

The Contribution of A. H. Almaas to Transpersonal Psychology

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Abstract

The Diamond Approach of A. H. Almaas builds on the various existing transpersonal approaches in psychotherapy. Combining the wisdom of the Sufis with modern developmental psychology, especially object relations theory, Almaas gives transpersonal psychotherapy a more comprehensive theoretical background. Another important contribution of the Diamond Approach is its precision as a method to activate essence as ontological presence and to dissolve self-images with the goal of spiritual development. Almaas extends the reach of conventional psychological theory and method to the spiritual realm and thus bridges the gap between the two.

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1) Introduction

The postmodern separation of spirituality from institutional religion in the past century has opened up the potential for new approaches to spirituality. In simultaneous movements, psychotherapy has liberated itself from the domination of science while theology has become freer of its exclusive fixation on dogma and rigid rituals. Psychotherapy has learned more about the healing potential of religious beliefs and meditation. On the other hand, psychotherapy is increasingly accepted as a useful support in Christian religions as well as in western Buddhist spiritual practice. At the beginning, this means it functions as a support, a mutual exchange, a dialogue. Parallel to this is the mutual development of theoretic-

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cal positions. Developments within psychotherapy regarding the deeper content of the psyche, on one hand, and interest within spiritual circles in the psychological ground, on the other hand, are starting to supplement each other.

Of importance at the beginning of this integration of psychotherapy and spirituality is the notion of a trinity of body (rough substance), soul (personal spirit, energy, subtle substance), and (absolute) spirit (cosmic emptiness, non-duality). This parallels Ken Wilber's trinity of the coarse substance, subtle and causal bodies. There are different definitions of the trinity. For the purposes of this article, I refer only to this definition. These three levels can be understood as developmental steps that people go through in different sequences. Psychotherapy, as a technique for the treatment of psychological disorders, will rarely result in an experience of non-duality, cosmic unity, or emptiness. But it can, as transpersonal psychotherapy, develop the intermediate realm of personal spirit in the soul. Meditation, on the other hand, has a therapeutic potential through the development of greater concentration and the surfacing of unconscious material, which it allows. Unfortunately, traditional spiritual practice is not interested in the content of the soul, which can lead to many problems. It is here that psychotherapy and spirituality can contribute to each other. An expanded and refined psychotherapy that is interested in and able to transform the soul and support the realization of "divine" qualities such as peace, love, will, strength, value or space, can be called spiritual or transpersonal.

2) Transpersonal approaches in therapy up to now

2.1. Jungian Analysis

C. G. Jung brought a more spiritual dimension to the psychotherapeutic process through his emphasis on the collective unconscious and the archetypes. His "process of individuation" contains the alchemical transformation of the consciousness through the archetypal energies. The method is limited by its restriction to symbolic images and imaginative techniques. The Jungian analyst Michael Washburn describes the individuation process as regression to the pre-egoic "dynamic ground", regeneration, and integration into a higher state. The Freudian "regression in the service of progression" develops into a "regression in the service of transcendence".

2.2. Psychosynthesis

R. Assagioli has tried to conceptualize the "superconscious" as the goal of a spiritually expanded psychotherapy. His technique of using symbols and exercises to bring about disidentification were designed to enable access to the superconscious

realm. His intention was to integrate certain transpersonal qualities of the “higher self” such as surrender, compassion, courage, intuition, hope, or equanimity and establish them as firmly as possible within the structures of the personality.

2.3. Initiation Therapy

Graf Dürkheim expanded the Jungian depth psychology to a “great” (initiation) therapy through a combination of body-therapeutic methods, mandala-painting, martial arts and meditation. A process of centering, psychodynamic depthwork and transcendence is intended to activate numinous “experiences of Being” and tries to provide continual access to a state of transcendence.

2.4. Logotherapy and Existential Analysis

The founder of logotherapy V. E. Frankl postulates that many neuroses are caused by a lack of inner meaning. Neurotic symptoms express a lack of “the fullness of Being”. Logotherapy is intended to fill the “existential vacuum”. Fear is understood as a symptom of separation from “Being” which can be overcome through confrontation.

Existential analysis (L. Binswanger and M. Boss) relies on the insights of existential philosophy. Human existence is characterized by ontological and transcendental traits. Therapeutic change is realized through allowing the expression of existential fear and weakness. In particular the experience of “withdrawal” (e.g. as a result of confronting decisions, separations, failure and loss) allows the possibility of transcendence and the realization of a perspective of being. The therapy is characterized by the method of phenomenology. The mystery of transpersonal experiences is invited by letting go of fixed patterns, allowing emotions to arise, and the acceptance of new and unexpected experiences.

2.5. Holotropic Therapy

S. Grof’s holotropic therapy uses a breathing technique in combination with bodywork, whereby holotropic breathing can result in extraordinary and transpersonal states of consciousness.

2.6. Energy-oriented Therapies

Some therapeutic schools use neo-Reichian body-therapeutic concepts to loosen energetic blockages. They are oriented towards the Indian chakra system. This

category includes Biosynthesis (D. Boadella), Biodynamic therapy (G. Boyesen), Orgodynamic therapy (Plesse/St.Clair), Hakomi (R. Kurtz) and Core Energetics (J. Pierakos). The liberation and experience of energy is seen as a spiritual experience that promotes the development of consciousness, thereby preparing for the experience of essence. Biosynthesis especially, with its emphasis on the containment of emotions, comes close to the essence work of Almaas.

2.7. Gestalt Therapy

The Gestalt therapy of F. Perls has given the therapeutic (and spiritual) process a theoretical basis. Its phenomenological orientation and the focus on awareness in the here and now, as well as the client's self-responsibility, are basic principles. The therapeutic (and spiritual) process is characterised by 5 steps.

- 1) Focus on the outer layer of identity with its fixation on ego roles and games, as well as the emotional, mental, and behavioural patterns of the false self;
- 2) The differentiation and awareness of unconscious conflicts underlying mental and physical blockages, resistances and the formation of dualities (foreground/background);
- 3) The "impasse", the dead end, the bottleneck, the aggravation of the conflicts accompanying the diffusion of identity, with experiences of confusion, loss of orientation, existential hopelessness and fear (of death);
- 4) The implosion, the identity vacuum and the transformation of deficient emptiness into the expanded space of "creative indifference";
- 5) The explosion, the expansion of identity, the integration of the liberating "ground" and "organismic self-regulation".

Other important achievements of Gestalt are its orientation towards the awareness continuum, the therapeutic dialogue and body awareness, the technique of "staying with" and the "paradox theory of change" through deepened awareness in the "here and now", the contact cycle, the basic field theory, and its openness to the "organismic transformation". Through work with the polarity of foreground and background to reach the "good gestalt", Gestalt therapy leads to the "ground" of organismic self regulation. Beyond that, Gestalt therapy can expand its scope to a spiritual "ground".

2.8. Quantum Psychology

S. Wolinski also created a psychotherapeutic approach to spiritual development. Using the personality styles of the enneagram, "quantum psychology" intends the practitioner to become aware of and work on the identities of the ego. Even

deeper structures of the ego are intended to be dissolved by a differentiated inquiry process leading to essence and the void of the nameless absolute.

All these methods, using different theoretical backgrounds, aim to loosen fixed psychological structures and the body armour, in order to bring about an opening of the soul to spiritual experiences. An extensive discussion of these methods is found in Brant Cortright's book "Psychotherapy and Spirit" (1997).

3) The Levels of the Spiritual Ground

In his book "Identität und Befreiung in Gestalttherapie, Zen und christlicher Spiritualität" (Identity and Liberation in Gestalttherapy, Zen and Christian Spirituality), Petersberg 1993), L. Frambach describes common principles of therapeutic and spiritual unfolding. This provides a good theoretical basis, although he uses the terms "emptiness" and "ground" somewhat vaguely. He describes the development of emptiness from a deficient emptiness to the cosmic emptiness of the absolute ground. However, in the context of Gestalt, the experience of the "absolute ground" is not very likely. The "ground" is sometimes seen in qualities and abilities like love, strength, peace, joy, or contactfullness. These qualities are not differentiated from cosmic emptiness, which can also be called "ground". This compares with the "middle mode" of Gestalt, which aims to overcome fixed dualities (such as symbiosis versus separation). F. Helg (2000) also discusses the spiritual potential of the process of gestalt therapy. He states that after the experience of emptiness the differentiation between foreground and background is dissolved in favour of pure consciousness. This is a development of the soul, which has practical consequences.

The experience of cosmic emptiness or unity, which is the primary goal of the Zen path, has a totally different transpersonal quality. Although important, these differences are often confused in spiritual literature. The confusion of energy with essence also leads to misunderstandings. These differences are stated more precisely in the Diamond Approach of Almaas. The philosopher K. Albert (1974) discussed the "ontological experience" in philosophy, religion and literature. The psychoanalyst D. Stern (2005) approaches the experience in his book "Der Gegenwartsmoment" as well as its importance in psychotherapy.

4) The Teaching of A.H.Almaas

4.1 *Essence as a goal of transpersonal psychotherapy*

The teaching of Almaas is based on the above-mentioned division into three parts. The coarse body is inhabited by the soul's egoic structures. The soul, as ego, is identified with many reactive patterns, self-images and belief structures. Spiritual development for Almaas is firstly the development from identification with the structures of the ego to essence, as the subtle ground of the soul. Essence is an old term used predominantly by the Sufis, rather than Buddhists. Essence is the subtle substance, the "wisdom stone", the "pearl beyond price", the "elixir of enlightenment", which the transformed egoic soul can experience. Essence has many qualities such as value, strength, peace, love, etc. According to Almaas essence is in-born. Due to their lack of capacity for differentiation and as yet undeveloped cognitive ability, however, infants cannot be aware of it in a self-reflective way. Because of deficiencies in the holding environment and the immaturity of the child's soul, access to essence is lost in the growing child. The experience of essence is repressed and replaced by the reactive structures of the ego.

Understanding the repression of essence as a psychological process, it becomes clear that it can be rediscovered by psychological means. Psychotherapy is mainly concerned with the pathological structures and tries to transform "neurotic suffering into normal suffering"(Freud). With refined methods it is now possible, to expand and deepen the psychological process for it to become a spiritual one. Individuation can be enriched by the qualities of essence and the deeper structures of identity can dissolve into an "essential identity"(Almaas 1997). This work then becomes more like learning with a teacher, rather than having psychotherapy with a therapist. And of course, transitions from one to the other overlap.

4.2. *The Division in three parts in the works of Almaas*

The development of essence enriches, relieves and refines daily life through the integration of the manifold qualities of essence into the self. The term essence compares with C. G. Jung's "archetypical energies", M. Washburn's "dynamic ground", the "higher self" of psychosynthesis, the "being experiences" of initiation therapy as well as the "middle mode" and the "creative indifference" of Gestalt. Essence is not only the highest development of the personal soul, but also has "self-cleansing" abilities. Essence prepares the soul for the experience of a transpersonal "spirit", experiences of unity and the emptiness of the Absolute. The process of regaining essence is described in more detail below.

4.3. The Regaining of Essence

The soul's main structures are identifications with individuality (how I am), identity (who I am) and of entity (where my borders are). Concerning individuality, we are mostly identified with different deficiencies, or lacks of essence, e.g. the lack of value (we feel worthless); or we have a counter-identification (we have to prove our value). By means of the psychological and spiritual process, deficiency is usually experienced as a "hole", the experience of deficiency in the body image. By confrontation with this deficiency by means of inquiry and by allowing of the experience of the specific hole, a space can open which eventually will fill itself with the appropriate essence. Essence is the fullness of Being experienced as a subtle substance. Essence has different textures, colours, tastes or scents. Fully experienced, it has a "numinous" quality; it is a presence, a self-reflective consciousness. The separation of the observer and the observed is abolished here. Essence is calm and full and differs from the excited and bubbly experience of energy. Essence is a descending force in contrast to the rising energy of the chakra system, the Kundalini energy. Because of the subtlety of the experience, it is often not recognized and not valued. Nevertheless, it has an enormously relaxing effect on the soul, because only essence is capable of replacing the reactive structures of the ego. The soul experiencing essence is able to function sensitively and flexibly in everyday life. Almaas mentions five main qualities (lataif): joy, compassion, will, strength, and peace. The experience of the qualities of essence is repressed because of specific psychological constellations in childhood. By working with these constellations, essence can be regained. It is here that the rich insights of developmental psychology help considerably.

4.4. The Transformation of Identity

The transformation of the identification with self-images leads to essence without quality, which is space. Almaas states that the transformation of these self-images without the experience of space is not possible. The process of self-inquiry, here, leads from the confrontation with the self-images to another form of emptiness. This time it is experienced as the emptiness of the whole body with the skin as its outer covering. The description he uses is the "empty shell". When the empty shell is tolerated, the self-image can dissolve and an "essential identity" can develop. Relating to specific self-images as outer or inner, a psychological self-image or a body-image, leads to the experience of different kinds of space. The outer psychological self-image, for example, is related to clear bright space; the inner psychological self-image to dense bright space. The outer body-

image is related to clear black space, and the inner body-image to black dense space.

4.5. The Ridhwan School

The continual development of essence and the transformation of the self-images are the primary work of the Ridhwan School. This process takes many years - even a whole life-time. It prepares the soul for deeper experiences of the boundless, mystical dimensions of the unity of pure presence and the emptiness of the Absolute. This is the third step of the threefold division. The deepest identifications are those with the inner body-image and the body boundaries. The dissolution of these identifications leads to non-dual unity and the emptiness of the Absolute.

Almaas has written about his teaching extensively and in great detail in several books. In his school, students are gradually confronted with the psychological themes so that, in alignment with their personal process, they can develop essence in its different qualities. The method is mainly that of inquiry, together with meditation and other techniques. Inquiry is used in groups of two or three and deepened by Ridhwan teachers in small groups and individual sessions. The method is phenomenological in the sense that all sensations, feelings, and associations are invited, respected, and allowed. It is hermeneutic in the sense that the understanding of all phenomena is situated within the broad wisdom of existing body therapeutic, depth psychological and spiritual schools. Through the deepening of the experience and understanding in a very personal process, the qualities of essence will successively be experienced and integrated into the soul. The reactive self-images of the ego can then gradually dissolve.

For the practical treatment, Th. Yeomans (2002), from psychosynthesis, can be quoted:

- Getting slower, to make connection. In a conscious slowing down, perception changes.
- Practicing silence, so that deeper experiences can show up.
- Welcoming conflicts, contradictions, and polarities and letting them be, holding them in consciousness instead of solving them prematurely in order to accept and value a greater spectrum of experiences.
- Holding intensity, hold it in silence, to let come the greater power.
- Welcoming the unknown, in order to let show up the greater wholeness.
- Enjoying the process, letting go of the orientation on results and to come to value the experience and life itself.

Ridhwanwork adds the orientation to the body and specific and differentiating questions about the quality, the density, consistency, colour of the experience.

4.6. Essence as Support in Psychotherapy

Essence can be experienced in the many emotional situations of life, e.g. in nature, listening to music, having sex, in meditation and in therapeutic situations. But it can unfold its enriching effect only when it is sufficiently understood, honoured and experienced. Then it can have a supportive effect in psychotherapy. Essence extends beyond psychodynamic understanding and emotional experience. It can give inner support, strength, relaxation, and autonomy, besides the experience of unexpectedly coming into contact with another layer of inner truth. Then the therapist's awareness of essence as the ground of existence can support the client in difficult situations. On the therapist's side, it is his field of essence that is supportive, on the clients' side it is their growing trust in the possibility of the fullness of Being shining through every difficulty. Then they can believe in the "good core" of humanity and the meaning of life can be experienced through essential Being.

By way of an example, I would like to mention the experience of a 50 year-old client with a fear disorder, working on his smoking problem:

"Starting from this strange pain in the right side and in the solar plexus I associated the thought 'smoking'. I made the experiment to imagine how it would be not to smoke any more. Quickly, the feeling of 'desire' and 'void' came up from deep inside. Axel talked of a 'lack' and proposed to allow the feeling. Sitting quietly on the couch, I listened inside myself and felt that desire. Again and again, I stay with the imagination to quit smoking and with the proposal to feel. I felt nervousness, I felt emptiness, I felt the desire to inhale and to suck. Like a child, I want to suck with my mouth to fill something, to fill up something (the void, the lack, lack of love?). Suddenly came the thought 'don't lead me to temptation but release me from evil'. Talking with Axel leads to the understanding that temptation is associated with search and addiction as a trial to compensate, to suppress, to not feel the lack, the void, the godlessness, the lack of love, the lack of peace. I become conscious that smoking is causing exactly this in me. With smoking I cover up and repress feelings, as shown above. By smoking I reward myself and relax and fill the void. Again the proposal to feel, to allow the feelings of nervousness, longing and emptiness. I listen and feel inside, both hands on my belly and chest. In addition to the feelings mentioned above another one comes up, a feeling of peace, freedom and being centred. Like a wave positive and negative feelings exchange and mingle. Sometimes one is on top,

sometimes the other. Now in addition to the feeling of peace and freedom comes a feeling of strength and clarity. I feel good in spite of emptiness and longing, I feel centred and feel this peace and strength again and again.

My conclusion: Deep inside, below this longing, this emptiness and the feeling of lack is a great strength, is peace and freedom and the feeling of centeredness. How to integrate this experience into everyday life? Going into the silence, going inside and feel. This desire but also the power to want and feel the peace and strength. As long as, that I believe, the longing, the emptiness are gone.”

In conclusion, my observation is that the experience of essence (as shown in the teachings of Almaas and the Ridhwan School) in the ”middle mode“ between psychotherapy and spirituality serves to support and deepen the psychotherapeutic process.

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