

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Sacred Self: Guest Interview with Andrew Harvey

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Andrew Harvey is Founder Director of the Institute of Sacred Activism, an international organization focused on inviting concerned people to take up the challenge of our contemporary global crises by becoming inspired, effective, and practical agents of institutional and systemic change, in order to create peace and sustainability.

MM: Welcome Andrew, it's so good to have you here. I wanted to start by talking about Rumi a little bit. Rumi's been such an important part of your life and work. What you say about him is that he is an initiator into the sacred, which of course is something that can be said about you, too.

You say that he combines the experience of divine beauty and mystery with a sober, humble, teaching about how to sustain, deepen and integrate them with daily life. How do we have that vision of the divine while integrating it into our earth-bound, humble daily lives?

AH: Well, that is the great challenge. It's a huge thing to be graced by the vision of God, it's a huge thing to have the heart be shattered open to the glory and beauty of the divine and to see the light burning IN and AS everything. But after enlightenment comes the laundry, as Jack Kornfield so beautifully said.

So, how do we really, really bring the light down into our minds, into our hearts and our bodies? How do we allow what we learn from the divine experience about tenderness, about compassion, to really infuse our daily living? That is the question.

I was interviewing the Dalai Lama on the day he won the Nobel Prize in Oslo. We had two hours together in an amazing, sleek white room in some dreary Oslo hotel. At the end of the interview, I was so overwhelmed by his presence that I couldn't get out of the chair.

His holiness came up and said, "Andrew, I have to go and get the Nobel Prize now."

He hoisted me up and I found myself breast to breast with the Buddha of Compassion. So, I looked up at him and said, "Well we'll never be in this position again. What is the meaning of life?" We roared with laughter. (Mark and Andrew laugh together.)

Then he became extremely serious and said, "The meaning of life is to embody the transcendent." He made a very powerful noise when he said, 'embody.' And he waved his hand up and down my body, and I felt this flame rise and fall in my body, which of course, put me into an extraordinary fragile state. It's not often you're breast to breast with the Dalai Lama and he gives you the secret to life. Then, he actually embodied what he said.

We were in a large room and he said, "Look, you see the door, it's fifty yards away. We will walk towards it, quietly together."

He took my hand like a mother, he held my hand so tenderly. He went to the door with me and he stroked my hand, and very gently let it go.

He said, "Goodbye my son."

And he stood in that corridor outside his room, watching me stumble down the corridor. I turned and all I could see, really, was golden light blazing from him, his face smiling so sweetly. He

hadn't just given me the secret, he was showing me how it's lived. In order to "live it," we must do three things.

First, we make sacred practice the core of our lives. So many people "smuggle in" practice. But there comes a stage on the path when you really "get" that you have absolutely no hope of aligning yourself with your deepest knowledge of God, unless you do the humble, daily, down home practice. Because, practice is tuning the dial of the radio of your scattered, chaotic, ordinary self to this pure transmission from the transcendent. So that it can flow with you throughout your day and give you space, so that whatever you do and whomever you meet, you're meeting in a state of brimming, tender calm and what you radiate from that is ordinary sweetness.

It's amazing what happens when you really, really practice because your whole life becomes so much gentler and you become gentler and you look at people with soft eyes and you notice things that you would never notice—flowers coming up through the crack in the pavement, the beautiful look of old people, you notice the dogs—it's extraordinary. You can go on and on about it, but people don't believe you 'til they do it. It's a way of staying in line, staying in tune.

The second thing that you really have to do, unfortunately, is to constantly work on your shadow. I, of course, have no remaining shadows, as you know. (Mark and Andrew chuckle.) The more you do shadow work of course, the more you discover how all pervasive and destructive and folly-ridden your shadow is and that keeps you humble. That keeps you knowing that whatever you learn in your divine experience, you have to constantly work on your human, traumatized self for that experience to become truly integrated.

And shadow work is very important, because without it, you will be secretly tortured by massive self-righteousness. With it, you realize you're just another inmate of the vast lunatic asylum, which is the world, and that gives you compassion and the skillful means to deal with other people's pain, other people's craziness, other people's savagery, without being terrified by that, or without rushing to beat them over the head, or rushing to judge them. That is a huge liberation.

The third thing that I think is absolutely essential for truly, truly integrating the divine, is to turn up what I call the *sacred activist*. I spent the last twenty years honing a vision of sacred activism and for me, sacred activism is a marriage of the deepest spiritual awareness, the deepest spiritual peace and passion, stamina and strength, with a clear, wise, commitment to action on behalf of human beings and sentient beings. So it's essential, I think, to look beyond the territory of your personal self and choose a mission, choose something that you can truly serve with your powers, with your resources, and discover the great secret that all the sages have talked about which is this: You cannot hope to integrate the divine experience which through grace you have been given, if you don't make the commitment to put it into living practice by serving other people.

So if you truly do sacred practice, that will align you constantly to your own deepest and best self. If you truly continually do shadow work, that will purify you so that you can become increasingly a humble instrument of divine love and wisdom, and if you really take the challenge of all the great teachers, from the Buddha, the Prophet, or the Christ—all of them—if you take the challenge to turn up and do something from your renewed and transformed awareness, then you will be able to integrate. And then you will be in the stream of love's transforming force, so over time you will become an EMBODIED, divine human being, constantly in touch with the source and humbly giving of yourself in your life to everyone in mysterious and tender ways. I know the truth of these things because at sixty-three; I'm a very different person than I was twenty-five years ago. I hardly recognize that person. It's not because I am enlightened or special. It's because I was so desperate, so unhappy that I finally listened to these simple pragmatic

instructions that I'm giving to you and to those listening. I realized that if I didn't knuckle down, didn't hunker down and really do the work, daily and humbly, I might have gone nuts or killed myself. And now, at sixty-three, I can see the truth of these things and I'm so grateful.

MM: Talk to me about the inner practice. I understand sacred activism as a way of bringing that awareness into the world, but talk to me about the inner sacred practice that folks can do on a regular basis to keep themselves aligned with this force you're talking about, the love that you're talking about.

AH: Well, I think there are really five kinds of practices we are called to do if we truly want to birth ourselves holistically as rounded, integrated, divine human beings.

The first kind of practice is what I call "cool" practices. Cool practices are essential; they are the foundation of the path. Cool practices are fundamentally those practices that enable you to stay calm, stay grounded, stay breathing in whatever circumstance you find yourself.

As the world goes more into this seemingly terminal death crisis, these are going to be absolutely the oxygen of survival. One cool practice that anybody can do, whatever they believe in, is a practice I was taught by a Greek orthodox monk years ago. It simply involves a breathing technique. When you breathe in, breathe in a golden light, the color of sunlight sparkling on the river and allow that golden light to go down to the bottom of your toes, consciously seal it, permeating your whole being, and allow it to go above your head, wrapping you in a cocoon, entirely around you. Then breathe out, and when you breath out, breath out your anxiety, your gloom, your hysteria, your rage, whatever it is, and you'll find that if you do this for just a minute with real intention, your whole consciousness will shift and steady. It's amazing. Try it.

The second kind of practice that everybody needs is one I call "heart practices." The new age has been so addicted to "cool practices" that it's become totally chilled out. I imagine all those "cool practices." People just sitting in front of the TV, and when they see Antarctica melting, sipping their Chardonnay, sighing, "Oh my, Antarctica is melting," or when they see Iraq fall apart, or witness the actions of Isis—it can be very dangerous if you only do the cool practices, because the divine is both peace and passionate becoming, so you need the heart practices that really keep your sacred heart juicy, passionate and wild, alive and open.

In a time like this when we're all threatened by compassion fatigue because everything's falling apart and it seems so horrible, everywhere, when everybody's tempted to just shut down and detach, it's so important to find practices that will keep your heart in a state of devotion to reality.

To me, again there's a very simple practice. That is to say the name of God by whatever way you worship God, say that name deeply into the core of the heart. If you have a mantra that you love, use it. If you love Christianity, just say the name of Jesus; if you love the Buddha, say "Buddha, Buddha, Buddha." If you are in love with Islam, say "Allah" in the heart. This is so simple, but in fact in all of the great mystical traditions it's known that saying the name of the divine that you love in the core of your heart connects you immediately with the entire cosmic presence of the divine. Some say I am so enthusiastic about this. But, if you do this, if you really do it, you will discover for yourself.

Rumi said that every time you say the name of God, it's like you take a rag and wipe the dirty mirror of your heart free of dust, so one day, the mirror of your heart will be so clear, that reality will be reflected in it without any interfering distortion and you will see, nakedly and directly, the purity of the real divine world that is actually always around us at all moments. This exchange

has happened to me as it has hundreds of thousands of seekers and I know that when I'm depressed, when I'm lonely, when I'm battered by what's happening, when I feel no one is listening or caring a damn about anything, I just stop and I open my heart to the beloved and I say the name which I love, which is Allah, because I think that any name that Rumi loved is good enough for me, or, I say "Jesus" because I love Jesus, immediately my heart both relaxes and starts to burn with its essential compassion.

The third kind of practice that I really recommend to everybody is prayer. It's one of the most amazing things to me as I go around the world teaching sacred activism, that so many people, in fact, most people don't seem to know how to pray or who to pray to, or why to pray when there are so many studies that show the power of prayer, scientific studies, and when, in fact, prayer has been at the core of all the traditions. Choose a prayer, or better still, write a prayer from the depths of your own heart and use that prayer, memorize that prayer.

I've just completed a book of prayers, it's published now. It's called "Light the Flame." Over thirty years, I collected short prayers from all the great mystical traditions, and I put them together in a 365-day book, and it's one of the books I'm most proud of giving to others because these short prayers are prayers you can memorize. You can memorize a prayer in the morning, really pray it for five or ten minutes and really get into the depths of its atmosphere, and then carry it around in your day, and turn to it in the odd spots of your day so that you can be infused by its power. Over time you'll find that through this practice, you'll be able to cultivate a deep devotion to the divine which in time will turn into a devotion to the whole of reality because being devoted to God opens you to being devoted to everything, being tenderly loving towards everything.

The fourth practice is body practice, my least favorite thing. When I had to run in the rain as an English schoolboy, and when I had to jump up and down, I've avoided exercise with a passion that is almost pathological. But now, at sixty-three, I'm realizing of course, this is madness. Over these last ten years, I've done a great deal of work on myself. I've worked on a book called "Heart Yoga" with a great yogini, and we married the traditional asanas with light mysticism.

Yoga is a tremendously important way of opening your whole being to divine energy so that you can actually taste the divine energies within you. So many people are becoming awake by yoga to this presence within, the beloved within. That is a crucial way of keeping the body limber and strong so that it can stand the sometimes immense energies that come as you expand on the path. Sacred dance is another wonderful thing that I've done. I've made a film with the great Banafsheh Sayyad, who is the greatest sacred dancer in the world, a film called "In the Fire of Grace." She's an incredibly beautiful person, an unbelievable dancer. We made this wild film about Rumi's path to love in a soft porn studio in Pasadena, which is probably the least likely place to ever make a film about Rumi, but it came out amazingly. Through her and her teaching, we've taught a lot together, I have really been able to release my body. You'll find if you have a sacred physical discipline, whenever you get constricted in your mind or sad in your heart, if you just turn to the body and allow it to open simply, the emotional, psychological or spiritual distress you are in will go away. I have often gone into a yoga class where I've been absolutely out of my mind with pain and despair with what's going on and come out serene. You are in the same world but you're in another consciousness because you've allowed the true innate truth of your body steady you.

The fifth practice is again, I believe, shadow work. Shadow work, for me, is a sacred practice. It's sacred because the divine will never be born in you completely until you have become completely awake to the dereliction of your human self, to the limitations of your human self. God doesn't

hand over the diamond of union except to the person who has truly understood the deep need for grace at every moment so as to be able to transform his or her narcissism, greed, cruelty and inherited madness.

So, anybody can do those five practices. They are not complicated. The more I live, the more I teach, the more I write, the more I understand, we have vastly overcomplicated the path. The path has many rigors, many ordeals, many stages and stations, it has terrible moments, disappointments and deceits, but if you get a few really simple practices in each of these categories that work for you, if you use them when you need them, over time you will find that you change greatly. My god how you will change! Greatly, deeply. And, you will become bearable to other people, which is such a wonderful thing.

MM: (chuckles) Why is it Andrew, that we resist the things that are most beneficial to us? The ego fights off the very things it needs for its own liberation? What is that perverse resistance?

AH: Well, I actually think it's quite simple although the consequences are very complicated. As soon as you start to wake up and start to have those first amazing experiences of bliss, light or infinite presence, your ego realizes its days are numbered. The presence that you are coming into, if you have any kind of authentic experience that reveals itself as so vast, so powerful, your ego feels that it's nothing, which is the actual truth of it. What we think of as our "self" is a fiction, what we've created as our ego is actually a structure created around wound and fantasies, conditioning, and the ego that has been so addicted to its perverse control gets secretly terrified and expresses that terror in resistance and distraction.

The ego says to you, "What is this rubbish about saying the name of God when you're walking down the street? It doesn't work. Look, you tried it for five days and you're not enlightened, give it up. Get back to your sex, drugs and rock and roll." That's the resistance, don't you think?

MM: I do, I agree completely. It's fear of its own survival that makes the ego fight off the light. And, it's right to fear the light.

AH: Yes, it's right to fear the light except that if it was able to really trust, then something amazing would happen to the ego. You see, I don't think the ego ever disappears on the path. The ego can be transformed, so instead of being the domineering, psychotic tyrant that it is normally, it can become the loving servant of the truth. And that's what the ego, in its essence, really wants to be. Until you do the practice and until you do shadow work, you won't be able to cherish this essence in the ego enough to allow the ego to go through its transformation so that it can remain, but not as a desperate, but as a loving servant. In that loving servanthood, it will find what it's always wanted, which is meaning, purpose and peace.

MM: Right. It sounds like you could replace the word ego with mind. We talk about the mind being a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

AH: Well, mind yes, but the ego is also constructed of its mental formations, but so many of these are prompted by emotional disturbance, too. It's how you've been shaped by your parents, what you suffered in your youth, how you've been with your own sexuality, there are a lot of things that go into this complex lunatic that we call the ego.

MM: Tell me Andrew, what do you say to the person without faith? What do you say to the person who doesn't have a theological bone in his body, doesn't believe in God, the person who hears the word "divine" and shrinks back from it? How do we communicate to a person like that

who is so afraid of being taken advantage of or being gullible, fearful of putting their faith in something that isn't real? How would you address that?

AH: Well, I would like to say, which I never do, is this: "For God's sake, get over it as quickly as you can." Don't make the mistake of confusing the "divine" with the religions and their crazy fundamentalisms, dogmas and patriarchal distortions. These must not be confused with the real, essential presence. Plunge into reading the real mystics like Rumi, Teresa of Avila, the Bhagavad Gita, because if you approach them with any kind of openness, you will be astounded at the way in which, beyond surface differences, they all agree and say so much of the same thing which must mean that they are in contact with the same thing. But if that is rejected and I understand why people would reject even that, I would say this:

Look. You are aware of being conscious. And you also must be aware from your own inner experience that you've experienced moments of tremendous irrational joy, perhaps just sitting in a deck chair and looking out at the sea, or great rapture, suddenly being with a dear friend, or enormous passion which exploded you into wild realms when you were making love, or great peace when you're listening to Bach. You don't have to call that God, but what you do have to acknowledge is what you normally think of as your consciousness is just a very small fraction of what your consciousness is capable of. If you don't want to think about divine or God, then cultivate a larger awareness, and slowly, your consciousness will expand to give you more of these calming and expanding states which will make you a much happier person. And one very skillful way to do this is to undertake mindfulness practice or very simple forms of meditation.

You don't have to believe in anything to do mindfulness practice and over time it has amazing results. You don't have to believe in anything except the mysterious vastness of consciousness to really do meditation. Just sit and watch your thoughts, and slowly over time, you will become aware of a vast, quiet, silent, white spaciousness within you that is your real daily witness, consciousness. This will enable you to step back and have a gap between you and all reactions that you might have had before. Over time you'll be amazed to discover what is actually living in you and THAT will set you free and start you on a path of real inquiry. Once you've tasted that vast inner consciousness, which is actually the true nature of consciousness, then you may very well be inspired by that experience to go deeper into divine inquiry.

Does that sound like an intelligent answer to you?

MM: Beautiful. Truly beautiful. Faith isn't really the point, the point is the power to observe consciousness and this mysterious, magnificent experience of life.

AH: Yes!

MM: And see what kind of space that opens up in the mind, see how that changes what we think is "possible." So much of this doubt and cynicism comes from depression, a low-grade depression, a stunted sense of what's possible.

AH: Absolutely. I've met so many spiritual directees that say they've never had a spiritual or mystical experience. I ask them if they've ever had a dream in which they woke up crying with joy? Well, that's a spiritual experience. When you're listening to Mozart, when your mind expands, have you ever heard something you've never heard before, something so beautiful that it pierces you?

MM: Yes.

AH: That's a spiritual experience. And when you've been sitting with a friend, and there was a mysterious unity between you, as if you were the same being, that's a mystical experience. And you discover, of course, at the end of the conversation that everybody has had these immense openings but because we live in such an un-sacred culture, a culture devoted to fundamentalism of the bottom line and scientific fundamentalism, and because we see around us religions behaving so childishly and sometimes savagely, people aren't encouraged to describe their experiences, they just think that it came and went. Well, no it didn't. Those experiences—dreams, and being in tender unity with a friend, listening to music, all those kind of experiences—are actually rays of the sun of the secret self within, invitations by that secret beloved to go deeper.

MM: Exactly.

AH: Don't you feel that?

MM: Yes I do. And it's seeing glimpses of the self through these experiences that are openings to what's there behind the door, behind the screen of craziness and the noise, this is what encourages one to go deeper. Whatever does THAT is a mystical or spiritual experience.

AH: Yes! Rumi says, "Every joy that you've ever felt is a ray from the invisible sun of love." And that means that even if you're eating a peach and you're exhilarated, that's actually an exhilaration of the divine in you. When you're walking and you suddenly notice a rose that's so beautiful and your heart leaps, that is a kiss from the invisible sun. And once you begin to realize that, when you realize the eternal one that has manifested staggering multiplicity out of itself, is reaching out to you in EVERY WAY POSSIBLE. And then you feel accompanied and sustained. It's that shift that makes all the difference.

MM: Oh, Andrew. Well, we began with Rumi and I think this is a great place for us to close. It is always wonderful to talk to you.

AH: And wonderful to talk to you and I'll talk to you anytime you want, baby.

MM: Thank you, my friend.

AH: Shall we have a Rumi prayer to end with?

MM: Let's do. Please.

AH: Let's do it. I LOVE this poem, oh my god. It really gets to the core of what we're saying.

*Stay close, my heart, to the one who knows your ways;
Come into the shade of the tree that allays has fresh flowers.
Don't stroll idly through the bazaar of the perfume-markers:
Stay in the shop of the sugar-seller.
If you don't find true balance, anyone can deceive you;
Anyone can trick out of a thing of straw,
And make you take it for gold
Don't squat with a bowl before every boiling pot;
In each pot on the fire you find very different things.
Not all sugarcanes have sugar, not all abysses a peak;
Not all eyes possess vision, not every sea is full of pearls.*

*O nightingale, with your voice of dark honey! Go on lamenting!
Only your drunken ecstasy can pierce the rock's hard heart!
Surrender yourself, and if you cannot be welcomed by the Friend,
Know that you are rebelling inwardly like a thread
That doesn't want to go through the needle's eye!
The awakened heart is a lamp; protect it by the hem of your robe!
Hurry and get out of this wind, for the weather is bad.
And when you've left this storm, you will come to a fountain;
You'll find a Friend there who will always nourish your soul.
And with your soul always green, you'll grow into a tall tree
Flowering always with sweet light-fruit, whose growth is interior.*
-- Stay Close, My Heart by Maulana Rumi

MM: Thank you Andrew, thank you for talking to The Seekers Forum.

AH: My great joy and pleasure. God bless you and everybody here. Bless you, bless you, bless you!