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—Ken Wilber

THE DIAMOND APPROACH

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHINGS OF
A. H. ALMAAS
JOHN DAVIS

“I myself can recommend the Diamond Approach as probably the most balanced of the widely available spiritual psychologies/therapies.”

—Ken Wilber

“The work of A. H. Almaas places him among the greatest psychologists alive today. His brilliant vision of the human psyche embraces our Being from early development to the highest realms of spirit. From this he then offers a new language and direct approach for awakening to this manifold nature.”

—Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart*, coauthor of *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*

“This is the first book to bring the main ideas of the Diamond Approach together in one place. That makes it an invaluable resource for every serious student of consciousness and psychology. The surprise is that this resource is delectable, a juicy morsel that engages the mind and the heart of the reader. It’s at the top of my list for recommended reading this year.”

—Sherry Ruth Anderson, coauthor of *The Feminine Face of God* and *The Cultural Creatives*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Diamond Approach has been developed and taught over the last twenty-five years by Hameed Ali (known chiefly by his pen name, A. H. Almaas), who is widely recognized as a leader in the integration of spirituality and psychology. This is the first book to introduce the complete spectrum of his teachings to a general audience.

JOHN DAVIS is a senior student of A. H. Almaas and a teacher of the Diamond Approach. He is also a professor of psychology at the Metropolitan State College of Denver and a senior adjunct faculty member at the Naropa Institute.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHINGS OF A. H. ALMAAS



John Davis

with selections from the writing of A. H. Almaas



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To the Work and the many struggles that bring us to it.

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CONTENTS

Foreword (by Hameed Ali)

Preface

Introduction

1. THE ORIENTATION OF THE DIAMOND APPROACH

The Call, the Path, and the Realization

The Diamond Approach to the Work

2. THE METHOD OF INQUIRY

Being and Understanding

An Inquiry with a Student

Intimacy

3. THE SOUL

The Swamp Thing

Self and Soul

4. SPACE

Attachment and Space

The Phenomenology of Space

5. ESSENCE

Essence

Essence Is the Life

6. THE THEORY OF HOLES: ABANDONING AND RECOVERING ESSENCE

The Theory of Holes

Essence Is the Teacher

7. THE PERSONAL ESSENCE: THE PEARL BEYOND PRICE

Spirituality and Personalness

8. SELF-REALIZATION AND ESSENTIAL IDENTITY: THE POINT

Identity

Self-Realization

9. TRUE NATURE AND THE BOUNDLESS DIMENSIONS

Divine Love

Pure Being and the Supreme

Nonconceptual Reality and the Nameless

The Logos

The Absolute

Epilogue: The Flame of the Search, Guidance, and the Love of Truth

Bibliography

Sources and Credits

Acknowledgments

Index

E-mail Sign-Up

FOREWORD

I NEVER INTENDED to create the Diamond Approach. It emerged and developed under its own intelligence and dynamics. It is true I am the primary person responsible for presenting it, but I have been more a vehicle and, much of the time, a guinea pig than one who intentionally developed it.

At the beginning, I had no idea that a particular complete teaching was unfolding. With an intense interest in the inner journey of liberation, I was doing all I could to be real and open to the timeless truths of spirit. I was passionately committed to finding the truth of what a human being is, what spirit is, and what reality is. It was not easy, and for some time, not much seemed to be happening. Yet I noticed that at times when my love of truth became selfless, when I was loving truth for its own sake and not for any personal gain, my experience opened up and deepened in ways I did not expect. I thought that my work was beginning to bear fruit when the first discoveries of soul and spirit Essence occurred, but it has gone far beyond that. My experience increasingly became a flow of discoveries, realizations, and insights, revealing amazing and unimagined qualities and dimensions of Being. As these discoveries emerged, I found that they were accompanied by precise and detailed knowledge about them. My inner journey became an adventure that was thrilling and, at times, terrifying.

It took me a few years to recognize that this surprising unfoldment and revelation of the mystery of Being was not only for me personally. The arising of the inner spiritual guidance of Being, and my recognition of it as such, led me at some point to recognize that a wisdom path was unfolding. I came to see that a contemporary teaching appropriate for our times was forming. I began to see that it was spirit itself, the true nature of Being, that was revealing this knowledge and developing this teaching. I became a willing and happy guinea pig, going through the various experiences that Being was revealing in my consciousness. I saw that my accompanying struggles with the barriers were necessary for Being to reveal the knowledge of how Essence is related to egoic experience in a very precise way.

Being has revealed its mysteries in my experience in a way that has profoundly impacted my consciousness and transformed it. The person that I am has steadily become a vehicle, servant, and mouthpiece for the truth that is being revealed as the Diamond Approach. The result is the deepening and expanding realization of my real identity as true nature. This identity is the same ultimate spiritual truth that I humbly and gratefully serve. And the beautiful thing is that this process turned out to be identical with the development of the new teaching of the Diamond Approach.

A few associates and my first students also became guinea pigs for the development of the new teaching. The teaching developed as my own personal needs, and those of my associates and the students I was working with, invoked Being to present the qualities and dimensions that were necessary. The Diamond Approach thus developed as a response to real needs in our contemporary times and not as a theoretical construct or a synthesis of existing teachings.

The author of the present book, Dr. John Davis, is one of the first students who joined this work at its inception. As one of my first committed students, he has witnessed its development and has personally undergone the path of transformation of the Diamond Approach. He writes not only from

what he has heard from me but primarily from his own personal experience and understanding of the new path of wisdom. The fact that he is also a psychologist who teaches transpersonal psychology at the college and graduate levels preeminently qualifies him to give a coherent and accessible overview of the Diamond Approach. He has a great deal of experience in teaching and working with students of the Diamond Approach, and it is clear that he puts it to good use in the present book. The result is a very clear, detailed, but simple overview of the Diamond Approach, written by one who knows the subject matter both intellectually and experientially. Dr. Davis has rendered a great service here, both to the Diamond Approach and to the many readers who want a fresh look at the human potential and its spiritual dimensions.

Hameed A.
Berkeley, California
May 2, 1993

PREFACE

THE DIAMOND APPROACH is a spiritual path based on new insights and timeless wisdom. It has the advantage of recent knowledge about psychological development and spirituality that was not available before. Thus, it provides us with a better understanding of profound, but difficult, spiritual concepts, and it gives us more effective ways to work toward spiritual realization.

Hameed Ali (A. H. Almaas) developed the Diamond Approach and has taught it to small groups of students for more than twenty years. His background includes the study of physics, bioenergetics, depth psychology, and spiritual work. He credits his early teachers and his studies of Sufism, Buddhism, and the Gurdjieff work, among other systems, with helping him to open to the discoveries that led to his understanding. Ali founded the Ridhwan School in 1977 to facilitate his teaching. Until a few years ago, the Diamond Approach was known only by the relatively few students who studied directly with Ali. Now, it is becoming more widely available.

Its two main centers, in California and Colorado, have grown, and there are branches in Seattle, New York, Boston, Hawaii, Michigan, Montana, Canada, Germany, Australia, and elsewhere. Writing under the pen name of A. H. Almaas, Ali has also described parts of this system in a number of books. Some of these are based on transcriptions of talks given to groups of his students, and others provide detailed explanations of various theoretical and applied aspects of the Diamond Approach, supported by case histories. Almaas's books are listed in the bibliography. (Note: Since Hameed Ali is better known through his books, I use his pen name, Almaas, in the title of this book and when referring to him as an author. Otherwise I generally refer to him as Ali.)

Recently, more people interested in spiritual work and the relationship of psychology to spirituality have recognized its value. Jack Kornfield—a popular Buddhist meditation teacher, psychologist, and writer—dedicated his latest book, *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, to Ali. In *The Eye of Spirit*, the well-known writer and theorist Ken Wilber writes, “As a result of this writing, I myself can recommend the Diamond Approach as probably the most balanced of the widely available spiritual psychologies/therapies.” Tony Schwartz, in *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*, called it one of the most useful blends of Eastern and Western insight he has found in his many encounters with transformative systems and schools. Schwartz went on to recommend Ali's books *Essence* and *Diamond Heart, Book 1*, as among the half-dozen best books to begin exploring a “path of wisdom.”

Brant Cortright included Ali's Diamond Approach as one of the main approaches to “transpersonal psychotherapy” (although he acknowledges that it is spiritual work rather than psychotherapy). Cortright places it alongside the work of Ken Wilber, Carl Jung, Stan Grof, and others as being equally important in the integration of spirituality and psychology. Chapters by Ali have also been included in several anthologies on spirituality and personal growth. Graduate courses on the Diamond Approach are taught at The Naropa Institute in Boulder and the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco, and workshops on the Diamond Approach have been part of Esalen Institute's program for several years.

As more people come to be interested in this method, the need for a brief introduction and summary

has become evident. Although personal practice is essential to anyone wishing to really know it, and although the books by Ali describe its philosophy and perspective in great detail, a brief overview introducing the Diamond Approach may support sincere seekers in integrating its various insights.

This book began as notes I was using to teach about the Diamond Approach in my undergraduate and graduate classes. I gradually put them into a form that could be distributed to students. They were reading some of Ali's books and doing exercises to explore their own experience, but they appreciated the overview my notes provided them. Here, I have added material to describe its most important concepts and central methods, and I have supplemented the overview with selections from Ali's writing.

The Introduction gives a flavor of working with the Diamond Approach through my own experiences. Although the rest of the book may be somewhat more abstract, I hope you will get a taste of the personal journey that underlies the concepts. The first two chapters introduce the path and orientation of the Diamond Approach and summarize its central method, Inquiry. The next four chapters present its basic concepts. Soul, space, Essence, and the Theory of Holes are key beginning points for understanding the Diamond Approach. The last three chapters present more advanced material. Two particular qualities of Essence—Personal Essence and Essential Identity—are especially important in the Diamond Approach. They speak to the tricky questions of realizing and integrating our spiritual nature into our lives in the world. The last chapter presents a summary of the advanced teaching on the boundless and egoless dimensions of Being. The Epilogue brings the book back to your journey and to some of the qualities that will support that journey.

This is a very detailed and thorough teaching, and I have had to be selective about what I include. Although this book covers the most central aspects of the Diamond Approach, I have had to leave out others. For example, Ali incorporates the Enneagram into his teaching in several ways. His most recent book, *Facets of Unity: The Enneagram of Holy Ideas*, has significantly expanded the understanding of the Enneagram by showing its connection to Essence and to the Boundless dimensions of Being. He has also provided very detailed and useful descriptions of many states and aspects of Essence that I have chosen not to include here. These are important, but I felt it was equally important to keep the size and scope of this book at a more introductory level.

The Diamond Approach is a whole, and its central features cannot be cleanly or completely separated from one another. The threads that I have teased apart and discussed in separate chapters in this book are really interwoven elements of a larger and infinitely richer tapestry. Thus, we see the same threads turning up in many different contexts within Ali's teaching. The concepts of soul, space, personality, self-image, and Essence, for example, appear in a number of chapters.

Each chapter begins with a brief discussion of an important aspect of the Diamond Approach followed by selections from Ali's writing. These will give you a taste of the Diamond Approach in Ali's original voice and illustrate and expand on the concepts. They may give you a sense of his range, too. Some selections are from talks given to students, which are intended to evoke a certain experiential quality in the students listening to them (for example, the "Swamp Thing" talk in Chapter 3 and some of the excerpts from the Diamond Heart books). Some are carefully detailed conceptual presentations (those from *The Pearl beyond Price* and *The Point of Existence*, for example). Others are personal accounts from Ali's journals describing his own experiences (such as the selection from *Luminous Night's Journey* in Chapter 2).

I have, with Ali's permission, shortened and edited some of these selections. However, he has reviewed them to ensure that they preserve the meaning he originally intended. In several selections, I have deleted comparisons Ali makes between his understanding and a comparable understanding from a spiritual system or psychological theory. I value these kinds of comparisons and honor the wisdom in other spiritual systems. However, in the interest of staying brief and straightforward, I chose to not

include very much comparative analysis. I encourage readers to pursue the various books written by A. H. Almaas (all written under his pen name, A. H. Almaas) in order to get a more accurate and penetrating view.

For those who do not know the Diamond Approach, I hope this book will introduce you to it in a way that is clear and not too complicated. I have assumed that you have a sincere interest and some personal experience with deep psychological growth work or spiritual work. I hope it will enable you to take another step on your journey. I also hope that, if any of the ideas and experiences I describe here are too confusing, they will become clearer along the way.

If you are already involved in a spiritual path, I hope this book will enliven and enrich your study. In many places, it should complement and expand things you already know. In other places, it may challenge you to explore new areas of your own understanding.

For those readers who are already working with the Diamond Approach, I hope this book will support your work. You have probably spent months or years working deeply on material covered in just a few pages here. You may also have encountered these concepts in an order very different from the more linear presentation here. Nevertheless, the overview and descriptions offered here might help give you a sense of the bigger context of your work.

Readers interested in comparative studies of spiritual systems, transpersonal psychologies, and the like should find some help from the Diamond Approach. In particular, it shows the continuity of psychological and spiritual knowledge more clearly and thoroughly than anything available before now.

I would add a caution to all readers. Reading this book is not the same as understanding the Diamond Approach firsthand. It will be useful if it provides clarity about what is already happening in your life and especially if it opens new doors for you. My deepest intention for this book is to offer the Diamond Approach in a way that will facilitate your direct experience of awakening, your development, and the realization of your potential as a human being.

INTRODUCTION

I MET HAMEED ALI in the summer of 1975. At that time, my life was opening up at a tremendous rate. A few years before, I had won a prestigious fellowship for graduate study in experimental psychology and I moved to Boulder for graduate school with my wife and infant son. I was enjoying my studies, my research, and the intellectual challenge of the frontiers of cognitive psychology. I had also begun to discover an entirely different dimension of my life through encounter groups, meditation, hypnosis, biofeedback, and other consciousness-raising techniques. Rock climbing gave me a new sense of confidence and power in my physical body and, along with massage and yoga, woke me up to deep potentials for body-centered growth. Boulder was a hotbed for the human potential movement, and I was trying out as much as I could.

Until my last year of college, my inner life had been fairly narrow—or should I say, shallow. I came from a pretty conventional and sheltered middle-class upbringing. My parents were mostly loving and supportive, but my emotional life was restricted. Aside from angry eruptions once in a while, I had very few strong feelings, positive or negative. Moving to Boulder in my early twenties offered many ways to reconnect with myself.

At the same time, I felt a deep dissatisfaction in my life. As I moved from one method to another, I found myself still unfulfilled. Even as I stepped into challenging and growthful situations, I managed to hide in the background, thinking I was invisible (or wishing I were). My mind was pretty adept at shielding me from anything that would truly alter my world and my sense of self. I was accumulating experiences without changing very much. I was drawn to new and more intense experiences, but I kept running into barriers to letting myself be deeply affected.

In my deepest and quietest moments, I was torn. Many of my experiences felt transforming, but something in my core still felt rotten and afraid. I found I was merely fitting these extraordinary experiences into the same old, two-dimensional framework. Almost immediately they would pale and lose their aliveness. They felt dead; I continued to feel stuck and impoverished. Driven to keep filling myself, to keep my sense of aliveness for more than a moment, I was jumping from one training system, or workshop to another. A haunting sense of deficiency dogged me through all of them.

When a friend told me he had found a new sort of growth work that had impacted him, I was mildly interested. He described it as an emotional housecleaning. This didn't have the same flash appeal as some of the things I'd been involved in, but it still resonated as an important piece for me, so I signed up, not knowing just what I was getting into.

Thus, I found myself in a group of eight participants with two leaders, Hameed Ali and Karen Johnson. The "Process," as they called it, involved three months of very intensive psychological work. I wrote my autobiography from different perspectives, I contacted my repressed rage and pain, I relived many childhood experiences, and I began to make peace between my emotional child and my rational intellect.

Still, I was a tough nut to crack. Although I was doing my best, my intellectualizing defenses were very strong. My mind was constantly trying to "figure this out" the way I had figured out other work.

Of course, figuring out meant coping with it, not really understanding it. I was busy trying to look good and trying to impress my teachers, while at the same time I was constantly fitting the experiences into my preexisting categories, keeping myself at an ever-so-slight distance from them. And when that didn't work, I would go to sleep, both literally and figuratively. At the end of the three-month process, I had opened up a great deal, but I felt a familiar touch of disappointment. Some corners of my life felt unchanged. I was tempted to move on to the next thing.

Yet there was something different this time. Hameed had caught my attention in a new way. It was not that I found him warm, personable, or charismatic (although surely I have seen his kindness and tenderness since then). He was a direct and often stern guide. I saw his sense of compassion and humor, but mostly it was an undaunted quality that struck me. He had the most steady, unobstructed presence I had ever encountered, before or since. Some part of me responded to him, though he did not fit any of my pictures of the kind of teacher I would be attracted to. I guess I had always expected someone who would combine the warmth I had at times felt with my mother and the approval I wanted from my father. I felt neither of these from Hameed in those first three months, but what I did find was much more rewarding.

When he said that some of those who had completed the Process had formed a small ongoing group and that he was leading it, I signed up. We began meeting every other weekend, Friday night and a day Saturday and Sunday, often an hour's drive away. It was a huge commitment of time and energy. I questioned it often, but I always found myself coming back to it.

My upbringing, my personality style, and my scientific training had produced in me strong skepticism and an ability to distance myself in the service of a misunderstood "objectivity." This challenged Hameed and his work often. Yet he consistently responded to who I was, not my fears, my shame, or my avoidance. When I tested him by hiding behind concepts, he drew me out, sometimes gently and sometimes with a challenge. When I faded into the background or into the pseudosafety of my fantasies, he confronted me.

I remember a time after I had been working with him for a year or two when I got mad about something and dumped it on him (unfairly). I was screaming at him at the top of my lungs and pounding on the floor. I was in touch with a deep, deep reservoir of hatred and pain. A little later, I realized I was also testing him to see whether he would reject me for what would have been a shameful outburst in my family. He stayed right with me, unflinching.

It took five years before I found myself trusting this unfoldment. All through that time, Hameed was constant in his unwavering acceptance and presence.

Many of those early years in the Work (as he called it) were aimed at opening up my restricted emotional life. Through the Process and my subsequent work with Hameed, I gained more insight into the underlying dynamics of this pattern. I came to appreciate even more my mother's kindness, generosity, playfulness, and humor. However, I also realized that her kindness was often driven by a deeper guilt and that much of her humor had a cutting edge to it. It seemed that my father was aware most of the time, working to provide for his family's material needs. I came to a deeper gratitude for him, and we found new connections. I also came to understand how often he was distant emotionally or on the verge of anger.

There was a pervasive injunction in my family against strong feelings of any kind, including excitement, anger, or love. The feelings that did come out often felt damaging. I often felt an atmosphere of shame and covert hostility, which occasionally erupted into outright fighting. One of the clearest rules I remember as a child came from a story in which one of the characters (Thumper in *Bambi*, as I recall) says, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." I believe it was well intentioned, but it made for a lot of quiet times around our dinner table.

When I was two years old, my mother gave birth to twins. My older brother was now twelve, and I was developing his own interests outside the home. With my father gone most of the time, naturally, my mother had her hands full. This was a time when I needed steady support to venture out into the world and a soft lap to return to for “emotional refueling.” However, I was left alone a good bit of the time, and my mother’s lap was usually occupied. I learned it was easier to hide my needs and feelings than to have them overlooked, and I learned to distance myself from my inner life. This defense of distancing and using my mind to compensate for a lack of real contact developed further throughout my life.

As the Work helped me understand these patterns and their origins, they loosened their hold on me. There was more than just my emotional healing going on, though. Looking back, I now realize that I was also developing new capacities and qualities. Both the world and my inner experience took on more color. What I had previously seen in tones of gray became richer and more beautiful. I felt three-dimensional and more alive to myself. I came out of my shell into the world. I was less afraid to let myself be seen, and as a result, I began to see others in new ways, too. I was curious about how other people felt and how they saw the world. I gained a capacity for genuine compassion toward myself and others.

The group with Hameed was growing, and the Diamond Approach was beginning to take shape for me. He brought in a number of insights and practices. For example, he used the Enneagram (an ancient system of insights into personality and human nature derived from Sufi sources, Gurdjieff, and Oscar Ichazo) as a way of looking at the ego and its core beliefs, deficiencies, and idealizations. Aspects of depth psychology revealed the psychodynamic issues that were binding us, and understandings from several of the world’s spiritual wisdom traditions helped deepen our capacities for awareness. Stories, Reichian breathwork, and emotional release were all important in our individual and group teaching sessions. Meditation practices still provide an important foundation for all our work.

All of this was applied to our own experiences and unfoldment. I remember Hameed’s referring me back again and again to my own experience to examine and understand what he was teaching. He constantly encouraged me, as he did with all of his students, not to take what he said on faith but to check it out for myself in my own experience.

For nearly twenty years, I worked with him in one-to-one Reichian-style breathwork sessions each week or two. For most of that time, we continued to meet as a group every other weekend. (His schedule has changed recently to a longer, less frequent retreat format.) It was a huge commitment of time and energy, and we were covering much ground. During those years, I often had the experience when Hameed finished a particular segment of his teaching that it was the conclusion of the Diamond Approach. “Well,” I would think to myself, “that was great. I wonder where I’ll go next.” Then, as if noticing an overlooked door on my way out of the house, I would sense that there might be a little bit more. I would peek through that new door and discover that what I had thought was the whole house was just the foyer!

We had begun by working on old wounds and personality patterns and studying personality from a new perspective. Then, Hameed introduced a new set of material on what he called Essence. At first, it seemed to me that he must have been making it all up because, in my own experience, I had so little reference to what he was describing. As I continued to explore, however, I began to see and feel what he was talking about. I discovered that although the ideas were new to me, the experiences felt deeply familiar. In some cases, I have had a sense of discovery of what was there in me all along, but hidden. Other times, I have reflected back to see that qualities and capacities have developed that were not there before.

Every few years, Hameed introduces a new facet of the Diamond Approach, and I have to say that most of the time it starts out sounding like science fiction to me. Yet the teachings always come with

the encouragement to examine them directly and experientially. Never have they been given abstract theories or pronouncements to be taken on faith. Each of these facets could be a whole system on its own, but he has shown how they are all intricately interwoven with his previous teaching. Each segment has provided me with a whole new perspective that made all the previous teaching come alive in a new light. Again and again, I had a sense of “Oh, that’s what that was all about.”

It was many years before I stopped being surprised when what I thought was finished turned out to be just another step. Yet I have never stopped marveling and feeling grateful when what had seemed complete opened into an even greater and more complete context. It was as if the journey were a set of inside-out Chinese boxes. I had started in the smallest and most restrictive, and every time I stepped into a newer, larger one, I felt a great sense of relief and freedom. Instead of finding smaller and smaller boxes inside, I was finding bigger and bigger boxes outside, each more radiant and refined than the one before.

At times, Hameed has encouraged us to explore other avenues of personal and spiritual development along with the Diamond Approach. My own explorations led me to work with wilderness experience as a spiritual practice. For sixteen years, I have participated in and guided wilderness trips that incorporate solitude, fasting, and direct contact with the earth. I value this work enormously and have found over and over that my work with the Diamond Approach and my wilderness work, as student and a teacher of both, have complemented and expanded each other. Hameed’s teaching has allowed me to understand and more deeply take in the lessons of an earthcentered spirituality.

I also found that systems-oriented marriage counseling with a very skillful and insightful therapist helped my own development, as well as my marriage, a lot. I feel that my work with the Diamond Approach has helped me to go deeper with this counseling and to get more value from it. The question of the timing of exploring these other avenues is very important, though. For me, there have been times when looking into other systems was a way to avoid a difficult issue. By avoiding my work with the Diamond Approach, I was unconsciously avoiding a certain wound. At those times, Hameed guided me to stay with what was coming up and not to distract myself. However, Hameed has never presented his work as a closed system.

In his work, Hameed was taking us into a territory, a spiritual landscape, that I couldn’t even imagine. I began to realize that the emotional and psychological work was really the doorway—necessary, but only a beginning. With his support and guidance, I began to experience more and more subtle states, states of unconditional peace, strength, self-worth, love, and intimacy with my life. I was experiencing a depth and richness that touched me very deeply. Each new experience brought up deeper defenses, issues, pain, and fear. I came to realize that this was a necessary part of my expansion and development.

I also learned something that seemed so right and obvious in retrospect but that I had never heard before. I don’t have to get rid of my ego; my task is to understand it, accept it, and allow it to unfold (I will say more about this later in the book; for now, I would just point to it as a central feature of Hameed’s teaching.) The irony is that, for so many years, and even now, I have had to work hard to disidentify from my ego’s reactions and to free myself from its hold. There was no way around this work. Yet what I have finally understood is that the ego is really only the product of halted development. I have come to an understanding of my stuckness. This brings a compassion for my suffering and an even greater appreciation for these difficulties.

I am learning to walk the line between not indulging in my ego patterns while not rejecting them either. I can appreciate the unique terrain of my own life. Hameed has held with great caring the gifts, triumphs, tragedies, and accidents that make my life unique. In a way, working with him has been the opposite of cloning. I have come to be more assured of my absolute uniqueness, even while I discover my seamless connection with all that is.

Initially, Hameed didn't spend a lot of time naming and explaining Essential states and the correlated issues. Nor did we do a lot of comparative analysis between systems. This came some years later in his teaching. His focus has always been more on opening up to whatever is happening in the moment. He was interested not only in the experience itself but in the background of our experience, its medium and texture. The important question was, so what? How was I holding onto (or rejecting) my experience? Was it touching me? How was I letting it into my life and living it?

Very early in his work with us, Hameed taught a basic awareness practice of actively sensing our arms and legs, looking, and listening. We practiced sensing, looking, and listening with an open and present-centered awareness. I realized later that this practice, along with understanding our psychological reactions and resistance, is a foundation of his work with us. Although the sensing, looking, and listening practice is a very helpful technique for getting us more in touch with our bodies, senses, and feelings, it is more important than that. It has formed a basis for our work on presence, witnessing, and the deepest dimensions of our experience.

The shift toward the medium of experience undercut my inclination to "collect" experiences and insights. With Hameed's guidance, I found myself not only tracking my experiences but being able to notice my awareness itself. I also noticed a quality of being less reactive and more present. When someone was upset with me, I was better able to be open without needing to hide or get defensive. When I found myself feeling abandoned, I could more easily tease apart my own old reactions from what was happening in the present. My basic core issues didn't change exactly, but my response to them did. I became more able to examine them and not be overpowered by them. I discovered that by following my issues, I was led to a richer and more authentic sense of myself.

I remember, for example, a time after the end of my first marriage and before the beginning of my second when I was grieving the loss of a romantic relationship. For days, I had been feeling betrayed and resentful, going through the same emotions over and over again. I worked on this in a group session with Hameed. First, I felt my anger and hurt, then sank into a deep sadness. I cried hard. This was not just one relationship I had lost, but all of them. I was an adult man losing a lover, a junior high school student feeling rejected by my friends, a humiliated little boy sent off to school before he was ready, a toddler feeling abandoned by his mother and father, and an infant crying alone in his crib with no response. All these losses at once flooded me, and I felt the deep shame of being unlovable. Eventually, though, the crying subsided, and my shame lessened. I felt a relief and a lightness that were new for me.

With Hameed's support and guidance, I stayed with this lightness. It eventually gave way to a sense that I was being showered with luminescent jewels of different kinds, like a rain full of grace. I was touched beyond anything I could have imagined. I felt held in the arms of reality and blessed, well beyond the resolution of my loss. I saw that what I had lost was really an image in my mind of being loved and that what is really here is a genuine love and value that is intrinsic to my own nature. I found a degree of self-acceptance I could not have dreamed of. I knew the universe to be loving and precious, and I knew I was part of it.

That experience kept unfolding over time. Along with similar experiences Hameed later identified as states of Essence, it led to a greater trust and confidence. My issues about being seen and valued were having less of an effect on me. When they did come up, I saw them more clearly, and they changed more quickly. Of course, that was not the last time I will feel rejection and loss. In fact, it seems to me that my subsequent feelings of abandonment have been even deeper and more painful, often seeming as if I were abandoned by everyone—the world, myself, and God. Yet there is an increasing openness to the pain and to the states that follow.

A similar issue arose years later. I was on an advanced training retreat Hameed was conducting for Diamond Approach teachers. My mother had died six months before, and I had been struggling with

decision to leave a job that I loved but that did not support me and my family. I was with my mother during the several weeks before her death and when she died, and I had time to talk to her and make my peace with her leaving. As I sat with her those weeks, I learned more about her pain and suffering. I expressed my sorrow and found deeper love and gratitude for her, and we shared some very tender moments. In the weeks up to her death, I felt her soul transform from feeling like a thick, black, tar-like substance to a clear black fluid and then to a luminous, transparent black space. I watched her struggle to let go and finally succeed. In the six months since her death, I felt I had grieved and let go, though I missed her at times.

During this same time, I was coming to a resolution with my decision to change jobs. After looking at my choices, I was clear about the best decision for my family and myself. Still, “clear” and “resolved” are not the same. I became aware of a psychodynamic layer that was involved. It was an old pattern of getting something I loved and then losing it. It reminded me of being in high school as a popular tenth grader with a close group of friends and then moving to a new school with a very different subculture and no friends at all. At a deeper level, it felt like a replay of being two years old and delighting in being the focus of my parents’ love and attention, only to lose it to the babies. At its deepest, it was the sense of having been held by an all-fulfilling reality and then being thrown into a world of struggle and aloneness. With all these layers activated, there was a huge amount of loss and anger tied to what might have been a simple career decision.

The psychological loss of my mother when I was two, her death, and my job change all began to overlap and intensify each other. I was clear cognitively, but there was still a more subtle layer of distress and suffering that I could not seem to get to.

Then I went on the retreat with Hameed. He was teaching about an egoless dimension of pure awareness and emptiness. (I will say more about this in Chapter 9.) The retreat had been very good for me. I found a clarity and radiance I had never felt before. One night near the end of the retreat, I got into a very deep layer of pain about my mother’s suffering. As if out of the blue, I was swept away with an intense sadness about not being able to help her or take her pain away. On the walk from the meeting hall to my room, I collapsed in tears. By the next morning, I was feeling intense sadness about my own life and the pain caused by trying to hold on to the images of what I wanted.

As I stayed with these experiences, I came to a place that I can only describe as beyond coming and going. I saw that my mother’s life had been precious but that what she really was, her true nature and source, was never born and could never die. I still missed the person she was, but the sadness had turned to tenderness and my guilt had unfolded into gratitude.

I also realized, not only as a mental insight or an emotional feeling, but in my bones, that my life, too, was an expression of that same dimension beyond separation, birth, death, or any other concepts I needed to make my choices about my job, but these choices evaporated in the face of the immensity and clarity of pure awareness. I felt aware of being transparent to Being as it was moving through me. My job choice, and indeed all my choices, were no longer problems to be solved; they were purely the flow of Being through my life. This flow felt empty and as if there were no substance to it, yet it was radiant. All the world and all experience seemed made of pure, clear crystal. I felt the preciousness of our fragility and vulnerability as human beings. I realized there was nowhere else to go except to abide in the present moment. And then the sense of “I” evaporated into the emptiness, and all that was left was pure crystalline awareness.

Lest these experiences sound idealized or romanticized, I remind you that they were preceded by many years of difficult work and study. And they certainly were not one-time resolutions of these issues. There are still times I grieve for my parents, feel angry at them, or try to win their love (although these times are more likely to be measured in minutes than days). My feelings of being

abandoned arise in a hundred different ways, and at times, I still feel resentment for my losses. Yet there has been a shift that I notice when I stop my busy-ness and distraction. My experience is less entrenched than it once was, more fluid and open. I find it easier to rest in the grace of each moment and I experience myself more as an expression of the flow of Being through my life. I am more consistently able to step forward out of my fantasies and fears and into the truth of my life as it is.

Again and again, I have learned that the focus of the Diamond Approach is not only on the experiences of true nature as Being but on the clarity, lucidity, and directness of my experience. For me, the Diamond Approach has been about a quality of my everyday life, not only about remarkable experiences. The remarkable times are richer, clearer, and easier to describe, but they are only the peak experiences. Most of the landscape of my life feels more ordinary, yet precious and rich. As I reflect back over twenty-four years in the Diamond Approach, I notice that I feel more at home in my life and the world. Most of the time, there is a curiosity about my experience and a confidence that I have what I need to live my life to its fullest.

As I sit at my computer typing this, I am aware of a sense of ease that eluded me for many, many years. I hear a bird singing outside my window, the dishwasher running downstairs, my wife's voice as she talks on the phone. I am aware of some of my thought process as I type these words. I feel tension and concern: Who are you? Will I communicate this to you clearly? Will you understand? As my attention flows through these different perceptions and thoughts, I feel an appreciation, a light sense of gratitude for being here, now. This feeling grows in my chest until it includes all that is flowing through my awareness: birdsong, dishwasher, Judith's voice, my typing, the tension, the appreciation, and the awareness itself. And I feel myself opening more until all of these are part of the same flow and unfoldment. This flow feels personal; it is every bit mine. At the same time, I feel no separation or alienation from the world around me. All of these contents of my awareness feel as if they are just different shapes or textures of the same medium. It is this openness in the flow of consciousness that, to me, is at the very heart of the Diamond Approach.

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIENTATION OF THE DIAMOND APPROACH

THE AIM OF THE DIAMOND APPROACH is to live fully and deeply. It offers the understanding and the practices to support a life without unnecessary struggle and difficulty, a life characterized by fulfillment and contentment. As with most spiritual systems, the Diamond Approach invites us to live in a way that both reflects and develops wisdom, love, joy, vitality, power, peace, authenticity, passion, curiosity, appreciation, stillness, pleasure, trust, gratitude, and an unrelenting engagement with what is. Furthermore, the Diamond Approach is grounded in the knowledge that these qualities are characteristic of our true and fundamental nature. They are our inherent and undying birthright.

If we let ourselves be open to our feelings in this moment, we begin to recognize a longing for such a way of being. For some of us, the longing feels like an ache or a sadness just below the surface of our usual awareness and concerns, a background so common that we fail to take notice. For others of us, it may feel like a gripping desire to gain and hold on to these qualities, an intense drive in which we set our sights on some distant spiritual paradise. Still others of us may adopt a frustrated resignation in which we devalue these qualities as an impossible or even undesirable fiction. Perhaps the most common response of all is a kind of numbness in which we sleepwalk through our days, not even considering our deeper thirst. We then delude ourselves into believing that crude counterfeits of fulfillment, love, joy, and wisdom are the real thing.

When we are cut off from our natural strength, our energy and passion are less available. The sense of expansive vitality escapes us, and we feel weak. To make up for this, we push too hard or strain to capture that passion. We try to convince the world and ourselves that we are not as weak as we feel. Bitterness or hostility flavors our activities and relationships. We then mistake this fake strength for the real thing, and we are caught on a merry-go-round of proving ourselves. The harder we try to prove our strength, the more we reinforce our weakness.

Instead of an openhearted compassion, curiosity, and willingness to engage suffering without running away, we find a compulsive need to criticize, and then fix, ourselves and others in order to take away their pain and protect ourselves. We mistake false compassion for genuine compassion and wonder why we never feel really healed and whole. And so it goes; we dream of relief and fulfillment but settle for shallow and unsatisfying substitutes for real life.

When we allow ourselves the gift of seeing our deeper nature as one having vitality, aliveness, peace, and trust, we also become aware of the difficulties, blocks, and obstacles to these qualities. Even when we do experience them, it is only rarely and briefly.

For example, you may feel a sense of unconditional compassion for all existence—that is, until someone hurts your feelings. Then compassion is out the window, replaced by your desire to hurt the other. Or you may experience your intrinsic value as an inseparable part of the sacred mystery—that is, as long as you feel seen and loved. Otherwise, your shame and guilt overwhelm you, and you get busy proving yourself or hiding.

I think we all have had strong and deep experiences of some aspects of our spiritual nature, only to lose the experience. We fail to grasp what those aspects mean and what our relationship to them really is. Although we long for a rich, fulfilling life and believe (or at least hope) that this is possible, it usually feels outside our reach. Our daily affairs are colored by mistrust and difficulty, and the barriers to our potential seem so much more real than that potential.

Rather than suggesting we fight against these obstacles to find fulfillment and contentment, the Diamond Approach invites us to understand them from a radically different perspective. In this view, they are not merely barriers; they are doorways, too. Hurt is not simply a block to genuine compassion. It is also the access to compassion. Anger or the desire to inflict hurt is not just a shallow and frustrating substitute for authentic strength. Experienced and understood deeply, it is the key to unlocking the treasure of expansion, capacity, and vitality that is our birthright. Our misunderstandings, reactions, and wounds open the doors to a life that is real. The Diamond Approach shows us the precise relationship between these counterfeit qualities, their attendant difficulties, and the more real aspects of our nature and our potential.

Even with a precise understanding of the connection between psychological issues and the qualities of our intrinsic nature, the work of self-realization takes commitment, courage, and love for the truth. Our beliefs about ourselves and the world constrict our experience and become solidified into fixed (and fixated) patterns of feelings and reactions. These patterns give our lives a defensive and compulsive texture. Even our understanding of self-realization becomes a projection of these images, beliefs, and patterns. Our usual attempts to free ourselves, based on these patterns, only bind us tighter. Given our identification with the obstacles and difficulties, we can scarcely imagine what real wisdom, joy, and contentment might be. The Diamond Approach shows us not only how but *why* the work of fully experiencing our lives is so difficult.

The Diamond Approach brings about a transformation beyond these images, beliefs, and fixated patterns toward our deeper nature. It means penetrating the false images and patterns and grounding our lives in an unrelenting love for our lives as they are: painful, ecstatic, or fulfilled. Spiritual realization is not merely a linear projection of a life based from the past to the future. It requires a new foundation that is grounded in the present. The Diamond Approach provides not only a new understanding of this foundation but ways to move toward it that are appropriate and powerful.

Encountering our lives in this moment, as they are, we begin to respond from the perspective of truth, openness, and trust. We relax into difficulties and unavoidable struggles, with an experiential knowledge that we can live our lives fully. We discover we do not need to avoid or fall asleep to our situations. We become present and awake.

Each moment that we are able to experience our lives more fully and with less censorship, we become more open, spontaneous, natural, fluid, and responsive. Our distress unfolds into a confidence and an appreciation that is without judgment or hesitation. There is a joyful curiosity and a generous, unassuming calm at our center. We discover our capacities to be strong as well as still, tender as well as clear, accepting as well as persevering, relaxed as well as fully awake to this moment and in movement. And through it all, we come to abide in a basic trust in the compassionate intelligence of the unfoldment of our lives.

Everyday life becomes the arena for this work. The defensive, constricting patterns are both the locks and the keys to the qualities of our true nature. The present moment is revealed as both the path and the fulfillment. The orientation of the Diamond Approach, then, is toward presence and the expression of fundamental truths in the present moment. This presence offers remarkably complete and effective answers to the fundamental human questions. The questions are, what is the fullest realization of our true nature, and how can we go about realizing it? The answer is presence.

The Diamond Approach offers a psychologically sophisticated spiritual system. This system includes an understanding and a path for full realization that draws on ancient spiritual wisdom and modern psychological insights. It is both a description of the full potential of human experience and a method for the realization of that potential. Its insights are fundamentally consistent with other approaches to spiritual truth, although it does not attempt to explain other approaches or reduce them to its own terms.

In this view, psychological growth is an aspect of spiritual growth, inseparable from it. Where other spiritual paths might focus primarily on physical disciplines (such as yoga or martial arts) or devotional practices, prayer, or contemplation, the primary method in the Diamond Approach is exploring and understanding immediate experience. If this exploration is deep enough and sincere enough, it will lead to spiritual awakening, development, and eventually, liberation.

Along the way, we come to a greater understanding, and we work through the blocks to our true nature or Essence. We develop and refine higher capacities. When we experience a block deeply, it leads to that which the block was covering. This brings a painful experience of deficient emptiness followed by a sense of presence and the direct experience of Essence. These psychological issues stimulate our growth in a way similar to the grain of sand that serves as the seed for a pearl.

Psychological issues are present throughout the spiritual search. We move through our initial fears and frustrations, and even hopes about what a spiritual search will mean, to the subtle attachments and resistances present in the most sublime spiritual states. These issues, fears, and hopes have long been recognized as contrary to our deeper nature and as obstacles to deeper self-realization. However, these issues are not only barriers; they also guide us toward the truths underlying them. The Diamond Approach provides us with a precise means of understanding and resolving such issues, revealing them as both obstacles and doorways to self-realization.

The goal of the Diamond Approach is the full development and realization of Being expressing itself in and through an individual human life. It posits no particular end state or experience. Its goal is not necessarily love, wisdom, power, will, action, bliss, peace, or emptiness. All of these are intrinsic to human potential and do arise as part of the path of the Diamond Approach. However, none is a specific aim of the Diamond Approach, so we do not stop there. The journey of understanding and truth continues without preconceptions or prejudice. The result is the free unfoldment of a living reality without constrictions or distortions.

THE METHODS OF THE DIAMOND APPROACH

The Diamond Approach uses a broad range of methods. In private sessions with a teacher and in small groups, students of the Diamond Approach explore their feelings, thoughts, and actions. It integrates emotional, cognitive, and intuitive processes, breathwork, and subtle energies, all within a spiritual framework. (The several case studies presented in this book are examples of this way of working.)

There is also a variety of formats for pursuing this path. Students of the Diamond Approach generally do this work in individual sessions with teachers trained and certified by Hameed Ali, who developed the Diamond Approach. Students also meet in small, ongoing groups led by a teacher. Large-group meetings are used to teach, using a combination of lectures, experiential exercises, meditation, and other practices. Ali and other Diamond Approach teachers also conduct long-term teaching retreats. Finally, students of the Diamond Approach engage in their own study and application of this material through meditation, reading, and other specific practices.

These methods and formats for learning the Diamond Approach have evolved in response to the needs of students and of the Diamond Approach itself. The variety of forms that the Diamond

Approach takes will likely continue to expand.

THE DIAMOND APPROACH AND OTHER SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Enduring spiritual truth arises in different times and places. The Diamond Approach expresses such truth, making it accessible to us in a form suitable to our time and place. Because it has come out of our specific cultural, intellectual, and psychological context, it communicates spiritual wisdom in a way that is uniquely suited to us.

Two aspects of the present time are especially important to this form. First, there is much more communication across cultures and between different spiritual systems. Because we can have firsthand knowledge of many different spiritual traditions, new understandings are possible. Second, we also have available to us new knowledge that was not available before, especially knowledge about psychological development, suffering, and healing. For the first time, psychological and spiritual wisdom are available together. The Diamond Approach incorporates the findings of psychology with integrations of the wisdom of a variety of spiritual traditions.

However, Ali does not merely restate or translate others' spiritual wisdom or combine psychology and spirituality. The Diamond Approach is neither a combination nor a revision of these systems. It is its own system, arising from the needs and opportunities of this particular time and place and through Ali's particular expression.

The Diamond Approach is consistent with a number of psychological and spiritual systems. It is congruent with aspects of the Gurdjieff work, Sufism, Vajrayana and Zen Buddhism, and modern psychodynamic theory. It is consistent with many insights and practices from these spiritual wisdom traditions that are now more widely available. At the same time, it draws from ego psychology, object relations theory, and other psychological systems. I believe the perspective of the Diamond Approach is unique among spiritual systems in its integration of the psychological and spiritual aspects of full human development.

The Diamond Approach extends the earlier spiritual disciplines by providing a more thorough understanding of psychological issues, barriers, and obstacles as they occur throughout the spiritual search. And although it is not a psychology, it has much to offer to the deeper goals of psychology. The case can be made that, throughout its history, psychology has been moving toward a perspective such as this. Psychology has aimed to provide an experientially and intellectually satisfying understanding of being human and to provide a means of realizing human potential. The Diamond Approach moves us a step closer to fulfilling the promise of psychology, especially the transpersonal psychologies, by making psychological knowledge useful in spiritual work.

BEING, ESSENCE, SOUL, AND TRUE NATURE

It might help to give a brief map of the Diamond Approach and introduce its basic concepts here in the first chapter. Most of these terms are described later in the book and in thorough detail in Ali's writings. In the Diamond Approach, the true nature of existence is referred to as *Being*. Being is the fundamental nature of all manifestation; it is the ground and the expression of the exquisite diversity of all that is. Being reveals itself as both diversity and unity. From this ground of Being arise awareness, presence, flow, and emptiness.

The soul is the individual consciousness or medium of experience. It is not a fixed entity (as the concept is sometimes understood) but a pattern flow of consciousness. The soul is shaped and influenced by all experience, and it may be structured by the conditioning of the ego (or personality) or by its true nature, Being. In a sense, it is the soul that makes the journey of awakening from conditioned and constricted patterns to the realization of its true nature.

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