

In the World But Not of It
from Diamond Heart, Book One
By A.H. Almaas

There is a Sufi saying, "to be in the world but not of it." This phrase can have many meanings. The meaning depends on the situation and on your own development and capacity for understanding. To be "in the world but not of it" is a matter of orientation. I will talk about some of the meanings of this phrase so you'll have a better understanding of what we are doing here.

When a baby is born, it is pretty much all essence, or pure being. Its essence is not, of course, the same as the essence of a developed or realized adult. It is a baby's essence--nondifferentiated, all in a big bundle. As the child grows, the personality starts developing as a result of interactions with the environment and especially with the parents. Since most parents are identified with their personalities and not with their essence, they do not recognize or encourage the essence of the child. So, after a few years, the essence is in fact forgotten, and instead of essence, personality develops. Essence is replaced with various identifications. The child identifies with one or the other parent, this or that experience, and with all kinds of notions about itself. As the child grows up, these identifications, experiences and notions become consolidated and structured as its personality. The child, and later, the adult, believes this structure is its true self.

However the essence was there to begin with, and is still there. Although it was not seen, not recognized and even rejected and hurt in many ways, it is still there. In order to protect itself, it has gone underground, undercover. The cover is the personality.

There is nothing bad about having a personality. You have to have one. You couldn't survive without it. However, if you take the personality to be who you truly are, then you are distorting reality, because you are not your personality. The personality is composed of experiences of the past, of ideas, of notions, of identifications. You have the potential to develop a real individuality, the personal essence, which is different from the personality that covers the loss of the essence. But this potential is usually taken over by what we call our ego, our own acquired sense of identity.

If a person believes himself to be the ego, the identifications, ideas and past experiences, then he is said to be "not in the world, but of it." He is not aware of who he really is, of his essence. This is difficult to understand unless we are aware of our own essence at least some of the time.

So the ego, or the sense of ego identity, takes the place of what we call the real identity; and the personality as a whole takes the place of essence. The personality is a substitute, an imposter. However, the world is just the world. It is the same for both essence and personality. What exists, exists. But the way the world is seen is different. A person who is "not in the world, but of it," is oriented toward the personality instead of toward essence.

Let's give a few examples of how being identified with your personality distorts reality and, of course, results in suffering. Let's take the issue of proving yourself in the world, of being independent, on your own, strong, successful, making a place for yourself. That's a big concern, a major preoccupation. Nearly everyone has this aim. But this can be an aim that rises from essential orientation or personality orientation. There is a big, big difference. Establishing yourself in the world and being independent means building the personal aspect of essence, and establishing that. It is totally an inner accomplishment. So in reality, you may have a very deep desire to actualize who you really are, your real sense of your identity, to be truly independent and not influenced by your unconscious or past circumstances. Real independence means not being dependent on the past. Being who you really are means being free of all the identifications from the past that have built up your sense of false identity. Being who you really are does not depend on what you do in the world. Whatever you do in the world can be an expression of who you are, but it does not define you. When you are your personal essence, your own true sense of identity, anything you do will have essential orientation. You usually think that the job you choose, whatever it is--gardener, physicist, mother--will make you feel who you really are. But that means you are identified with being a part of the world. It means there is a distortion of reality.

Usually when a person is beginning to work on himself, he has no idea of the difference between choices that are motivated by personality and choices motivated by essence. He may have vague desires, preferences, and think that doing this kind of thing instead of that kind of thing will help him be himself. There is no clear guiding principle at the beginning. And because of the ego identifications, the person not only lacks a guiding principle, he believes

what his personality is urging him to do, and is very vehement about defending these things. "This is me, this is who I am, this is what is best to do." And of course, every time you question his plans for the future, question his ideas about who he thinks he is, he feels quite threatened. To even begin to question these structures means the possibility of destroying all his beliefs. So the drive of the personality for independence and identity is really a distorted reflection of wanting a certain aspect of essence, what we call the personal aspect. This is often referred to in certain Sufi stories as the Princess Precious Pearl, or the Pearl beyond Price. There are many stories about the princess--the personal essence--being liberated from a prison, which is of course, the prison of the personality, what is false in us. And in other stories, it is the search for a precious gem that represents the search for personal essence.

How do you apply "in the world but not of it," to this situation? "Being in the world but not of it" means that you continue doing what you do, you continue to pursue your career as a physicist, a gardener, a mother and so on, but all the time you remember and realize that it is only a reflection of something else, that what you wish most deeply is to actualize a part of yourself. And the main effort and work of what you have chosen to do is directed toward understanding that certain part of yourself and actualizing it. If you live that way, it is true you are in the world, but your motivation is different; you are not of the world. your purpose is to find the precious pearl, your personal essence. If you're a physicist you could be awarded one prize after the other; if you're a lawyer you could become the state attorney. But you will still feel unfulfilled if you don't find the pearl. You'll still have to do more, try more, prove more and so on. You could spend your life striving for bigger and better results.

Do not misinterpret what I'm saying. I'm not saying that you must not pursue what you're pursuing. I'm not saying that you must sit home and think about what the precious pearl is. I'm saying that whatever you're doing is a distortion of the real thing until your orientation is with essence, until you have actualized personal essence. But because your personality is a distortion of the real thing, it can point to the real thing. By understanding it, you can begin to see what the reflection is really a reflection of.

So the saying isn't "not of the world," it is "in the world but not of it." "In the world" means not meditating on some mountain, not living in a monastery. You're actually living the life of the world. Your life is an adventure, and whatever you are doing in the world is not an end in itself, but the process, a crucible for melting the gold from the ore."

Once you know yourself to be the personal essence, what you do doesn't matter much. You choose what will enlarge and enhance your real self. There can never be a sense of lasting fulfillment unless you have realized that essential part of yourself. Nothing else can take its place.

Let's take another example: the issue of being with somebody else and remaining independent. It seems you have to sacrifice a part of yourself, compromise. You don't want to do that: you want to feel independent. you want to be close, intimate, loved and loving, and still be yourself, without sacrificing yourself or compromising.

You're still "in the world." How can you be "not of it" in this example? We need to understand something first about the nature of relationships. The core of the need for intimate love relationships is the desire to actualize a certain relationship you have in early childhood with your mother. When you were a baby, four or five months old, you were in a state called "symbiotic union." In this state, you were essentially merged with your mother. There was no sense of "I am me" and "you are someone else." There was total, non-differentiated unity with wonderful, pleasurable, warm melting kinds of sensations. So when you think about what you want in a relationship, you'll usually find out that you want to be so close that there are no longer two people, no longer two separate individuals. There is a deep desire to melt into the other person, with no boundaries, so that it's not even a question of two people loving each other; there is just a state of love. It's a big puddle--a wonderful, golden puddle--like honey with the sun shining through it. A golden womb. You feel safe, protected, melting; your body is all pleasure, your mind doesn't exist, it's all wonderful. And because we had that experience with mother during our infancy, we believe very deeply that we can have that state again only with somebody else. So. we search for the right person, that somebody else. We are actually searching for that sense of merging, the golden, melting feeling.

But we haven't said how we can do this and not be "of the world." Well it is first necessary to understand that the state of complete merging, of complete disappearance into a melted kind of pleasure is a state of essence. And you can have this state all by yourself. You do not have to be with someone else to have it. you can experience this aspect of essence by yourself, anywhere--or with your cat, with the rug, with your car, with another person--anything. But our belief that we need somebody else in order to have this golden merged feeling is very strong. "If I could just melt into your arms, if you just loved me, everything would be wonderful." You think that's what will do it. For most people it is easier to experience the merged state with somebody else, because having somebody else

there is the condition they have for it. But the search is really for a certain aspect of essence. So, in this case, to be "in the world and not of it" doesn't mean you have to forget about relationships, and just go off to a cave someplace or to the north pole and merge with the icebergs. Although if you want to do this, that's fine. It really doesn't matter. What does matter, is that whatever you're doing, whether you're in a relationship or not, you need to look inside yourself and find what the barriers are that prevent you from experiencing that part of you which can feel merged and melting no matter who you're with or where you are.

The desire for this essence state affects not only couple relationships, but also the wish to have children; people want that merged state with a child. When people are looking for aesthetic experiences--beautiful landscapes, things like that--what they really want is that feeling of merging with what's around them. They believe they need one condition of another to be satisfied. So, relationships can be a crucible for discovering a certain golden substance.

It happens that I have given two examples that are intimately connected. The first example has to do with independence, with being yourself, and brings up the issue of identity--the personal aspect of essence. The other example has to do with relationships and usually brings up a conflict between being a separate self, and merging, which often makes you feel as if you are losing your identity.

You pay attention to your own actual situation of being in the world, which is a distorted reflection of the true state of affairs, in order to find out what is really there. Your career, interests, relationships, are very important--but they are only important insofar as they lead you toward a deeper understanding of yourself. Otherwise they are irrelevant.

Hakuin and the Baby

The Zen master Hakuin was praised by his neighbors as one living a pure life. A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near him. Suddenly, without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child. This made her parents angry. She would not confess who the man was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin. In great anger the parents went to the master. 'Is that so?' was all he would say. After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbors and everything else the little one needed. A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth--that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fish market. The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back again. Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was: 'Is that so?'" (Paul Reps, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones)

Things keep changing. Sometimes he's bad, sometimes he's good. He doesn't care. It doesn't make a difference to him. It has nothing to do with who he is. Who he is is always the same. What happens around him is irrelevant. He's still who he really is.

Your essence is very intelligent, very generous. It has a way of throwing a conflict in front of you, so that by looking at that conflict or barrier you'll find out something you need to know. The situation that you are given is perfect in terms of timing, place, the people involved, your capacities, the capacities of people around you, everything, every detail. The situation is such that if you actually try to understand it, you'll understand something about your essence. It is not there to give you a hard time. You'll have a hard time if you only look at the manifestation, at the conflict itself as a difficulty. If you look at it from the perspective of ego, of identification, then you'll suffer and continue to suffer. But if you see that you fall on your face and you're suffering because you tripped over something that was in your way when you weren't looking, then you'll want to find out more about what that was, more about that barrier.

So, what we do here [in this school] is look at the barriers that you bring to work on in this group. We dismantle them, analyze them, examine where they come from in terms of your childhood and your relationships and your life in this world now. And from all that material, we eventually get the real and precious metal, or the gems hidden in it. That's why all that material was there. You think that by working on your issue of independence you'll finally be independent, you'll be able to support yourself, earn a lot of money, do what you want and all of that. That's all true, but it's not the most important factor. The most important aspect of working on any issue and being aware of it is for something inside you to develop. Then the rest will follow almost effortlessly.

So, 'in the world but not of it.' We live in the world and we do what everybody else does: wear clothes, eat food, go to the grocery store, have a job, make love, fight, everything. However, our focus is different. We do not identify with the part of us who eats, shops, works, and so on. We learn to develop the capacity to be aware of what is happening, but at the same time not to identify with it; we develop what we call awareness and disidentification. As you know, these are the most important things you need in order to do the work of understanding yourself. You have to be aware of what's happening inside of you and outside of you. The world is seen as a big classroom, and the situations of the world are classes for you to develop certain aspects of yourself, certain aspects of your essence. The whole world is a big university offering many classes: classes on sex, classes on work, relationships, dependence and independence, and so on.

Little by little, we become aware of our lives and our situations with all the conflicts and barriers without totally believing that's all it is. The more we're able to pay attention and disidentify, the more we'll be able to see the real truth that is there, like veins of gold in piles and piles of rocks--the truth, the gold in all that ore. Developing this capacity to pay attention and to disidentify at the same time ultimately leads us to experience our essence.

"In the world but not of it" not only describes the person who is free, it describes essence itself. That's the deeper aspect of it. So what is the world, the world that we're "in but not of"? The world is, of course, a multitude of things. But the world as we perceive it is primarily made up of mental thoughts and images, emotions, and sensations. What else do you know? Ultimately, the world as you perceive it comes down to your sensations of the world, your emotions about it, and the mental images and thoughts you have. For instance, a tree is a tree and it's part of the world, but for you what is it? A certain image in your mind, the way it looks, a feeling about it, sensations when you touch it--rough bark, smooth bark. If you're sitting in a chair, what is the chair for you in your direct experience? A sensation under your butt, right? An image of it in your mind, an idea about it that it's causing you to sit in this way instead of another way. That is the world.

Now, essence is "in the world but not of it." It's not sensations, emotions, or mental events. But it is "in the world." It lives there with these things. It's like the gold in the rock. It is not the rock, it's in the rock. Essence is in the sensations, emotions, mental events, but it's not any of them. Diamonds and emeralds--precious stones--are in the earth, but they are not the earth itself. They are something else. So is essence in you. It's not your flesh, it is not your emotions, it is not your thoughts. But it is embedded there. Essence is in you like the gold in the rock, like precious stones in the earth.

Since that is the case, you can do some exploring, some mining in order to find it. You can dig in the body and in the emotions, in the mental events to find the precious substance. For example, you could do body work to develop the sensitivity of your body. You might discover what is there, what is essence. You might explore your emotions and your sensations until you become so aware of them that you see subtle discriminations. You see that what you were so sure was an emotion is not an emotion; that what is there is not a physical sensation, but all the time you thought it was--close, so close to a physical sensation, but not really a physical sensation. Essence is like a physical something that is not of the physical body. It is like a physical existence of a different level, a different mode.

There is a deeper meaning to "in the world but not of it." Once it is found, essence goes through a development, an alchemical refinement, until it reaches its basic nature--the true nature of essence, which is the nature of everything. It is my nature, but it is also your nature. It is the nature of birds, cats, trees, rocks, everything. It is not the rocks, not the cat, not your body, not you, not me. It is the real nature of these. It is what allows these to exist. That real nature of the essence, the nature of everything, is what is sometimes called God.

God, the essence of the essence, is everywhere--in the physical body, in sensations themselves, in the thoughts themselves, in the animate, inanimate--in everything. But it is not those. It's in it but not of it. So God, the essence of the essence, is "in the world but not of it," and this is its deepest meaning.

There is an important aspect of being "in the world but not of it" that I want to point out here. It is the recognition of what is essence and what is not essence, and this means recognizing and acknowledging that essence is working in you, that it is a real factor operating in you.

Essence develops very quickly the moment it is seen and recognized. It thrives on recognition. If you don't recognize it, it stays dormant. The moment you recognize it, it starts growing; it feeds on light. This is very important for certain aspects of our Work here; we must recognize what factors actually contribute to our change and development. For instance, let's say you've been working on yourself for a year or two, coming to this group and dealing with issues in your life, and some changes start happening to you. It could be that your heart opens, or you

get clearer. You might say, "Oh, my heart opened because I met this wonderful woman; she's so marvelous, my heart just opened to her and it's been open ever since." So you don't give your essential work recognition, you give something else recognition. When you do that, you deprive yourself of the possibility of that essential work continuing, giving you more understanding of truth. You give credit where it is not due. When you do that, you invalidate your work. You've done two years of work on understanding yourself, but you're saying it didn't do a thing. Your openness, your expansiveness, the fullness you feel happened because you met this wonderful woman. Or you say your kundalini opened because somebody gave you this massage, somebody worked on your sacrum in a particular way. And you completely ignore the fact that you've dealt for five years with all kinds of emotions and if you hadn't done this work somebody could have rubbed your sacrum with sandpaper and you wouldn't have felt a thing.

If you happen to get a cold, and at the same time you feel your heart is open, you might decide your heart is open because of your cold. You give the credit to your cold, your sickness, instead of acknowledging four years of work that opened it. The cold is probably actually a resistance against further opening. Getting sick is a common resistance to expansion.

It's very important to have that discriminating faculty, not only in terms of orientation--what we talked about earlier--but also in terms of what the real influences are in your life. If you do not give credit where it is due, you invalidate what actually brought about the changes, what actually brought about the growth--your own work, your own capacity, your own essence.

In my experience, I've seen that many of my friends have experienced their essence but did not understand what it was, because most of the time they invalidated what they had done. Every time they went on to something else, to some other spiritual study or discipline, to some other self-exploration, they would invalidate what they had just learned, they would throw out everything. They would throw out their understanding and what they had attained that was of value. Then they would have to start all over again. I was lucky, I didn't invalidate anything. Whenever I moved on to something else, I understood exactly what I learned from the other. And I found that this makes quite an important difference.

Sometimes it's not easy to tell what's contributing to the understanding and clarity in your life. But if you can discern what is, you'll move increasingly toward your essence, because only essence brings this about. But if you attribute your development to external things, you are not only making a mistake in judgment, you're also slowing or stopping the process that has really contributed to your development. You're telling your essence, "You don't matter." And that's an attack on your essence; you are attacking your essence. Invalidating your essence is an aspect of your ego or superego. From what I have observed, people often do not acknowledge what's really happening, or what the force is that's operating in them precisely because there is something in them that resists seeing and experiencing essence. It's not just a mistake in judgment; there is an active motivation behind it. It is a defensive function of the superego itself. Not only that, other people might see your changes but attribute them to something else, so you have practically no support or guidance from the world around you. When people don't recognize the actual force in you that is contributing to the changes in your life, it is because they are resisting the reception of that force in themselves. They, themselves, do not want to see the truth, so they don't want to recognize it in you. In my own experience, it is important that I know what is really bringing about my changes and my development. "In the world but not of it" extends to seeing the real causes, the real forces operating that are in whatever it is we do. Any questions, comments?

Questions and Answers

Student: Is it possible that some people have--I don't know how to say it exactly--that some people have more essence moving and working and showing in them than other people, even though they're unconscious of their essence completely?

A.H.: Yes, it happens. It's what Gurdjieff called stupid saints, which means Being with no knowledge.

S.: And other people are attracted to them because they want that quality?

A.H.: Sure. Sometimes people are developed essentially without doing any work on themselves, just because they didn't get too squashed at the beginning.

S.: And then their essence is there, more evident, because of some accident, or some talent. . .

A.H.: One thing we have to remember, essence has nothing to do with talent. A person can be very talented but at the same time, completely identified with their personality. Essence, is as I have said, "in the world but not of it." Talent is part of the world. Of course, essence can fuel and bring to fruition the potentialities of the talents that already exist. But being intelligent or not intelligent, creative in one way or another, has nothing to do with essence.

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