

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health's Essential Conversations

NEAL ALLEN

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is *Essential Conversations*. Our guest today, Neal Allen, is an author and coach who has devoted much of his life to the study of spiritual traditions, both ancient and modern. His new book is *Shapes of Truth: Discover God Inside You*. You can read an excerpt from the book and his essay, *Asking Questions Is Most of Compassion* posted on the Spirituality & Health website, spiritualityhealth.com. Neal Allen, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

Neal Allen: Hi, thank you for talking to me.

Rabbi Rami: You're welcome. This is my pleasure. The book was really interesting. My only concern is there's so much in this book and we only have this limited amount of time. I want to get the heart of it across to people, and then the listeners are all invited to get the book and dig into it yourselves. All too often, I read a lot of books about God, or at least with God in the title. All too often, when I read a book about God, I discover pretty quickly that the author isn't going to define what is meant by the word God. The word just hangs there like a blank slate on which the reader can project any idea about God that they may have, but your book is an exception, thankfully, I appreciate that.

Your book explores 35 qualities of God that can be experienced by the reader because, and here's the, I guess, the great revelation of the book- they're inside of us. These 35 qualities of God reside within us. Of course, that's the subtitle, *Discover God Inside Yourself*. 35 is a large number. In Judaism, we only have 13, [chuckles] and I wrote a whole book on those. There's no way that I can expect you to expound on all of these in this short podcast. If you could, help the reader a little bit understand your idea of God, and then briefly talk about what you call the big five of these attributes; joy, strength, will, compassion, and power.

Neal: Thank you. First of all, when I talk about God, I'm not quite talking here about the overall God, the God that's outside you, inside you, that permeates everything, that might be a pervasive unity, or might be a guy with a beard up in the sky, or might be all of that. What I write about and what I'm talking about is an ability that we have, that all of us seem to have to notice, and discover, and retrieve aspects of God that are particularly useful to us as human beings, that are inside us in two senses. In one sense, they remind you that you are actually made of the same material as everything else, and that it is imbued with God.

In another sense, they're actually inside your personal body as conceptual objects that can be felt and seen as if they were good, broad sentences describing God, a bunch of sentences describing God's aspects inside you, but instead of being sentences or words, they're a vocabulary of simple, geometric, solid objects that have colors, and smells, and scents and things. Where the book starts is this kind of

unbelievable proposition that hidden in your body is a set of 35 divine objects that represent specific aspects of God. They can grant immediate and sustained relief from everyday suffering if you spend time discovering them.

It's an approach that is useful in the sense that when you go in to discover a particular aspect of God, the way in is, in a lot of approaches, a lot of religious and spiritual approaches, the way in is through noticing your own suffering. There's going to be one of these objects of God that supports your ability to get out of that suffering. They're trippy and weird. When you move into them, it's as if, by looking inside yourself, a little opening will show up like a snow globe opening inside you, and an object that might be an amber stone, or a red sphere, or a white pearl, will suddenly come into view. Each of these objects has a meaning, and it has the same meaning for you as for me.

Rabbi Rami: One of my questions, as I was reading the book is, and you just answered it and the book answers it, that I'm going to see a white pearl, and you're going to see a white pearl, and the meaning of the white pearl is the same for you as it is for me. That made me think of, are we talking about something like Jungian archetypes? Is it similar to that?

Neal: Jungian archetypes tend to relate like dreams do to our social beings, and how we relate to the world in storylines, and in patterns of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. These are much more fundamental and simple than that. They can form into storylines, but they don't have to. These are more like building blocks for everything from a Jungian archetypal story being told to myself, to a way of understanding what is meant purely by the words that are represented, these divine words that are represented.

The 35 objects and the 35 concepts that they relate to, are all what a linguist would call abstract nouns of value. They are words that abstract out an essence that can be known by human beings from the objects around us, including ourselves. They're words like strength, and discrimination, and will, and truth, and self.

Rabb Ramii: Passionate love and universal love. There's so many, you can't name them all.

Neal: You're right, and gratitude, all of a sudden, but there are all these words, and each of them happens to represent a quality of life, a quality of the divine, a quality of you that sits on the good side of the polarity of good and bad, and the right side of right and wrong. What's interesting is in this entire set, and it appears to be a comprehensive set, it's not my discovery, so we can go into that. Into this entire set of divine objects, none of them represents evil, or weakness, or the concepts that we have learned that are on the other side of ethical codes, and moral codes, and our sense of good and bad and right and wrong.

The indication that gives me is that we're rigged to the good, which, nice to know. It's basically saying, you come into this world, built for this world with compassion, and empathy, and strength, and will and curiosity, all built in without their opposites. We learn their opposites through social restraints that are appropriate, and that we need to learn, but we ourselves, are made of the good stuff.

Rabbi Rami: A couple of questions about how that works. For example-- I'll come back to the colors in a second, but just this notion that we're built for the good stuff, and we learn the bad. In the book, you talk about the true form of these objects, and the false form of the objects. It's your social constructs and things that cause the false view of these objects or that create the false form. How do we get from being born with all these positive things, and then fall into the trap of the false?

Neal: We have no say over that. We're told that we have to restrain our freedom when we get to be five, six, seven years old. The more we're told that, it's reinforced with frowns and with concepts of, "If you don't do this, you're a bad person," or, "It would be much better for you to do this than that." That's all necessary. That's all necessary for maturation. What we don't notice though is that the more that those layers of conformity are put on us, the farther and farther away we come from noticing that we actually have an innate capacity to make the right choice, we just haven't tapped it and we don't know how to tap it. In the meantime, we're learning a different way to operate in the world.

By the time we're 15, 16, 17, we've learned most of the rules of the road that tell us this is good and this is bad. We should be allowed to operate where we have all of those rules sitting next to us as a good, strong ethical code, and we've tried them out, and they generally work for most people most of the time. We know that. We can trust ourselves that when necessary, we'll move over into the ethical code, but we could learn at that point also that, as long as we have that hanging next to us, we can operate out of a different system most of the time, and most of the time we can operate out of noticing that we are compassionate, we are empathy, we are strength, we are will, we are power, already built-in.

In particular, we are so simply these things that we can recognize them in other people. The big difficulty in modern civilized life is that we distrust each other, so we'd find it very difficult to move into empathy. Empathy says, "I'm more interested in what is similar about you than I am in your differentiated identities." If you ask most people, "Who are you?" They'll give you all their roles. They'll say, "I'm a lawyer. I'm a woman. I'm this race. I'm that ethnicity. I'm somebody who likes ice cream. I'm this and that." They'll tell you, "That's who I am."

What they're really answering is a very different question, which is, what differentiates you from other people? If you ask, "What is a wolf?" People would say a wolf is an animal that is fierce when in attack mode, and who is gentle when a puppy, and all of these sorts of things, and we would all think, "Yes, that's what I want this," but nobody would ever answer about themselves that same way. "I am a being. I'm a large mammal. I am a large mammal that has a heart. I'm a mammal that has a heart and ability to self-reflect and notice other people are similar to me," and that sort of thing.

If we could get back to seeing how we are mostly undifferentiated from each other, then we wouldn't need the social restraints so much, because if you see the other person as being just like you, they could be you, you are them in some sort of way, then you're not going to do the wrong thing. You're not going to beat them up. You're not going to steal their food. You're going to share.

When we're born into this world, we share, we learn how not to share, but then we don't go back and relearn how to share. The book teaches a particular way. There are many ways to learn how to reshare, but this is one way that goes to a way to discover a nice trippy sense of, "Wow, I am strength inside me. I thought I was somebody who had to go pretend to be strong."

Rabbi Rami: Okay, so we're born with these 35 divine objects in and of themselves, I don't know if perfect is the right word, but they're perfect, let's just go with that for a second. Then just given the realities of being a baby, and then a toddler, and a child, and adolescent, all of that, you're formed by your family and your society until you lose touch with these divine objects and that's just baked into the cake.

Like with all spiritual system, something brings you around so that you really want to see if you can find some other way to be than the false sense of these 35 objects, just to stick with the language. How would parenting change, or how would society change if the society was rooted in the 35 divine objects, in their true form, if your parents weren't coming from the false form? Is there a way to be raised more true and to have a society that is more true, or do we have to go through the distortions, and then some of us recognize them as distortions and want to get back to the core truth?

Neal: I wish there was an easy answer to that, Rami. I ended up taking a dismal anthropological view, which is that once we moved out of fairly small tribal societies, we were stuck with living next door to strangers. I live on a beautiful block, on a beautiful street, with very charming people who are good people, compassionate people, and

we all have fences around our yards, and that's a problem. That's a real problem. I don't know that with the population of the world, there's any way around that problem.

Gandhi wanted to revert India to a new civilization of tiny villages because he recognized what the anthropologists recognize which is when you get beyond a group

200 people, and you have to live around more than 200 people, you're going to default to distrust. The rules that we learn as kids are designed to help us in a world where we default to distrust. We default to hierarchies. We default to people having to compete for things.

Really, Stone Age tribal communities, the ones that still exist in this world, are just different. They don't do that, and they don't have to do that. The people in a Stone Age tribal community default to trust. I think this is individual work. I don't think we can take on civilization for this, but the good news about that is nobody has to be a better parent, nobody has to be a better neighbor.

The point of doing this kind of work, and it requires repetitions is, I get to be this kind of me. I don't care anymore whether other people are like me, whether other people or dislike me in this. I get to operate in the world. It turns out that when I operate with freedom, I become more appropriate, and more compassionate, and more empathic. Just about everybody I know who's traveled down a serious spiritual path, that's true.

They oddly end up really engaged in the world in a new kind of relational way. It's fine to do it individually. I don't know how to change the world, though. We distrust our neighbors.

Rabbi Rami: I don't disagree with that at all. I was just thinking while you were talking, something's got to drive you to make this shift, if you can make this shift, and that's unique to the individual.

Neal: I come back all the time to-- my wife who's the author, Anne Lamott is very engaged with 12-step communities. 12-step communities are probably evolved, and I've engaged with Buddhists, and odd new-age groups, and Hindu groups, and all sorts of different places where I've sat and gone into retreats, or I've sat in worship with them or whatever. You want a spiritually magnificent group, just go to your local 12-step meeting on a Wednesday night in the basement of a church somewhere, a temple somewhere, and you are going to see the most spiritual people on earth.

Why? Because they know the power of the dark night of the soul. They know that when you hit hopelessness and helplessness, everything can happen. The first line that Jesus came out of the gate, yelling to the world was, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is dark night of the soul stuff, quit your beliefs, become a loser, and see what happens.

Rabbi Rami: Well, [chuckles] now, we're switching into one of my passions, and I have to be careful not to go into 12-step, because I agree with you 100%. If anyone's listening, and they go, "Oh, I got to check this out," you just can't go to a 12-step meeting. You have to check to see if it's an open meeting. You just can't. Unless you are an addict, then be our guest and go. Just really a side note, just because you brought it up, besides bringing up your wife, which I was not going to do, but okay.

You mentioned the first thing out of Jesus mouth, the dark night of the soul. All of Christianity, as I read the Christian story, is-- the big turning point in Jesus's life is crucifixion and the ultimate dark night where he says, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" That's really being broken on the literal and the metaphoric cross. Unless you do that, there is no resurrection, so you have to hit this rock bottom. That's what's going to drive you either, not necessarily to Christianity, but just to some other system that speaks to you.

In your case, and I don't know how much of this influences your thinking, but it seems like you mentioned this earlier when you said you didn't discover these things, you've learned them. I'm assuming you learned them from A. H. Almaas the founder of the Diamond Approach. Is that fair?

Neal: A. H. Almaas is his pen name.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, Hameed Ali.

Neal: The credit goes to Hameed, and he's a spiritual master, who has a very efficient, progressive path through the obstacles of the ego, which I went through. He does the part that gets a little bit mushy in a lot of spiritual traditions. The part of, "I've got to address my emotional difficulties and get them to move to the side, and that's part of what I have to do in order to have freedom."

He had developed a, remarkable and very diligent, and progressive approach to that, but it's a mystery school. What I noticed was in the midst of that, he had discovered these objects inside. Now, he's not Sufi. He was born in Kuwait to a Muslim family, but they weren't Sufi. Five of these objects, have been known since the 13th century to the Sufi, who called them the *lataif*.

Actually, those five are particularly, and I know Rami, you've been wanting me to talk about this for 20 minutes now, but those five are particularly powerful and important because if you take those five aspects of yourself, and I'll go through them very quickly, but if you take those five aspects of yourself, you can form, through looking at which ones do you feel are strong, and which ones do you feel you're weak in, you can form a personality out of them.

What that means is that they represent the most essential activities that we need to have to relate to each other and work with each other as human beings. The first one's called curiosity, second one's called strength, the third one's called will, the fourth one's called compassion, and the fifth one's called power. The way to think about these, curiosity always appears as a yellow object inside. It's how you start anything. Anything you ever do, you start with curiosity and the words for it are, oddly enough, I want. Curiosity is the little kid pulling the red thing that he doesn't even know the name is a ball up to his mouth and trying to chew on it. That's how we start everything.

Then strength is red and it really represents less musclebound strength, although sometimes it represents that, but more of the heartfelt ability to accurately discriminate things in the world and come into the world and say, "I can figure things out. I can do things."

Then will is what it sounds like. Will, as white it's often felt in the spine, but it's also felt as a white craggy mountains sitting in the bottom of your stomach will show up. What will represents is, "I not only can it I'll finish it, I will do it. I will be steadfast in it." In other traditions, it's represented by a more common sense of freewill, but in this tradition, it's more, "I'm going to be steadfast in anything."

Compassion, we all know what compassion is or we think we do, but it's actually a green brick in your heart. It basically says to the world, "I am," in the sense of, "I am just the same way you are." This is the I am Ramana Maharshi developed, and other mystics have developed as being, "Let's get away from our identities and who are you really?" I think I talked about this a little earlier, but it, once you notice who you are at heart, you're going to notice that everybody is just like you at heart.

Compassion, by the way, is the love that rises in the presence of suffering. It happens to be the strongest love that we notice in our relational life with other people, because most people are suffering more, and talking about their suffering more than they're in a bliss state and talking about their bliss state.

Finally the fifth, which is a much more subtle one, and usually it takes a while to retrieve, and find, and spend time with, is called power. The odd thing about power, the sense of, I know in some great knowing way, more a big consciousness knowing than, "I can figure out how to put an Ikea Billy bookcase together." This is a bigger knowing, a knowing of wisdom. It's actually the exact same thing as peace. It's just

weird to discover something inside you that at first you think represents an ability to grok the world, and then you notice, "Wow, as soon as I grok the world, everything gets quiet."

Rabbi Rami: I was looking at all of these, and I know that the argument is that they exist in all of us, and Almaas was not as Sufi, but these big five are related to Sufism, where do we get the shapes like the green brick in your heart? Is the brick shape and the color--? They're not as far as I understand, these are not culturally conditioned.

Neal: Yes. As far as we can tell. Hameed and I have looked into that, I got some. He helped me with this book, in the early stages, and in particular, there's a catalog in the back with all 35. First of all, there are these 5, and then there are 30 more. The 30 others, Hameed discovered all of those. He is solely responsible for discovering all of those. We looked back through, everything that we could look through, did a lot of research. You think they might have something to do with the tree of life, but they really don't, or something to do with the chakras, but they don't.

What's different about them than the systems that you might think they would be part of is they stand independently. They're not a system. They are building blocks for any system. They are so fundamental, and so rooted, and so simple, that they don't organize themselves into neat paths and neat shapes.

No, if you have an emotional suffering, go into the emotional suffering. Once you're passed through the emotional suffering in a particular manner, then one of these shapes will show up and it shows up for that emotional suffering and not for any other purpose, until, by the way, you've learned about five or six of them, seven or eight of them, having done them over and over and over again. Maybe seen them 30 times, 40 times. All of a sudden, it dawns on my clients, or the way it dawned on me, "Oh, wait a minute. Maybe I'm more them. Maybe I'm more these things than I am my nagging snarky thoughts that are running through my mind telling me to behave better."

Rabbi Rami: That way it's similar to self-inquiry from Ramana Maharshi.

Neal: Very much so, but a different kind of. You don't have to spend 17 years in a cave. You can spend a couple of years being precise and being guided a little bit.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I want to let the listener know that I have no idea how much sense any of this is making. I never know that when we're talking, but you do go through, I just want the listener to know this, you do go through all 35 in enough detail, so they make sense, but more importantly, you can use a section of the book where you lay out how to do this with a friend, as you put it, that you can actually experience what you're talking about in yourself.

This is not an abstract book. Now, maybe the conversation sounds that way. It really is, as the subtitle says, a method for, I'm saying a method, to discover God inside of you, to discover these 35 divine objects inside of you and the method isn't, it seemed to me, it wasn't complicated. You got to have a friend you trust, you both have to be aware of the system you're working in, but it seems like it's something that most people could do. Is that your experience?

Neal: It's very odd. Almost everybody can do this and almost everybody, when they do it. They act like it was the most normal thing in the world. My most rationalistic friends who hate all things woo-woo, and have no need for God or spirit. They were my people for many years. I'm fine with that. I don't have any problem with that, but I work with them, they see these, and they come into these the exact same way the most spiritually advanced people come in, and I say, advanced, precariously. By the way, I'm just pretending there's something like advanced spirituality, but at any rate, what anybody can do this.

The biggest obstacle to it is people not trying, which is a very funny thing. A lot of people go out and say, "Oh, I'm not good at feeling into things," or, "I'm not good at seeing my body." "Oh, I've tried doing things like that." The technique that I developed, and that's used, a lot of it I picked up, I think, from Hameed Ali, in his teachings, but the technique is, so simple and so easy. The only complication is you need a friend, you can't do it yourself at first.

In fact, a lot of people get the full use of it before they're able to do it themselves. You have to use a friend, and do it with a friend over and over and over again, before you have a real chance of being able to do it for yourself. It's just the way we're wired but the technique is really quite simple. It's a series of 8 or 10 questions that you ask the other person right in a row, and by asking those questions, almost every time a form is evoked.

Rabbi Rami: I want to just underscore that, it is very doable. I only read it, I haven't done it with a friend but you can see, you lay it out so that it can be done. I love the fact that that it's a friend you're turning to, and not some spiritual master, and then you have to deal with all of their own craziness. Yes, this book, it would be an interesting gift to give to a friend with whom you'd like to do this.

Neal: Oh, that's nice. That's a very nice idea. I hadn't thought of that.

Rabbi Rami: I'm just trying to sell books.

[laughter]

Rabbi Rami: Actually, we're over time, but I just want to ask you one other question. Since you already brought up your wife, Anne Lamott, if she were on the show, and I asked her and I said something like so, "Anne since Neal's been doing this, what is the biggest change that you've noticed in him?" She's not here, I can't ask her, but can you-- what do you think is the biggest change in you?

Neal: Well, I learned these in the course of moving through the obstacles of my ego and it was one of the big tools. I learned these in Hameed Ali's mystery school originally. The biggest change in my life was a fundamental transformation in how I perceive myself. I'm less than I used to be, and I operate in the world without many purposes, and mostly, I just do the next thing that arrives. I know that sounds unbelievable, but it's actually how I live. I was a corporate strategist, and I was good at strategy, and planning things, and the biggest thing that came through that path that these were part of, was my loss of planning.

I have no idea. I fill my days with clients and my calendar's always full, and I'm not being coy when I say I don't quite understand how things get put into my calendar, even though I do it. I just follow my nose now. I prefer living my life following my nose and I find that I'm closer to people.

Rabbi Rami: Excellent answer, way better than what I was going to guess you might say, and I am cognizant of the time but when someone says I live without purpose, I know that there's got to be people listening go, "What? No, what are you talking about?" It's very Daoist, it's very, in the Chinese way, *wu wei*, noncoercive action, being in the moment and doing what must be done. I think that's such a phenomenal gift that this practice offers and if you can attest that this is how it works, I just think that's absolutely fantastic.

Our guest today, Neal Allen, is the author of *Shapes of Truth: Discover God Inside Yourself*. His essay, *Asking Questions Is Most of Compassion* is an excerpt from the book and you can read that excerpt online at spiritualityhealth.com. You can learn more about Neal's work on his website, shapessoftruth.com. Neal Allen, thank you so much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

Neal: Thank you, Rami, for letting me blab about this trippy stuff.

Rabbi Rami: [laughs] You're welcome.

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