

The Seekers Forum Transcript

When the Rubber Hits the Road: An Interview with Adyashanti

April 16, 2017



The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

MM: Hello. Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview for this month's program, "The Fruitful Darkness: Gifts of the Shadow." I'm happy to welcome Adyashanti to The Seekers Forum. Adyashanti is one of the clearest and wisest teachers around these days, and one of my favorite people to do retreat with. He's the author of "*The Way of Liberation*," "*Falling into Grace*," "*True Meditation*," and "*The End of Your World*." Adya is an American-born spiritual teacher who is devoted to serving the awakening of all beings. His teachings are an open invitation to stop, inquire and recognize what is true and liberating at the core of all existence. Asked to teach in 1996 by his Zen teacher of fourteen years, Adya offers teachings that are free of any tradition or ideology. "The truth I point to," he writes, "is not confined within any religious point of view, belief system or doctrine, but is open to all and found within all."

Based in California, Adyashanti lives with his wife, Moochi, an associate teacher of open gate sangha. He teaches throughout northwest America and Europe offering satsangs, weekend intensives, silent retreats and a live, internet radio broadcast. Adyashanti means "primordial peace" and that is indeed the feeling one has when spending time with Adyashanti. We spoke today about what's going on in the world and how we can live with awareness and compassion when the rubber is hitting the road, as he puts it, when the shadow seems to be on the rampage and the world seems to be getting more dangerous and uncertain all the time.

MM: Welcome Adyashanti, it's great to talk to you again, thank you so much for getting together with me today.

ADYASHANTI: Ah, it's nice to be with you again Mark, thank you.

MM: Thank you. You've said post-election, *this is when the rubber hits the road*, as you have put it. What do mean when you say in this moment when there is fear and uncertainty for people that *the rubber hits the road*, spiritually speaking?

ADYASHANTI: Yes. What I mean by that, is when we go into the world of relationship, the world of relationship is basically almost anything that's happening outside your meditation cushion, let's say. We're always in relationship with something, somebody, there's "some" happening. This is where we find out actually the depth of our own wisdom and our own peace, our own clarity. We really need the world of relationship to find out really where we're actually at. It's relatively easy to feel at peace and happy and balanced when we're left alone, so of course, with this latest election we've had and our newest president, this is one of those moments when, obviously, so many people are so triggered by what has occurred and what is continuing to occur. It holds a mirror up to each of us, we get to see how we are in relationship to this. We get to ask ourselves: What is the depth of whatever I may have realized in my own spiritual search? What would it mean to bring that into play, to start to entertain the question: What would it be to respond from the deepest place within any of us?

MM: Are you finding that the people you work with or those that come to your retreats are expressing the fact that they are triggered and what do you recommend to them? What kinds of tools and practices of self-inquiry do you recommend?

ADYASHANTI: Well, it's a great question, Mark. This first thing I recommend is, first of all, just the question, really looking within: What would it be like if I was to respond to this? When I say respond, I don't mean simply in terms of what you DO; it includes that, but also how do you emotionally react to it? This also includes where we're coming from individually, just to start with the question: What would it be like if I related to what's happening from the deepest place I know, from the wisest place I know, from the most centered place I know? Not to answer that immediately with the first thought that jumps in our head, but even just to think about that.

Everyone has the deepest thing they know, their experience of great peace or being centered. I think sometimes, when something happens in an area where we feel challenged in a big way, this kind of question becomes really relative. What would it be like to meet this challenge from the more centered place within me? That's the first step, just asking the question can evoke something deeper within us and it also provides a mirror where we get to see where we are coming from. Am I coming from a very sort of triggered, reactive place? If I am, can I just acknowledge that and see if I am afraid or upset, whatever the emotion might be. Again, just the question: What would it be like if I came from the more centered place, the quieter place, the place that's more clear? What I find is that just asking that question and not immediately answering it, it's almost like you're waiting for your body to respond to that question rather than your mind. Then, it can help people reconnect, especially if they have done some sort of contemplative practice, whether it's meditation or prayer, there are many means of accessing our depth.

MM: What I'm hearing a lot from those with spiritual practice is that it's the first time they are realizing how judgmental and how like the "Other," the supposed "enemy" they themselves are.

ADYASHANTI: Sure, in fact I was just talking to someone about this the day before yesterday. I was in the office, we were talking about the election a little bit, talking to one of the people that work there. We get to see how easy it is to go into a very judgmental place. It's holding up a mirror I think, and this is the challenge for a lot of people. I even admit this for myself as I was communicating to one of my people. Intellectually I can understand in a certain sense what might be the appeal to someone like our current president on an intellectual level, the fact that he talks to the anguishing people, like they haven't been heard, politically, giving voice to a lot of people who feel like they've been left behind in the political discussion over the last couple of decades.

But that's something that's quite different than being able to kind of emotionally understand it, emotionally get it. I think this is something that a lot of people, even those who try to kind of be reflective and see where their minds go into judgement, especially when they get confused, or whatever negative state we can get into, to be able to see where we go. I think people are having a real challenge when they try to rationalize by saying, "I can kind of understand some of the appeal." There is a disconnect for a lot of people, a disconnect from understanding emotionally, when you FEEL like you GET something, when you really FEEL like you understand how someone else may FEEL. I think that's a real disconnect for a lot of people. If they can get it in their intellect and yet have a hard time getting it emotionally, even understanding it in terms of a feeling, I think that's when we often get the more reactive parts of our structure triggered, there becomes a lot of judgement.

MM: Are you saying people can say, “I can react that way, too.” That’s a spiritual insight, is it not?

ADYASHANTI: Absolutely. Just talking from a spiritual development point of view, I think that’s a really important thing to be able to see. It’s humbling, isn’t it, when we see that we can go into judgement, anger. I think a lot of people are afraid, and wonder: Can I actually go into the fear experience before I go into reacting mode?

MM: So let me just ask you about fear, anger and outrage. Is there a place for outrage in spiritual life?

ADYASHANTI: I think there’s a potential for almost any emotion. There’s always the wise and unwise version of just about any emotion. Sure, I think there’s a place for anger. We look at the life of Jesus, there are times when he could be really, really angry. When we look at anger, it’s a really interesting emotion. I think a lot of us have experienced that when we get angry, we stop thinking clearly, we get cloudy; it’s harder for us to see clearly, but there’s also a kind of anger that can actually give a crystal kind of clarity if it’s not conflicted. I think it’s important to not make what one is experiencing in any way wrong, as a spiritual personality type we can get very much hung up thinking there’s a whole list of emotions we’re not supposed to feel. I think what we really need to look at and ask is whether what we’re experiencing is coming from a conflicted space. In other words, where I’m basically saying NO. We can see something, we can disagree with it, we can use our discrimination and say, no that doesn’t sound right, clear or true, or I don’t feel like I’m being talked to in an honest way, we can see all of that from a very clear place. And there may be an emotion behind that. We can also see those same kinds of qualities and then go into resistance. We drop into fear and then the anger turns more into a kind of rage where we get sort of emotional and very cloudy. I think it’s very, very important that we don’t make FEELING or EMOTION into something WRONG. As soon as we see it as feeling and emotion, then we can work with it.

If we think, *Oh my god I’m feeling really angry*, or, *I’m feeling very fearful, this is fear*, as soon as we make it wrong, then we’ve got a conflict. There is a conflict when I’m experiencing something my mind tells me I shouldn’t be. Whereas, if we can just be honest and accept what we are feeling without the spiritual personality coming in and saying “No, you shouldn’t be feeling that way,” then we have the anger and the judgement about your own anger.

MM: Right. And then whatever positive action could be taken out of that anger also becomes clouded.

ADYASHANTI: Right. I think this is really, really an important part, Mark, because when I talk to activists, one of the things I try to emphasize a lot is this. However you’re going to respond to what’s going on in the world, whatever you disagree with, instead of getting totally hooked into what you’re against, pay more attention to what you’re FOR. So if you’re FOR justice, as an example, really put your attention into what you’re FOR because otherwise you can get sidetracked into being against injustice. You see what I mean? When we’re in a negative place it really clouds our thinking and our feeling and actually diminishes the power of the impact that we can have.

Someone like, let's say, Martin Luther King used to emphasize this a lot, or Gandhi as well. He used to say, "I'm not against the British, I'm for Indian rule." So he was trying to make the point, don't get all hung up in what you're against; get focused on what you're for, put your energy into what you're for. I think it's a lot more effective, it's a lot more powerful and then you're also not adding to the energy of conflict that tends to swirl around these kinds of issues, when someone's having trouble with our current president. It's so easy to get caught up in the rage and the upset and the fear. It's better if we can shift and ask ourselves, "Wait a minute, what am I FOR? What if I put my energy into what I am FOR, rather than getting so hung up on what I'm against?"

MM: That makes so much sense and it leads into my next question. What is the relationship between psychology and spirituality? Do you find as a teacher that there are problems that can only be best addressed through something like therapy, that spiritual practice doesn't touch?

ADYASHANTI: In a strict sense, sure. I think there are problems or difficulties that, just from the fact that you can go to a therapist who can be with you in a committed way over a long period of time. Now most spiritual teachers might be able to meet with an individual, or some may not, but you're not going to get anywhere near the same kind of attention and you very well may not get the same kind of expertise. So, I think, spirituality and psychology are not the same kind of band of consciousness, but they are certainly related and I know that over the years, the more that I have taught, I've become much more prone over the last seven or eight years to recommending people, recognizing that a certain kind of issue would be dealt with much more effectively with a really good therapist, especially when it comes to things like early childhood trauma.

That kind of work usually really takes some real attention and real expertise. Like anything in life, you're best served in seeing someone who has some expertise in what you're experiencing, although most any spiritual teacher will deal with these kinds of issues because that's what will come up. Most spiritual teachers aren't specifically trained around trauma issues. The more honest we can be about that, the more we are able to help others. I'm much more able to tell someone to find a trauma specialist, at the end of the day. The only thing that's relevant to me is what works.

You go to the person that you really find the most beneficial. Sure, therapy can be a great, great aid. I've joked with friends about this, saying I would love for the vast majority of people that came to see me to have spent two or three years in therapy. This would make my job a whole lot easier. It's a way of acknowledging that there is this whole dimension of spiritual experience that we often call the "psychological." We can have great spiritual leaps and insights, we can even awaken without having our psychological act together at all, which is kind of good news. The other side of that coin is this, just because you awaken doesn't mean you're going to get all of your psychological baggage taken care of through that insight.

MM: Well, I know from personal experience, having been with quite a few teachers, some of the teachers that I've known and worked with are some of the most neurotic people I've ever met.

ADYASHANTI: Well, yes. I think with spirituality itself, there are so many powerful means of opening our consciousness to transcendent dimensions that it's very easy to kind of skip over our psychological material where we're so conflicted, and when we have these transcendent moments, you really feel as if all your psychological difficulties for a while have completely disappeared, but very rarely does it remain that way. Because, essentially, when we've had these powerful spiritual moments, we've transcended the personal domain, but that doesn't mean that what we've transcended has been essentially changed. Most people that have these powerful moments, at some point they boomerang back to some extent and they're going to inevitably be faced with the unresolved psychological material, which can sometimes be confusing because when you transcend it all, it seems like that unresolved material isn't even there or it can simply be disappointing because a lot of people hope that if they just have the right spiritual experience that all of the psychological conflict will somehow mysteriously just disappear. Sometimes a huge amount of it will disappear for some people, you never know how much. Some of it will inevitably. It really differs from one person to the next how much will be resolved through spiritual insight alone.

MM: Yes, and you can't underestimate the desire to escape, that can be such an insidious thing in spiritual life, this leap frogging. And what feels like transcendence can be a form of escaping, without actually transforming the darker materials.

ADYASHANTI: That's right. When working with dark material, you have to be willing to not transcend it, to stay with it and to stay in it. I've found that when people have access to a sort of a more transcendent domain, if they're still dealing with a very difficult piece of their psychology, I'll have to say and counsel them not to go to that transcendent place because they will feel better for a moment or an hour or a day, but they clearly aren't solving a particular part of their psychology; they have to temporarily withhold themselves from going to a deeper dimension of wisdom so that they can stay with conflict and really look at it and explore it and try to see within its own domain. In that sense, it takes a lot of honesty and humility to really come to grips with the fact that we are these very complex beings and we exist on many levels of consciousness all at the same time.

MM: I find that "enlightenment" is one of those most misunderstood words, it's like mysticism. What are some of the misunderstandings around enlightenment that you have come up against in your dealings with people?

ADYASHANTI: That's a whole laundry list. First, I call it the sales pitch of enlightenment. When you're enlightened you'll be in some eternal, everlasting, unending state of bliss and it will be like having an unending orgasm in that domain, this idea that when you have an enlightenment experience it will immediately solve any problem you have, that enlightened people are treated more kindly by the universe and that they somehow don't have the challenges of other people, the list goes on and on, a kind of myth-making that we make about it. In one sense, I hate simplistic descriptions of enlightenment, but here I go anyway. Enlightenment shows the unity of all existence, it shows us by our own experience that we are much, much more and much, much less than we ever imagined. More in the sense that we're not defined or contained within the ego structure, much less because our essential nature really has nothing to grasp; there's nothing about it to grasp on to. In the same way your eyes can't turn and grab hold

to themselves, your ears can hear sounds but they can't hear themselves, and so it goes. We're much more and much less.

You notice that this leaves a whole lot out of the picture. A lot of the ways that some of these difficult human characteristics, our deeper personal issues, issues around relationships, around sexuality, around power, around money, traditionally, up until somewhat recently, (this is an overstatement), to a large extent, these things were dealt with spiritually by NOT dealing with them. What I mean by that for example is, for boys, sexuality, is a really big issue, so just be celibate. Money can be very corrupting, so if you're an asado or a mugma, you're not allowed to deal with money. And so it goes. There was an attempt for some time to deal with these most troubling aspects of what it is to be a human being by simply refusing to engage in those parts of yourself.

I think we've come to see that there are very few people that this actually works for, it's not a very effective way. I think that's why, certainly in the '60s and '70s when we started to have so many Eastern teachers and gurus and all kinds of religions coming to the country, so many of them had tremendous falls from grace. I think part of that was that they didn't have such terrible intentions from the beginning, or that they were charlatans. I think part of it was that they came out of these systems where some of them were relatively protected. Maybe they were celibate, or someone else dealt with money or the power issues were dealt with by a bigger organization and all of a sudden, when they are in America, all of those boundaries and safeguards were taken away and I think a lot of them just hadn't developed those parts of themselves that would let them deal with this stuff effectively.

If we're talking about people like that, those who probably had a significant degree of realization, it tells us something about each of us. Each of us would be well-served by having some humility around these issues and realizing that we can't just ignore them as ways of dealing with them, they are part of human development. We need to have at least some sort of basic competency around these really powerful forces in all of our lives.

MM: It sounds as if you're saying that enlightenment, awakening, is a process that goes on and on and that there is no destination, there's no end to it.

ADYASHANTI: Well, sure. I think that's one of the most common misunderstandings, the idea that enlightenment is sort of crossing a cosmic finish line. The funny thing, Mark, is that it's kind of a paradox. I'm not talking from a theological, philosophical context, but just strictly experiential. Any time we touch upon the nature of our absolute reality of our consciousness, it always feels whole and complete and total. That's what it feels like. It's beautiful but it can also be deceiving. Any time we touch upon the absolute, we are touching upon that which is whole and complete and in one sense, isn't evolving. It's like the heads and tails of a coin. On the other side of it, that which is always, and already what it is, is also constantly changing. The changeless is constantly changing, evolving but not evolving towards the finish line, always having a different experience of itself. So it's kind of a paradox. In our minds, paradoxes don't sit comfortably, but in experiences, we come to experience all of this. Everything is inherently complete and within that, something seems to always and forever be completing itself. There is an obviousness to that, in direct experience, but even if we've experienced that, our minds are

much more comfortable in putting that in nice little neat categories and we don't necessarily like paradox.

MM: Beautiful. One last question just to bring us back to where we started. Adya, what would you say to our current president if you had ten minutes with him? What would you say to him?

ADYASHANTI: That's a great question, Mark. Wow. I'm taken up short by this, I'm not sure what I would say. My instinct is the same as when I talk to most people. I would want to understand him better if it's possible for me to do so. Because I think, in doing what I've done over these last few decades, what it's shown me is that for all of us, whatever our behavior is, everything is coming out of something else. There are reasons for the way we behave, reasons for the way anyone behaves. The reasons may be justified or not. Everybody and everything has a story to it, right? That's one of the things I always remember. That doesn't mean I don't have discrimination and see things that I don't like and take an action on, but I always remember that everybody has their own story; I don't forget this. Even very unskilled actions generally come out from a life of conflict and pain. That doesn't mean it gets anybody off the hook. That's probably what I would be interested in, not that he would tell me anything. I think that we are much better at dealing with each other when we have some intuitive or felt sense that everybody has their story. I would be interested to know the story that leads him to move in the world the way he does.

I wouldn't go in and try to change him, there are plenty of people who want to do that and it doesn't seem to be happening. Nor do I assume that I necessarily know how someone should be changed. I tend to only respond to how they might want to. I don't go in with preconceived ideas of how people would be. For the rest of us, for those who are glad about what he's doing, and also for those who are very uncomfortable about it, I think that he's holding up a mirror to some American traits that I've seen within the collective psyche of this country for a very, very long time. And I think to our president, those traits are blown up in a very big version and in some ways, I think he's holding up a mirror to all of us, to our whole culture. A mirror that says, "Hey look, see."

I think it's important that people respond in a way that feels most important to them, empowering to them. It think it's important as a culture to see what's being reflected back to us.

MM This is so fantastic, wonderful. This is going to be so helpful for so many, thank you so much.

ADYASHANTI: Thank you, Mark, it's nice to talk with you again.