

A.H. Almaas and the Synthesis of Transpersonal and Psychoanalytic Psychologies

Review Essay by Harry Hunt

Books by Almaas discussed:

Essence: The Diamond Approach to Inner Realization, Samuel Weisen, York Beach, Maine, 1986.

The Void: A Psychodynamic Investigation of the Relationship Between Mind and Space, Diamond Books, Almaas Publications, Box 10114, Berkeley, Calif., 1986.

The Pearl Beyond Price: Integration of Personality into Being: An Object Relations Approach, Diamond Books, Berkeley, Calif., 1988.

How do I convey the potential importance of this material? First, then, how is this extraordinarily original integration of psychoanalytic object relations theory with a discipline of transpersonal self realization (closest to the fourth way tradition of Gurdjieff/Ouspensky) relevant to our "new science" of lucid dreaming?

Lucid dreaming has rightly been compared to a spontaneously emerging state of meditative realization. When their potential is not narrowed by over control, lucid dreams show the same development of the detached "witnessing" attitude that is sought in meditation and its tenuous co-existence with ongoing participation in the dream situation. Correspondingly, an explicit goal of some Buddhist, Taoist, and Sufi practices is the progressive extension of the "observing self" of meditation into all aspects of one's everyday social life. It is noteworthy that the euphoria and kinesthetic "rush" characteristic of lucid dreaming often grows into the powerful sense of presence or "being" that Maslow termed peak experience. The content of such lucid dreams can also include involves the mandala/chakra patterns and "light of the void" experiences described in deep meditation. Indeed, just as transpersonal psychologists like Wilber and Engler have called attention to the way that experiences of felt transcendence can create or exacerbate narcissistic/self pathology, Gackenbach has been calling our attention to the way that an overly narrow fascination with the "high" of lucid dreaming can give rise to self inflated grandiosity and/or schizoid isolation.

The transpersonal potential of lucid dreaming now seems clear and raises the more general issue of lucidity per se -- "lucid wakefulness" as a goal of personal development that involves this same ability to be fully present and "here now" in the midst of waking activities. To experience when awake the same sense of "being" that characterizes the most powerful lucid dreams would indeed entail a realization experience very similar to successful "self remembering" in the Gurdjieff/Ouspensky system. Gurdjieff taught a "fourth way" practice, apparently derived mainly from Sufism, in which the classical, more impersonal, experiences of transcendence ("objective consciousness") were deemed less important than the difficult and gradual realization of I-am-ness or felt presence within daily activities. (See also Charles Tart's *Waking Up*, New Science Library). Self

remembering is a this - worldly meditative practice that seeks to transmute "false personality" into "Essence". Gurdjieff's description of those to whom these teachings were directed anticipates to a remarkable degree the recent psychoanalytic formulations of self pathology: the sense of having a lost or underdeveloped "true self" (unrealized Essence) defensively masked by a multiplicity of false identities; a largely mechanical (schizoid) way of "sleepwalking" through everyday life, lacking genuine will and lost in "identifying"; and "unconscious paralysis by one's chief feature". The role of chief feature in Gurdjieff's work is strikingly like M. Balint's account of the curative acceptance of "basic fault" in deep psychotherapy. Full self remembering gradually renews our lost attunement to Being, also a major theme of the psychoanalysts Winnicott and Bion.

Enter Almaas, with his astonishingly detailed approach to the realization of Presence or Essence that integrates the "fourth way" tradition of spiritual development (predominantly Sufi) with Kohut, Kernberg, Mahler, and especially Winnicott and Guntrip -- in other words, with the major developments in clinical psychoanalysis over the past 25 years. This synthesis is effected by means of a further development of Reichian bioenergetics, in which typical relationship conflicts and felt deficiencies of self are experienced as contractions in specific parts of the body. With sustained, open awareness (which will also entail anxieties over disintegration and dissolution), each contraction gradually comes to be felt as a hole or opening in the body image. Continued contemplative awareness allows these holes, or concrete realizations of felt deficiency to open outward into attunements to Being. It was this sense of Being (felt as open, clear space) that was given up and then defended against in early childhood. The areas in which these contractions and openings are felt are linked to yogic chakras, as well as to the more subtle bodily energy centers discussed in Sufism as lataif.

A great strength here is Almaas's refusal to treat transpersonal experience and dynamic conflict as inherently separate realms or as necessarily separate phases of realization (as in, first fix the container, then receive higher teachings). In a way reminiscent of Angyal on the "universal ambiguity" (reversible gestalt) between health and pathology, he states:

The old idea is that the personality is the barrier and must be removed before there can be a recognition of our essential beingness. Our findings indicate that essence can be realized in steps or in degrees, simultaneously with work on the personality. Each essential aspect or facet has a psychological constellation associated with it Understanding and resolving the relevant psychological constellation (which is only a sector of the personality) will allow the associated aspect of essence to emerge in consciousness. It is not necessary to resolve the personality as a whole. (Essence, p. 59)

After first teaching this system in small groups and individual therapy for a number of years in California and Colorado, Almaas has now published, *Essence* (his most general introduction), *The Void*, and *The Pearl Beyond Price* (his most systematic and detailed

presentation, like *The Void* with copious case history vignettes). There are also shorter books of lectures (*Diamond Heart, Books One and Two, The Elixir of Enlightenment*), and a collection of tapes. It becomes apparent that in addition to the traditions he explicitly synthesizes in these books (which also include key references to Buddhism, Vedanta and Taoism), his work is congruent with Jung (whom he critiques as overly imagistic), Eugene Gendlin on inter-sensory "felt meanings" within the body (which one could argue he extends into transpersonal experience), the philosophy of Heidegger (with Essence equivalent to Dasein as our primordial presence in-the-world and space as the "lighting" of Being-as-such). His work is also consistent with some of my own writings (Hunt 1989; 1985) positing the cross modal synaesthetic bases of the mystical experience of the void and of the sensations of body hollowness and internal "streaming" experienced as chakras in meditation and as body mutilation in schizophrenia. Finally, there is an intriguing similarity with the most recent books of Carlos Castaneda, especially in the latter's description of "subtle energy emanations" felt as dents, crevices, or black spots in the body image.

Like Gurdjieff/Ouspensky, Almaas carefully distinguishes the more impersonal attunements to Being ("Space is the experience of" reality with no boundaries at all, with no sense of separate identity whatsoever, with no sense of individual experience." *The Void*, p.154) from what he terms the Essence realizations of will, value, compassion, joy, peace, and, especially of strength. Strength is basic to Personal Essence (the sense of oneself as embodiment of Being). It is Personal Essence that must replace the hopelessness and despair that comes from experiencing the inevitable falsity of ego structure. Personal Essence also forestalls the defensive grandiosity and isolation that can result from premature transcendent awareness. The more impersonal side of mystical states can operate as a defense against the more personal dilemmas of relatedness and autonomy. "Transcending a situation is not necessarily the same as resolving it" (*The Pearl Beyond Price*, p. 15). The facets of Essence (will, etc.) that are the potential openings to the direct experience of Being are termed the Diamond approach, while Personal Essence -- the realization of I-am -- is referred to as the Pearl.

As with Winnicott, "feeling real" is contrasted with defensive identifications based on false accommodation.

"Self-image itself is the barrier...against the experience of space. It is what fills space, what structuralizes it; so only an individual who can let go of identification with the self-image will be able to experience space" (*The Void*, p. 85)

With the object relations theorists and Kohutian self psychologists, self representations are based on internalized interpersonal relations and so ultimately on the child's early symbiotic-mirroring relation with the mother. These residues of early constructions of self and other are identical with "personality structure" and thus are the deepest barriers to presence and openness. Almaas is especially tied to Winnicott here who similarly posits a primary attunement to Being and its inevitable slide into the sense of having a lost "true

self" -- the isolated, non communicating or "unfound" core of the self that did not or could not receive empathic mirroring.

Like Fairbairn, Almaas hold that "identification" always results from "bad" experience. It is the most basic defensive contraction, reflecting the failure to fully "metabolize" or "digest" experience -- owing to its strength and/or our vulnerability. This contrast between presence and "self representation" is also nicely captured by the psychoanalyst Bion.

The belief that reality is or could be known is mistaken because reality is not something which lends itself to being known. It is impossible to know reality for the same reason that makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, or pulled, or eaten, but not sung. Reality has to be "been"... Is it possible... to affect a transition from knowing the phenomena of the real self to being the real self? (*Transformations*, p. 148).

Bion similarly distinguishes between undigested residues of experience ("beta elements") and the "alpha function" that would assimilate our experience without "structural" trace.

To experience the Essential attunements to Being involved in strength, will, compassion, peace, etc. requires a re-experiencing, with the original sense of anxiety and emptiness of the early defenses that came to either deny their absence or fake their presence, by ages three to four. With sustained open awareness these feelings will turn into "holes", "gaps", or sensations of "emptiness" in the stomach, genitals, chest, and head. These holes would constitute concretized expressions of psychic pain, I would suggest, in a creature in whom a metaphoric capacity must re-use the expressive patterns of body sensation as the symbolic vehicles of self reference. Almaas states that since Essence is naturally attuned to the openness of space, or light-of-the-void, as its most inclusive expression, while "personality" rests on chronic psychosomatic contractions, a phase of partial transition in essential development will have to involve just these sensations of gap and hollowness. As Almaas points out, these holes -- which can also be sensed as mutilations -- indicate that we are tapping into borderline or narcissistic regions of personality. (He reserves judgement on how useful his methods will prove with overtly borderline or psychotic patients). Finally, with a sustained attitude of openness and surrender these holes will be spontaneously filled and replaced by initially subtle sensations of Essence -- as facets of the experience of Being (space). Each facet (will, joy, love, etc.) will be seen to have its own characteristic physiognomy, involving feelings of fullness, expansiveness, roundedness, melting, flow, etc.

More specifically, realization of Personal Essence, the key step in essential development, is understood as the transmutation of the defensive residues of Mahler's symbiotic/individuation phases of infancy. Strength, the essential manifestation or metabolism of early autonomy, emerges as a felt meaning or physiognomy of power, body fullness, roundedness, heat and peace to replace a sense of weakness and emptiness centered in the stomach. The full experiencing of defensive dependency (Mahler's

symbiosis) re-appears as "merging essence" or compassion, with its physiognomy of sweetness, honey-like flow, melting, and golden colour sensed as filling a hollowness centered in the chest. The existential or intrinsic aloneness entailed by Personal Essence is balanced by the replacement of the internal image of the symbiotic mother with merging essence. The chief defense against such essential strength (and aloneness) is "negative merging" -- the vicious circle of negative symbiosis between contracted images of self and other.

Something of these transitions is reflected in the following case vignette:

I am beginning to see how much I identify with my mother. We discussed my dream of not being able to breathe...I see men as able to breathe and get away from mother. That is one of the reasons I had the hard masculine defense.... Now... I enjoy being a woman and that means I am like my mother, and I become afraid to breathe.... Part of the reason I sell myself short is to try desperately to get her love; she did not want me to be me and do well.... I felt a large gaping hole around my heart and lungs as you spoke. I kept trying to fill it in various ways, one of which is trying to be my mom.... I have a gigantic wound where my mother continued to emotionally stab me as an infant every time my strength and love came out to her.... She has the love and warmth, and I am nothing without her. As we worked Saturday night I felt at some point a juicy, honey-like feeling or presence in my chest, where the wound is. It was sweet and warm and like nectar... I feel strong and more myself than before. (*The Pearl Beyond Price*, p. 229-230)

The final step in this sequence of developing Personal Essence is the metabolizing of Mahler's practicing subphase, in which the young child extends its sense of personal initiative. Almaas terms this the realizing of Essential Self. This is a sense of presence originating from the head cavity, with a physiognomy of definiteness, singularity, luminosity, and preciousness -- a highly distinct sense of "alive presence", or we might say "lucidity". From there, Almaas offers a sketch of the more impersonal levels of the experience, of Being that is quite congruent with Buddhist accounts of the void.

The most startling of Almaas is recontextualizing of classical psychodynamics, however, comes with his discussion of castration anxiety (the defensive sense of passivity and helplessness at the core of the oedipal dilemma) as the blockage of Essential will. This deficit is experienced as the "genital hole" -- a felt absence of sensation and presence in the genital regions for both men and women. This could be Almaas's transpersonal reading of Freud's controversial discussion in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" of castration anxiety in men and penis envy in women as a common "repudiation of femininity". For Almaas, however, such conflict is actually against the genital hole as felt deficit. With the beginning shift from contraction to open space in this region, men will report the fantasy/sensation of possessing a "moist, juicy vagina" (which Almaas points out is especially upsetting for the macho). There is a

compensatory penis in women (equally dislocating for militant feminists). Personifications of femininity in terms of weakness and passivity are based on a confusion of the vagina with the incipient sense of genital hole as metaphoric deficit.

The genital hole is the impacted and so distorted experience of the opening at the top and bottom of the hollow column sensed as running vertically down the center of the body and which is basic to the phenomenology of the yogic chakras and the release of Kundalini. I have suggested (Hunt, 1985) that this open column would be the inevitable result of a cross modal, synaesthetic translation between the open circular shape of the visual field and lack of differentiated tactile sensitivity in the body interior (also noted by the classical introspectionists). When cross modally based felt meaning is developed for its own sake (i.e., contemplatively) and no longer subordinated to pragmatic reference, such complex visual-kinesthetic synaesthesias would help embody a correspondingly abstract felt significance. For Almaas these holes at the top and bottom of the body column are the most common and direct openings to the experience of space.

By way of some critical reflection: Almaas's descriptions may seem at times like overly literalized metaphors (i.e., guts for strength, heart for melting love, etc.). This is a potential problem if he wants to substitute a directly sensed presence for all "mental constructs". However, if the human symbolic capacity does rest on a capacity for cross modal or synaesthetic translations across separate sensory realms -- such translation being the animating factor behind felt meanings -- then it does make sense that such an imagistic re-use and emergent synthesis of the structures of tactile-kinesthetic perception should fuse felt meanings with the expressive potentials of muscle groups. There would then indeed be a continuum between incipiently metaphoric body sensations and the most abstract, inclusive felt meanings.

From an admittedly more cognitive perspective (which may indeed not do full justice to the phenomenology of unmediated directness and reality in these experiences), some clarification of Almaas's enterprise may be gained from Langer's distinction between the representational and presentational organizations of symbolic experience (Langer, 1972). In representation, medium is subordinated to discursive intentional reference. In presentational symbolism meaning emerges precisely from experiential immersion in the synaesthetic properties of the medium of expression, as in aesthetics and most directly in "altered states of consciousness". Accordingly, we could consider the phases of Almaas's essential realization as involving a transmuting of self and other representations into directly felt presentational states -- released as such and independent of their ordinary embedding within practical reference. The unfolding of such immediate presentational states would be based on increasingly "abstract" fusions between the basic structures of the separate senses -- the more diffuse and "open" the patterns involved, the more all encompassing and powerfully unitive the resulting felt meaning.

Almaas seems to imply something very much like this way of conceiving pure consciousness as a dynamic synaesthesia in his account of the full experience of Essence:

Essence, when experienced directly, is seen to be some kind of substance, like

water or gold, but it is not physical substance like physical water or gold.... Imagine that this water is self-aware, that each molecule is aware of itself and of its own energy and excitation. Imagine now that you are this aware substance, the water. This is close to an experience of essential substance.

Connecting the various capacities [for subtle perception] with different energetic centers does not mean that it is only in those locations that the capacities are exercised. In fact, such capacities can be exercised, when developed, at any location in the body; indeed they overlap. Texture (belly) can be discriminated by taste [heart], even by seeing [head], as can density and viscosity.... The phenomenon points to a very deep truth, that of the unity of senses, or capacities of perception. At the deeper dimension of essence, the centers lose their importance.... It is possible to say that essence is consciousness, pure consciousness....

Essence is self-aware. It knows itself, intuitively itself, sees itself, hears itself, smells itself, tastes itself, touches itself. But all this is one act, one unified perception. (*Essence*, p. 50, 80, 132-133).

I have suggested that a full translation of kinesthesia into open visual space will entail a correspondingly synaesthetic opening out or evanescence of body image -- i.e., its phenomenal disappearance (Almaas's space). Where anxiety and contraction still exert an effect, the result would be a negative absorption by black emptiness, in contrast to the positive and full dissolving into the open luminosity of classical mysticism.

This more cognitive formulation may help to address a question that Almaas ultimately leaves open: Is essential realization primarily a matter of development in later life or an uncovering of something lost in childhood? Generally he writes from the latter perspective. He repeatedly calls attention to our intuitive sense that very young children are "special" in having just those spontaneously expressed aspects of strength, will, love, joy, etc. and he offers a normative schedule for their gradual disappearance and distortion by the age of four. He also points out that the later opening of these dimensions of essence is often accompanied by the recovery of early childhood memories of these aspects of essence, and there are indeed widespread adult memories of transpersonal-numinous experiences from childhood. Yet Almaas also points out that such children embody essence without the self awareness that is critical to adult realization. Consistent with suggestions that transpersonal awareness entails an abstract cognitive development, he states:

...we are not suggesting here that the neonate experiences itself as space in the same way an adult experiences his mind as space; we are only pointing out the qualities of spaciousness and openness in the concept of the undifferentiated matrix. Most likely the perceptual apparatus of the neonate is not developed enough to experience the undifferentiated matrix as space. (*The Void*, p. 37).

Indeed, it may from a developmental perspective, be most plausible to suggest

that essential realization is an adult "presentational shift" of infant "structures" embedded in the representations of self and other in ordinary relatedness. It may even be that the deepest levels of these patterns do not become truly symbolic until finally reached by synaesthetic translation -- as in the deep, inner body coenesthesia that only proves "hollow" on introspection/meditation. More specifically, the patterns of mother-infant interaction and their internalization as psychic structure are, in Jung's sense, the diffuse "building blocks" of our symbolic capacity. Their shift from embedded phases of representation to direct presentational awareness would be correspondingly abstract and all-inclusive in felt meaning. In other words, those experiences become symbolic only when released as the potential metaphoric vehicles of essential realization. What is truly uncovered here is the child's lost spontaneity and expansiveness, which were freely and openly expressed precisely because they were outside of the very self awareness whose later incomplete development was the source of their inhibition. Certainly both "presentational shift" and the appearance of more abstract spatial synaesthesias could also appear sporadically and precociously in children -- much as we find occasional precocity in more specific frames of intelligence like music, mathematics, and visual art.

By way of conclusion, none of these minor reformulations or extensions can in any way obscure Almaas's extraordinary achievement in taking the next and long awaited step in the dialogue between Eastern spiritual traditions and Western psychotherapies. Somehow he has synthesized recent psychoanalysis, "fourth way" and other spiritual practices, and something like a guided imagery version of Gendlin's focusing by way of Wilhelm Reich -- and all this with intellectual rigor and clarity!

There is also a message here of real hope for those both drawn to and frustrated by the transpersonal traditions. The opening out of space (whether taken as metaphor or reality) is right there within our personal anguish, and most especially within our most chronic body tensions. Our attunement to the sense of being and feeling real would be found precisely where it seems most irretrievably lost.

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