time.

Self-Realization and the Point of Existence

The Diamond Approach recognizes that self-recognition is an inherent potential of human consciousness. The soul can become directly aware of her inner nature in ways that are different from the conventional sense of identity constructed by the ego. This self-knowing can be direct, immediate, free from the influences of the past, and independent of the reflections of others. The formation of the ego-identity has been the central focus of self-psychologists, most notably Kohut (1971) and Kernberg (1975), and the Diamond Approach has drawn on this body of knowledge to explore the possibilities of self-recognition beyond the ego-identity. In *The Point of Existence: Transformations of Narcissism in Self-Realization*, Almaas (1996/2000) described the process by which individuals realize *essential identity* or the *Point* and the phenomenology of this essential aspect.

The Point is experienced directly as the presence of the true inner nature of the self. As the ego-identity develops, one loses touch with the essential identity and one's sense of value, uniqueness, and significance come to be derived from self-images that require mirroring from others. Realization of the Point requires that one venture into an empty void, where the shell of the ego-identity no longer functions to cover up the insecurity and meaninglessness that lies at the core of the ego, the hole of identity. This is understandably a challenging part of the Work and requires confronting painful wounds as the narcissistic supports for identity fall away revealing the ego's inherent deficient emptiness. From this deep sense of deficiency and emptiness, first space and then the Point arise, infusing consciousness with an inherent sense of value and meaning. Almaas has called this aspect the Point since it often is experienced as a timeless, dimensionless

point of light. The need for external confirmation of one's identity fades away, as well as the corresponding need for inner confirmation through self-representations. As the Point, one knows oneself to be essence, and as this realization of essential identity deepens, the sense of self-recognition can expand far beyond the familiar boundaries of the physical body and self-images based on the past into the deeper dimensions of being.

Diamond Vehicles

As one's realization deepens and as one identifies more with essence than the ego-self, deeper and more subtle types of wisdom are needed on a spiritual path. The Diamond Approach details how organized patterns of knowledge, known as *Diamond Vehicles*, can arise in the soul. Diamond Vehicles are often experienced as messengers or teachers, supporting the soul's development at particular junctures of the spiritual path. They disclose precise knowledge of the relationship of essence to the soul and what is needed for further realization. This knowledge presents itself in the form of a structure composed of all essential aspects, each related to specific concerns on the spiritual path. They gather essential aspects to support the soul's unfolding, providing an understanding of how each specific quality of essence contributes to the soul's development, while also revealing the obstacles to further realization.

The essential qualities are often experienced in these structures as illuminated gems of wisdom with a sense of aesthetic rapture, and each Diamond Vehicle has a specific shape and function. The diamond-like nature of these vehicles reflects a clarity and objectivity as the knowledge of these vehicles addresses fundamental issues common to all human beings, especially those on a spiritual path. Various Diamond Vehicles show how each essential aspect contributes to understanding, pleasure, love, knowledge,

humanness, and the support for one's identity as true nature. While these and other such wisdom vehicles have been identified and are part of the advanced teachings of the Diamond Approach, Almaas has indicated that there are perhaps many other vehicles.

Boundless Dimensions

Being has both personal and boundless dimensions. The latter refers to the ways the soul experiences the infinite nature of reality beyond the structures (both egoic and essential) of a separate self-entity. Phenomenologically, the boundless dimensions are accessed by inquiring into the inner nature of all experience. Any experience is a differentiation of being into a rich, wondrous, and ultimately loving manifestation of reality. Further inquiry reveals the inner nature of this rich beauty as a pure presence without differentiation, and as this presence, reality comes to know itself by being itself. Inquiry into the pure presence of an experience reveals its inner nature to be pure awareness, free of all concepts. Co-emergent with these boundless dimensions is the constant upwelling, flow, and completely fresh expression of being in each moment. The source of all phenomena is an absolute emptiness and mystery beyond being and non-being. Almaas has named these co-emergent boundless dimensions, respectively, Divine Love, the Supreme, the Nonconceptual (or the Nameless), the Logos, and the Absolute.

The Absolute is the most fundamental and subtle dimension, and each subsequent dimension is considered increasingly differentiated and knowable, although all are fundamentally inseparable, much like the physical dimensions of height, width, and length. These dimensions form the ontological ground of all experience and phenomena. The Absolute provides the basis of spaciousness, openness, and unlimited potential in all

inner and outer experience. The Logos is the source of unfolding and transformation. Pure awareness enables the capacity for perception. Pure presence gives rise to the capacity for discrimination and knowing. Divine Love is the source of differentiated essential qualities and eventually, affect. When the Personal Essence arises in the boundless dimensions, they are experienced in a personal, though non-egoic, way, and they are expressed in authentic functioning. When the Point arises on the boundless dimensions, one knows oneself as each dimension in a nondual way.

While articulating these dimensions of true nature, the Diamond Approach also describes the specific issues and obstacles involved in their realization and integration, increasing the potential for direct experience and realization of these subtle dimensions. As human beings, we lose touch with our boundless nature through misunderstandings about the nature of reality. These misunderstandings arise from several sources, including an instinctual orientation to the external, that is, the surface of phenomena without recognition of their inner nature, and a variety of psychodynamic issues related to the development of a sense of separate identity. Through direct exploration, we can come to recognize these boundless dimensions and work through the veils and obstacles to each. Thus, spiritual teachings that are profoundly deep and subtle become more accessible to a wider body of students.

Journeys of Ascent and Descent

The Diamond Approach is generally taught to students in a systematic fashion. The teachings of the more accessible essential aspects are followed by the teachings of Pearl and the Point. This is generally followed by exploration of the Diamond Vehicles and the Boundless Dimensions. According to Almaas, this order reflects the unfolding of

the Diamond Approach in his own experience. The teachings are also organized in this manner because accumulated experience has shown that the understanding of the more subtle teachings requires considerable learning, maturation, and integration of many diverse spiritual qualities and capacities. In the logos of the Diamond Approach, this arrangement of the teachings and the soul's realization is considered the *Journey of Ascent*. The more advanced teachings of the Diamond Approach also reflect the unfolding and expression of the Absolute as it becomes manifest in the world. These teachings of the *Journey of Descent* emphasize the integration of the various qualities of essence (especially the Diamond Vehicles) into one's daily life in the world (Almaas, 2004). This includes the understanding of freedom from within the transcendent and manifest perspectives of the five boundless dimensions.

View of Totality

Almaas has continuously acknowledged that no path can provide a full and final description of reality, and indeed, this view is expressed in the Diamond Approach's continuing evolution as a spiritual system. Ultimately, true nature is beyond any concepts and descriptions and beyond any system or teaching. In the broadest sense, the Diamond Approach does not take any of its descriptions of the spiritual path to be final. For example, from the perspective of the boundless dimensions, the nature of reality is clearly nondual. At the same time, human consciousness generally arises through dualistic structures. To be a "true individual," means knowing oneself as both boundless presence and a unique expression of that presence. The Diamond Approach recognizes that all experiences, perspectives, and dimensions are co-emergent and always existing, at least in potential. It does not privilege one above another. The perspective of a child is not less

valid than that of a realized adult; in some ways, a child's consciousness is more open and fluid and in other ways less developed and capable. The most contracted and painful experiences express reality as do the most sublime; both are forms that reality can take. Similarly, absolute transcendent emptiness is not more fundamentally real or valuable than the manifest beauty of the world or the normal experience of taking a shower. Reality includes all the potentials of existence and non-existence, an ineluctable mystery that can never be encompassed by any individual consciousness or spiritual path. Because it is so radically open, this view includes all other views, including views of individual realization, enlightenment, mystical union, and liberation. Almaas has called this all-inclusive perspective the *View of Totality*, and its implications for both daily life and the spiritual journey are limitless. The view of totality opens up the understanding of unconditional freedom independent from any spiritual or material condition.

Assessment

Contributions

Since the Diamond Approach is continuing to develop, often in ways that are new and surprising, both to its founders and its students, it is difficult to assess its contributions and challenges. Probably its most important contribution is simply that it provides a precisely articulated view along with a core practice, inquiry, which can be engaged by many students at varying levels of personal and spiritual development. Thus, it makes spiritual work more widely available. Within this broad contribution, several specific contributions can be identified.

Nonduality of psychological and spiritual work. The Diamond Approach has several particular contributions for those pursuing spiritual realization and maturity and

for transpersonal psychologists. It is based on the seamlessness of psychological and spiritual work. Rather than seeing these domains as sequential or parallel, the Diamond Approach works with them as aspects of one whole. This perspective has several implications. It makes it easier to recognize the influence of essence on development, even in early life, and the influence of psychodynamics, even in the higher stages of transpersonal development. For example, the Strength essence mentioned in previous examples functions initially for the infant's survival. One may recognize this in the infant's loud and robust attempts to get fed or comforted and, somewhat later, as the infant comes to know herself or himself as an independent and autonomous person. This aspect of essence functions in a similar way throughout the lifespan, for example, supporting life transitions and healthy relationships. In transpersonal stages of development, the Strength essence expresses itself in dynamic and courageous inquiry and other spiritual practices and in the discernment and discriminating wisdom characteristic of spiritual maturity (Walsh, 2000). On the other hand, early imprints regarding strength, boldness, courage, and anger (as well as other essential aspects) limit the soul's maturity even in very refined stages of spiritual realization. While it is sometimes useful to discriminate psychological and spiritual elements of human development, in the view of the Diamond Approach, each reflects and supports the soul's needs at particular developmental stages; this development is one unified process.

The unity of the psychological and the spiritual is also evident in the Diamond Approach's understanding of the inner critic or superego (Brown, 1999). Some transpersonal and spiritual approaches have also recognized a *spiritual superego* inasmuch as evaluative and judgmental comparisons inhibit spiritual development and

further reinforce the narcissistic tendencies of the ego-self. Both Washburn (1994) and Wilber (1997) have noted that the *repressive barrier* formed by self-judgment is a major obstacle to the transpersonal stages of human development.

While the superego and other mechanisms of self-judgment are well known in psychology, the emphasis in the Diamond Approach is freeing consciousness from its limitations and not simply removing a source of suffering. Early in the work with the Diamond Approach, students are taught to recognize and defend against the cognitive, emotional, and somatic inhibitions of the superego. This allows the open and immediate exploration of present experience necessary for spiritual development. Furthermore, the Diamond Approach brings its understanding of essence into the work with the superego. Brown (1999) has shown how various essential aspects such as Compassion, Strength, and Value are necessary for a more complete resolution of these obstacles. While the superego and its impacts have been described by many psychological theorists and some spiritual teachers, it has been seen simply as a barrier. However, the Diamond Approach's orientation is that all phenomena are expressions of True Nature, regardless of how they may arise in our experience. From this orientation, the superego can be seen as a distortion or approximation of essential qualities of guidance, support, and protection. This view casts the superego, and indeed all egoic structures, in a profoundly different light. Rather than a structure to be rejected (further fueling the tendencies toward self-judgment), the superego reflects a distortion of essence. Through a combination of defending oneself and understanding the roots of the superego, the soul can reclaim more of its inherent depth.

These well-established methods for reducing the repressive influences of the superego are one example of the broader metapsychological insights of the Diamond Approach. One of the primary strengths of the Diamond Approach is the ways it draws on extensive knowledge of how the ego develops and functions. The ego and its age-appropriate structures are seen as necessary developmental achievements, providing capacities for effective functioning and spiritual discovery. It adds to this knowledge an understanding of how the ego also inhibits the soul's further development and how to help students systematically metabolize and release the ego in order to further purify and develop the soul. Taken together, these views and practices offer a major contribution to the practical methodology of transpersonal practice and exemplify the nonduality of the psychological and the spiritual.

Personalness and the Personal Essence. Many spiritual wisdom traditions hold the view (some explicitly, others implicitly) that the realized condition is at odds with living a rich personal life in the conventional world. The realm of personal experience is seen by many traditions as a limited expression of the ego-self that needs to be transcended in order to realize the ultimate impersonal truth. The Diamond Approach's understanding of the Personal Essence or the Pearl Beyond Price, and its emphasis on the realization and development of this essential aspect, clarifies the relationship between the human experience of personalness, authentic contact, and functioning in the world with the boundless experiences of nonduality. In order to be a complete human being, the personal must be experienced as nondual and the nondual must be experienced as personal (Almaas, 1988/2000b). The emphasis on the development of the Pearl is thus an important contribution of the Diamond Approach for practitioners of any tradition, since

this approach to spiritual development offers an embodied perspective that is more aligned with the contemporary lifestyles of the Western world.

Boundless Dimensions. As described above, Almaas has identified five fundamental dimensions of reality. Each of these has been described in other spiritual wisdom traditions, and often one or another is posited as the ultimate nature of reality. However, the Diamond Approach provides an inclusive view that recognizes each dimension without privileging one over another. These five dimensions are co-emergent and, in the view of the Diamond Approach, must be included in a full account of reality.

View of Totality. From the perspective of the View of Totality as articulated in the Diamond Approach, there is no particular end state that is more real or ultimate than any other. While this view is consistent with some of the deepest teachings of various spiritual traditions, it contrasts with many popular views of spiritual development. The View of Totality has arisen within this context and can be seen as both a response to, and a further contribution towards, the evolutionary needs of spirituality. It posits a view that includes the insights and realizations of all traditions and paths from every walk of life; in fact, it is fundamentally an openness to all possible experiences, both known and unknown. This view provides an orientation to the spiritual journey that is more aligned with the contemporary reality in that it does not require faith in, allegiance to, or cultivation of any particular condition of realization. Moreover, since the View of Totality is nonhierarchical, it also recognizes the experience of the ego-self, for example, to be just as valuable an expression of reality as is the revelation of a sublime nondual realm. This perspective provides an all-inclusive orientation to the full range of experience—both dual and nondual—that many traditional systems do not embrace. In

order to distinguish this View of Totality from a naïve relativism, in his more recent teachings, Almaas has emphasized that the View of Totality can only be realized after one has begun to integrate both the personal and the transcendent dimensions of essence.

[**FOOTNOTE:** As of this writing, Almaas is preparing a manuscript on the View of Totality that will deal extensively with this material.]

Challenges

Almaas' writings have contributed to the dialogue of transpersonal psychology (e.g., Cortright, 1997). Wilber has commented on the Diamond Approach, offering both sincere appreciation and pointed critiques (Wilber, 1997). Much of this debate has centered on the nature of spiritual experiences during childhood. Almaas has responded extensively to Wilber's critiques on this matter from theoretical and experiential perspectives (Almaas, 2004). According to Almaas, this dialogue has helped to clarify the specific understanding of the Diamond Approach and its relation to other transpersonal psychologies. It has also revealed how difficult it is to compare one system to another. In general, these discussions have helped the entire field recognize the need for increasingly precise understanding of the dynamics of transpersonal development. This precision helps to highlight distinct differences as well as to underscore the many fundamental commonalities that exist among the various paradigms of transpersonal psychology.

One of the main criticisms of the Diamond Approach is that it is syncretistic and does not really possess a unique logos and understanding. Almaas has continually emphasized that the Diamond Approach is its own teaching with a precise logic, organization, and capacity to develop the human soul, and that it has arisen from his direct experience (as well as the experiences of his collaborators and students). As a

modern teaching, it exists in parallel with many other psychological and spiritual methodologies. Almaas has deliberately chosen to use concepts and terms from various academic, psychological, and spiritual traditions in his teachings because he feels these terms provide the most accurate conceptual and linguistic means of conveying the Diamond Approach's teachings. His use of specific terms and concepts from other systems opens his teachings to charges of appropriation. However, he has expressed that he is using these concepts to articulate the experiential wisdom of the Diamond Approach within its own logos and that his use of certain terms is not intended to fully match the way they are used in their original context.

In his published works as well as his trainings, Almaas has also compared and contrasted the Diamond Approach with concepts and paradigms from other spiritual traditions as he understands them. While such comparisons serve particular functions for teaching students on a path, they also naturally lend themselves to criticism, especially in scholarly circles. He may not be simply appropriating but misappropriating. In this regard as well, Almaas has expressed that his intention is not to interpret other traditions *per se*, but rather to use those concepts and practices as a means of more clearly elucidating the teachings of the Diamond Approach. This carries with it certain theoretical and practical problems that are not easily resolved by any modern transpersonal or spiritual system. Such use of concepts and practices from other traditions remains a question for the Diamond Approach.

Although still under the direction of Almaas, the Ridhwan School, the organization with responsibility for offering the Diamond Approach teachings, training teachers, and overseeing the activities of DA teachers and students, is growing and

transitioning. Almaas is still active in teaching and writing but moving toward a less direct role in the organization itself. At the same time, the organization continues to grow at an increasing rate. As with many such organizations, it remains to be seen how the organization will respond to a next generation of leaders and teachers and how this will affect the Diamond Approach teachings. In conclusion, it appears that the Diamond Approach has reached a broad level of acceptance and influence and will continue to inform the field of transpersonal psychology as well as the development of humanity in general.

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