

Developing the Instincts — an Overview

A summary guide to becoming aware of the movement of the most unconscious, driven aspects of human experience — ‘the instincts’ — and developing these aspects so that they support us in our human lives and on the spiritual journey

The Enneagram’s teachings on the instincts can spark a curiosity about, and investigation into, some of the most unconscious and mechanical aspects of human beings. It has been written that the animal soul, which is just another name for the instincts, represents the primary barrier to spiritual development. Our instincts are what divide our hearts and literally divert our time and energy away from developmental practices and attitudes. The motivation to work on the instincts tends to become very apparent as soon as we start to engage spiritual practices as they are usually what is in the way.

No amount of resonating with descriptions will change anything until we actually experience first hand how instinct distortions are alive in us. This takes some knowledge about how the instincts manifest in our thinking emotions and behaviors (centers), but more importantly, it takes the practices of awareness or self-observation and inquiry/exploration. This article offers an approach to developing the instincts based on the teachings of A.H.Almaas, whose spiritual path (the Diamond Approach) is closely connected with the Enneagram. It is, by necessity, a summary guide to some of the most profound inner development work a person can engage.

A brief overview of the instincts

Human instincts are expressed in a broad range of maladaptive and adaptive behaviors but can be clustered into three broad groups.

The self-preservation instinct is concerned with physical survival and well-being. It drives behaviors related to health, safety, and comfort. The instinct manifests in our attention to bodily needs, routines, and the accumulation of resources. When balanced, it supports a healthy and stable life, including spiritual life; when imbalanced, it can lead to anxiety, hoarding, rigidity, inertia and neglect of other aspects of life.

The sexual instinct is associated with the desire for exploration and self-transcendence through various means including sexual union. This instinct can manifest as a quest for aliveness, ex-

citement, stimulation, attraction, pleasure, novelty or the pursuit of profound experiences. When balanced, there is a good capacity for acting on life-enhancing attractions and interests, and for experiencing deeply subtle states.

The social instinct pertains to our desire to connect with others, and to belong to a community. It drives behaviors related to status, group dynamics, and the desire to contribute to the welfare of others. This instinct manifests in our attention to social norms, roles, and the well-being of the collective. When balanced, it promotes cooperation and a sense of belonging; when imbalanced, it can lead to social anxiety, excessive reliance on others and/or unwillingness to establish independence.

Developmental perspective on the instincts from within Enneagram teachings

The most developmental perspective on the instincts from within the field of the Enneagram come from Russ Hudson. In recent years, his teachings have focused a lot less on the 27 ‘instinctual subtypes’ and more on the zones of instincts, which provides a framework for understanding the spectrum of behaviors associated with each drive (see pages 17-19). Although this information is more relevant to someone seeking to improve their functioning rather than attending to their spiritual growth/maturation, it is suggested that the reader uses the information to support an honest self-assessment on where they are with each instinct.

The development of the instincts from the perspective of A.H.Almaas

The rest of this article is based on the information from [Human Instincts on the Inner Journey](#), the teachings given by Founder of the Diamond Approach, A.H.Almaas. He teaches two lines to the work on developing the instincts: liberating instincts from early distortions so they can flow naturally, and integrating them with the spiritual drive so they support realization. The first line is supported by investigating the early situation with primary caregivers, and clarifying the ways that we are still perpetuat-

Please note that whilst this article is a close representation of the teachings from the ‘Human Instincts on the Inner Journey’ course, they should not be taken as verbatim.

ing early impressions.

The second line of the work is a lot more difficult as it deals with what Almaas calls inherent limitations of the instinct; in other words, universal limitations, that are nothing to do with our early environments.

The Enneagrams of instinct distortions represented in the prevalent descriptions of the subtypes are acknowledged as a useful resource for exploring one's relationship with the instincts, but not specifically focused on.

Core practices

From the perspective of A.H.Almaas's path, the Diamond Approach, the primary practice for developing our instincts is inquiry: both open and open-ended inquiry and the kinds of targeted explorations suggested in this article.

The two supporting practices are meditation and sensing practice. In the Diamond Approach, the mediation used is a belly center meditation, chosen for its capacity to ground presence in the body. This stabilizes instinctual energy so that emotions and impulses can be felt without being acted out. Sensing practice (sensing the body) is what supports a global awareness.

The transformation of the social drive

Dependency — connection — intimacy

Almaas teaches that the social instinct evolves through the expression of the three drives named above in italics. In its most undeveloped form, the social instinct is experienced as the dependency need; the primal feeling of "I need you". This is a vulnerable infantile layer of the social instinct.

A.H. Almaas emphasizes that genuine transformation involves acknowledging, communicating, and being met in this vulnerable dependency, which leads to deeper mutual regulation, authentic contact, and ultimate-

ly, the embodiment of realization in relationship.

As the relational instinct matures, it moves from the biological need for bonding and belonging toward intimacy: a mutual, conscious contact characterized by depth, immediacy, and presence. This transformation aligns the social drive with the enlightenment drive, where relationships become vehicles for truth, realization, and spiritual growth.

When the social instinct is matured to the degree that intimacy is valued, we will risk the loss of connection. True intimacy requires willingness to risk relationship for the sake of truth, so that the connection serves realization rather than egoic attachment. Almaas distinguishes three primary relationships that cultivate this development: the student/teacher relationship, close friendship, and intimate partnership, each serving as a crucible for self-knowledge and realization.

Core inquiries into the social instinct

The Enneagram of social instinct distortions, represented in the prevalent descriptions of the social subtypes which are easily available online, are worth reviewing as a broad map of the kinds of distortions we find in the social instinct.

Core inquiries to do are inquiries into:

- our relational capacity generally — how it is impacted by early experience, what limits its development now and what will help it develop;
- where we are with dependency need and when and why we hide it from people; and
- what we can observe about our drive for connection and intimacy, and the ways that we experience connectedness and intimacy.

Additional practices: The social instinct is easier to develop compared with the other two instincts, because of the existence of things like therapy and other corrective rela-

tional experiences. As emphasized by A.H.Almaas in his teachings, because early relational imprinting is preverbal and neurologically encoded in the limbic system, intellectual insight alone cannot free the patterns; transformation requires new, emotionally or essentially satisfying interactions that create new neural and soul pathways.

Other useful practices and forums are partner inquiry (i.e. practicing the explorations suggested above in groups of two or three) and dialectic inquiry, which is a form of inquiry where the individuals are sharing how they are impacted by the other in the moment. We can also cultivate friendships where we support and challenge one another with kindness and truth, and engage in inner work in community such like that happening within Asaf's community (see page 20).

The transformation of the sexual drive

Procreation — pleasure — union

Almaas teaches that the sexual instinct evolves through the expression of the three drives named above in italics. Its integration into our identity allows us to experience erotic life as part of our full human potential, spiritual growth, and realization, rather than being so externally oriented with the drive. The first step is to liberate the drive from limitations and distortions, allowing one to fully experience desire and pleasure without shame, guilt, anxiety, or inhibition, and undoing early childhood conditioning or societal taboos that may have suppressed it. One must also experience all facets of pleasure, recognizing that sexual enjoyment is not only physical contact or release but also the thrill of desire, anticipation, interaction, and the pleasure of giving and receiving.

A.H.Almaas highlights that this instinct highlights two of the most challenging aspects of developing any of the instincts: their compelling nature and the external orientation we have to their satisfaction.

Specific explorations to do around the sexual instinct

In addition to contemplating Enneagram of distortions of the sexual instinct (i.e. the sexual subtypes) we can explore:

- the integration of our sexuality into our being and identity, whether we feel confident and happy about being a sexual being or dissatisfied or scared or unhappy about it;
- how early childhood experiences around pleasure influenced how we orient to pleasure (where we find it, where we don't); and
- how we experience the drive for union.

Transformation of the survival drive

Physical survival — self-preservation — total being

Almaas teaches that the survival instinct evolves through the expression of the three drives named above in italics. The survival drive is a primary life force that permeates thought, emotion, and action, often distorting our experience when it is overactive. When the survival drive is understood and freed, it becomes not merely a mechanism to survive but a source of vitality, life force, and conscious engagement with reality, supporting both personal growth and spiritual realization. The survival instinct often infiltrates and distorts the social and sexual drives — distortions which cause unnecessary suffering and block genuine intimacy, empathy, and vitality.

As the ego develops, the survival instinct, which originally served to protect the body, becomes intertwined with the preservation of the self-image or ego-identity. This fusion turns the survival instinct into a self-preservation instinct, causing fear, anxiety, and compulsive reactivity even in non-life-threatening situations. Over time, this identification with a separate self limits our capacity to live from realization (our

direct knowing of true nature or Being).

A.H. Almaas notes that even after profound realizations of “no-self,” the self tends to reappear whenever instinctual drives are triggered, particularly the need to survive, relate, or act. The key to liberation is in becoming aware of the structures that carry them, recognizing their emptiness, and allowing the instinctual energies to function without identification. As this happens, the survival instinct evolves from preserving a separate self to serving the “Total Being”—the unified aliveness of body, consciousness, and true nature. Functionality and realization then begin to merge, allowing life to be lived directly from Being itself rather than from the self's compulsive need to survive.

A.H. Almaas teaches that it is possible for the survival instinct to evolve into a conscious love of life — a love that expands beyond personal well-being to include all beings and life as a whole, aligning the survival instinct with the enlightenment drive. Aggression becomes intelligent assertion, fear becomes sensitivity, and life itself becomes an expression of consciousness and love. Ultimately, awakening and aliveness are seen as inseparable—the more awake we become, the more fully and lovingly life expresses itself through us.

Specific explorations to do around the survival instinct

In addition to contemplating Enneagram of distortions of the self-preservation instinct (i.e. the self-preservation subtypes), we can explore:

- ways that the survival drive manifests in our emotions, in our activities, in our thoughts;
- how our survival needs appear in our social and sexual situations and actions — explore which one of these two instincts seem to be more compromised by the survival needs;
- what happens in situations that the survival instinct considers dangerous such as a physical

threat, pain or illness, i.e. what happens to awareness, presence and essential qualities at those times and what is needed in order to learn to deal with these situations most optimally.

Specific practices to develop the survival instinct: A.H. Almaas emphasizes tummo meditation as being helpful for this instinct and he also discusses awakening in “the first chakra”, which helps release unconscious survival patterns, grounding the drive in clarity, steadfastness, and life-preserving will rather than reactive panic. The practice of mindfulness — observing fear, anxiety, and thoughts without reacting — is also highlighted as helpful.

Summary

Working with instinctual distortion is some of the most difficult inner work we do, but the most fruitful for our human lives and our spiritual maturation. As we turn towards these aspects of us, we tend to be rewarded with greater access to the essential qualities being obscured by the defensive patterns. Aggression gives way to vitality and aliveness; neediness to sweet love, and addiction to a life enhancing capacity for absorption. It's a journey well worth taking.

The social instinct, from the work of Enneagram teacher Russ Hudson:
www.russhudson.com

<p>Zone 1: Reading people and situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading facial expressions/body language/tone of voice/moods • “Reading between the lines” • Interest in others/attunement/“tuning in” • Empathy/concern • Adapting to “clues”/adjusting behavior 	<p>Zone 2: Connecting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating relationships: Engaging others • Sustaining relationships: maintaining connections and knowing when to end them • Communication — speaking and listening • Cooperation/reciprocity • Play/shared enjoyment/celebration 	<p>Zone 3: Participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting involved or not: what do I participate in? • Need to contribute: something beyond my own needs • Enrolling: getting others interested and involved in what I am passionate about • “Part of something bigger”/sense of place • Belonging and welcoming
---	--	--

	Zone 1: Reading people	Zone 2: Creating/Maintaining connections	Zone 3: Participation and contribution
When present	<p>We easily pick-up cues from others and can read facial expressions and body language.</p> <p>We can read between the lines of what others are saying and we adapt accordingly.</p> <p>Helps us to navigate relationships and be good parents/caregivers.</p> <p>Helps us adapt and respond to what we detect in others.</p>	<p>Work at relationships and strive for reciprocity.</p> <p>Helps us in our ability to engage others, and to strengthen connections when it serves our purposes or desires.</p> <p>We value communication.</p>	<p>Passionate about what we contribute to others.</p> <p>Participation also brings a sense of belonging: that we are welcomed and that what we are doing matters.</p> <p>Participation does not mean joining everything or always wanting to be around people. We could be introverts and love solitude but still have a strong drive to contribute. Instinct helps us discern what we participate in, helps us realize what is not right for us.</p> <p>At its best, is the drive that keeps us contributing to the human journey and creating a meaningful life for self and others.</p>
When dominant/distorted	<p>Anxieties and self-defeating behaviors, over-concern about others—fearing exclusion or being devalued.</p> <p>May reject our own knowing to please others.</p>	<p>Deteriorate into codependent behaviors and anxious attempts to ingratiate ourselves with others.</p>	<p>Constant anxieties about belonging, creating in and out groups, and narcissistic needs to be important.</p>
When blind	<p>We may stereotype its energy as exhausting small talk and aimless hanging out.</p>	<p>We don't see a point in connecting.</p>	<p>We may perceive ourselves as independent or that nothing we do matters.</p>

The sexual instinct, from the work of Enneagram teacher Russ Hudson:
www.russhudson.com

Zone 1: Attraction (and Attracting)	Zone 2: Exploration and Edge	Zone 3: Merging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadcasting and charisma • Display/doing things to get noticed • Being attracted/following energy • Choosing/ fitness • Competition/winning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activation/arousal/turned on • Taking risks/adventure • Getting out of habits/leaving comfort zone • Stimulation/new experience • Following/honoring impulses and inspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus/intense involvement • Losing boundaries and sense of self/surrender • Concentration vs distraction • Pouring and spending energy rather than conserving it • Seeking fusion/at-oneness

	Zone 1: Attraction and magnetism	Zone 2: Exploration and edge	Zone 3: Fusion/merging edge
When present	<p>Being aware of attractions and lack of attraction.</p> <p>Putting energy into being attractive through highlighting strengths/features.</p> <p>Heightened charisma.</p> <p>Broadcast a quality of energy that commands attention.</p> <p>We are attracted to people and things that are good for us, that evolve us.</p>	<p>More interested in experiencing life powerfully than they are in stability or security.</p> <p>Being drawn to the edges of life and to discovering their own edges, energetically.</p> <p>Helps us to get out of our lethargy, our comfortable 'sleep.'</p> <p>It activates us and brings us back to the wakeful intensity of this moment.</p>	<p>Urge to lose ourselves in something or someone (could be a person, a piece of music or an engrossing book.)</p> <p>We seek conversations where the rest of the world seems to fall away.</p> <p>Leads to a beautiful capacity for focus and for being with the energy of another.</p> <p>Can evolve into a fiery commitment to our awakening, and to staying on track with our practice regardless of what arises.</p>
When dominant/distorted	<p>We get attracted to people and situations that are repetitions of our narcissistic wounds. We keep signing up for the same hurts and heartbreaks.</p>	<p>We are restless and in search of stimulation, distracted from our being.</p>	<p>There is a recurrent pattern of losing ourselves in relationships as well as in preoccupations - a difficulty holding a middle ground.</p> <p>All or nothing.</p>
When blind (avoiding two zones)	<p>Difficult time sensing what turns us on, and getting beyond familiar boundaries and comfort zones.</p> <p>Perceive others' sexual energy as dangerous and narcissistic.</p>	<p>We stay in our comfort zones and disturbed by others who want to challenge themselves.</p>	<p>Appear to have no passion or commitment to anything.</p>

The survival instinct, from the work of Enneagram teacher Russ Hudson:
www.russhudson.com

<p>Zone 1: Self care and wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diet • Exercise • Sleep/rest • Relaxation (time in solitude, walk in nature, meditation, yoga, etc.) • Adequate stimulation (reading, listening to music, healthy sex life, watching documentaries, etc.) 	<p>Zone 2: Maintenance and resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money/finances • Time management (self-management, time to self, time with others, being on time, etc.) • Practical application and skills (being able to address practical needs, fix things, manage life, etc.) • Work habits/persistence (the ability to follow through, finish tasks, discipline, habits around practical ventures, ways you are handy, etc.) • Energy management (how we use our energy, deal with stress, balance silence with activity, etc.) 	<p>Zone 3: Domesticity and home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort/domesticity • Safety/security • Structure supports life/base of operations (home management, home as a solid launchpad) • Beauty and holding (comfortable and inviting living/work space, feeling held by your home, etc.) • Re-charging/restoration (home as a place to restore)
---	--	--

	Self-care and health	Practicality and resources	Domesticity and home
When present	<p>Listening to body awareness.</p> <p>Genuine self-care.</p> <p>Getting real nutrition and exercise.</p>	<p>Practical streak.</p> <p>Sense of persistence and going for long-range goals.</p> <p>Work to maintain the foundations of life.</p>	<p>Grounded, stable domestic life.</p> <p>Prefer to be home than to travel or go out.</p> <p>Develops skills for making the home comfortable and practical, sometimes even beautiful.</p>
When dominant (distorted)	<p>Overeats or starves.</p> <p>Not exercise or over exercise.</p>	<p>Constant worry about resources and a grasping approach to life.</p> <p>Never feel relaxed or sufficiently secure.</p>	<p>Talent for domestic order can become a pattern of lethargy and becoming stuck in ruts.</p> <p>Fears of stepping outside of familiar tracks.</p>
When blind (avoiding at least two zones)	<p>Avoiding medical and dental check ups.</p> <p>Having haphazard relationships with exercise, rest and diet.</p>	<p>Lack focus on resources, hoping others will handle this part of life.</p> <p>Overall, our life lacks structure and regularity.</p> <p>We do things more randomly and our schedule tends to be more changeable.</p>	<p>Avoid focus on domesticity.</p> <p>Our home may be more of a 'crash pad'.</p> <p>May fear getting trapped by domestic life, seeing it as drudgery and heaviness.</p>