

The Passionate Mind Revisited:
Expanding Personal & Social Awareness
 by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

Map of the Book

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There are several possible approaches to reading this book. Though it has a loose thread of continuity that builds, it's also designed to enable you to follow your interests. This map provides a general idea of what the book is about by highlighting some key issues from each section. With the book's introduction as a foundation, most sections can stand on their own, so you can create your own order or follow ours. Basic themes are examined from different vantage points. The chapters explore diverse facets of the human condition and have their own introductions; the commentaries at the end of each chapter develop their social or worldview ramifications. Whether you follow our sequence or chart your own course, the map can help you navigate the book. We hope that whatever your path, the journey brings a more enriched view of our challenges and potentials as individuals and as a species.

The “**Introduction**” sets the stage for the book by presenting its purpose and overarching themes of inner inquiry, humanity’s dual nature, social evolution, and worldviews. We humans are so highly innovative that our escalating technological capacities have far outstripped our ability to handle their creative and destructive powers. To survive and thrive, we are being compelled to evolve socially. Worldviews are primary lenses influencing perception that largely determine what people consider to be “reality.” Worldviews underlie beliefs, values, identities, and much behavior, affecting the nature of the social fabric and how we treat each other and our planet. Dysfunctional worldviews based on dogma, outdated beliefs, or magical thinking are serious obstacles to creating a more humane and viable world. Consequently, understanding worldview implications is crucial.

Chapter 1. “Authority” lays out for the book as a whole the issues involved in exploring who we are and how we work as thinking social primates. Examining our nature can create a quality of awareness that breaks through subjective filters and opens possibilities. The chapter also examines obstacles to communication, including their relation to authority.

Authority is at the foundation of social orders, defining truth and morality. In the past, authority was largely unchallengeable, but in our rapidly changing world, all authority requires reconsideration—including accepted wisdom and what’s generally considered “sacred.” This includes questioning its basis, how it’s used, and by whom. Unexamined authority creates filters that prevent seeing clearly, while questioning assumptions and beliefs fosters creative change.

1: Supplement to “Authority.” Our book *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* exposes a social virus of mental authoritarianism in ideologies, values, traditional spiritual worldviews, and the human psyche. Becoming conscious of how the virus lives in us helps to disempower it. Its first chapter, **“Authority, Hierarchy, and Power,”** can be a useful supplement to this book’s chapter on authority as it addresses authority in the social arena and distinguishes legitimate authority from authoritarianism. It shows that the real problems are *authoritarian*, power-driven hierarchy and authority, rather than authority or hierarchy *per se*. We define “authoritarian” as a person or belief system that claims to know what’s best for others and is unchallengeable and impervious to feedback. Since some forms of authority and task-driven hierarchies are necessary, trying to eliminate them is a losing strategy that prevents using them constructively.

Chapter 2: “Belief.” The mind constructs beliefs to make sense of the world; they influence how we perceive, think, feel, and act. Beliefs also form group identity and establish values, rules, and roles. They can be used to create or allay fear, to control and manipulate—and to justify just about anything. Since outmoded and conflicting beliefs are a root of violence and many of humanity’s other problems, the question is not only *what* to believe, but *how*? Beliefs and values can be held with an open or closed mind. With ever-increasing change and uncertainty, an open, inquiring mind that strives for greater objectivity accelerates personal and social evolution.

2-Commentary: “Being Better Believers.” The real battle on the planet today is for people’s minds. Beliefs have largely made the world what it is. They both unite and separate us. People base their identities on them, fight and even die for them. Absolutes hinder social evolution and cause conflict, but relativism undermines the basis for objectivity, truth-seeking, and needed pan-cultural values. Past social orders were held together by unchallengeable beliefs. Now spiraling change calls for feedback-based instead of tradition-dictated approaches. Since all mental constructions are potentially fallible, beliefs need to evolve with changing realities. Aligning beliefs with what’s happening is a source of rapid transformation.

Chapter 3: “Pleasure and Desire.” Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are part of our animal nature. Pleasure and desire are powerful motivators that can work for us or against us, enhancing life or shadowing it. Desire brings interest, motivation, goals, and energy to realize them. It can also cause sorrow through dissatisfaction and envy. Enjoyment is part of what makes life worth living—but pleasure easily becomes repetitious and mechanical, limiting life by making it more habit-bound. Pleasures are often short-lived, triggering a desire for more. If uncurbed, this can lead to addictive or harmful behaviors. Seeing pleasure and desire’s relation to pain and fear enables us to walk the fine line between being enriched or driven by them.

3-Commentary. “Pleasure and Power” addresses power’s neutral, positive, and negative aspects. Power is the capacity to influence something or someone. Most people want more power—some control over how they feel and the direction of their lives. The problems with power stem from how it’s obtained, used, maintained, and institutionalized. Power can be one of the most insatiable, addictive, and corrupting of pleasures. And the more one has, the easier it is to get more. Without regulation, power and money coalesce, benefitting a few at the expense of the many. This leads to an increasingly dangerous gap between haves and have-nots; consequently, ensuring some balance and fairness is essential for democracies.

Chapter 4: “Fear.” This chapter looks at the role of fear, how it works, and how to live with it. The focus is on what the mind does with fear and how fear gets entangled with thinking, future projections, and desire. Fear is a necessary part of life and evolution that fosters survival by signaling danger. Since fear is more pervasive in perilous times, the challenge is to avoid getting stuck in the futile loops of worry and anxiety that the mind constructs. Fear and desire, like pleasure and pain, are genetic approach/avoidance mechanisms. Becoming aware of their double-edged, mechanical nature and interwoven connection with thought makes us better able to handle them constructively. Fear spreads easily, inhibiting creativity and responsiveness, but realistic fear can be a spur for action and problem-solving. Seeing the nature of fear can turn it into a motivator for change.

Chapter 5: “Freedom.” Freedom can be defined in many ways—personal, social, political, philosophical, and spiritual. Western concepts are primarily concerned with its external aspects—freedom from constraints and freedom to act through choice. Many Eastern traditions consider freedom an internal state of peace to be realized through nonattachment. This chapter reframes inner freedom as freedom in action that stems from awareness and seeing clearly; it lies in having the clarity to respond appropriately to what life presents. Becoming aware of conditionings that limit possibility can spring one out of patterns to meet the new creatively.

5-Commentary. “Whose Life Is Sacred?” examines freedom in the context of gender and power. Among humanity’s great challenges are the biological differences between the sexes (dimorphism), coupled with lengthy childhood dependency. Institutionalizing separate spheres for men and women with rigid gender roles has greatly exaggerated and exacerbated male/female differences, bringing power imbalances, injustice, and growing social dysfunctionality. Globally, this has led to two interrelated, gender-based explosions of life-creation and destruction that fuel each other. Killing, violence, and threat are the bottom line of male power, while most women don’t even have control over their reproductive ability or their bodies. For women to have greater influence in public spheres—essential for a safer, saner world—they need more freedom, including choice related to childbearing.

Chapter 6. “Images” addresses the way memory internalizes experience by creating images of self and others. This affects how we meet and interpret the new and each other. Images can be more or less conscious and subjective, colored by a spectrum of feelings, assumptions, projections, and judgments. Old or biased images can obstruct perception and connection, keeping one stuck in the past. At issue are the accuracy of one’s images and which are pertinent. Self-images are a foundation of personal identity. They anchor habits and impact one’s sense of limits and possibilities—either discouraging or inspiring new behavior.

6-Commentary. Ego is a core part of the innate self-centered and self-referential aspects of being human. Identity influences the forms ego takes; like language, it is acquired and changeable. **“From Images to Identity”** maintains that the real problem is not ego, but rigid identities that fragment the

world, creating conflict and justifying oppression and violence. The unity of groups whose identity or “group-image” is based on feeling superior depends on separation from others. Like self-protection, historical memory is natural, but identifying with a group’s long-standing wounds can perpetuate hostility and vicious cycles of vengeance. As personal identities based on such things as family, gender, ethnicity, or religion broaden, they tend to become more fluid and global fostering cross-cultural values and connections.

Chapter 7: “Love.” Love is a transformative magical connector—one of the most powerful forces of our mammalian heritage. But romantic love often wanes and gender roles are unraveling, making bonding more difficult. Knowing the predictable, often avoidable obstacles that stand in love’s way can help it thrive over time. Loving is a part of our nature that would fare far better if it were not entangled with unlivable values that interfere with our emotional make-up. Because self-interest intertwines with love, ideals of selfless purity are contrary to how people actually bond. Imbalances and unrealistic expectations create resentments that erode passion. Humans are both caring and self-protective social beings who love and want reciprocity. Values that take our dual nature into account can help bonding deepen and mature.

7-Commentary. “Love and Care” emphasizes care’s uniqueness and crucial importance in the social arena and in meeting global challenges. Love has long been touted as the solution to all our problems, but it often doesn’t even survive in intimacy. Like love, a general capacity to care is innate, but care is more accessible and broader-based. Loving is personal, primarily emotional, whereas care and empathy can be taught and extended to many arenas by showing causes and effects, both personal and social. So care has a much wider-ranging mental and emotional scope than love. Its cognitive and empathetic components allow it to reach wherever the mind can go.

Chapter 8: “Time.” Views of time influence how people try to live in it. This chapter contrasts two elusive concepts: living “in time” and feeling “timeless,” each with their place. Time pressures and an influx of Eastern mysticism helped popularize the ideal of living timelessly. The concept of simply “being” was a revelation in agenda-bound cultures. But the ’60s motto “Be here now” came with an anti-thought bias. Since thinking is what humans do, this creates confusion by putting people at odds with their nature. Everything occurs in an ongoing present, so there’s no way *not* to be “in the now”—including when thinking. The now you experience is where your attention is. Timeless states can heighten awareness and sensitivity and bring respite—but they are not a viable recipe for living. Life is a balancing act between being and becoming or doing. “Time” clarifies the conundrums around time, which can free people to live more flexibly and appropriately without formulas.

8-Commentary. “It’s About Time” is a core philosophical section presenting perspectives on time and worldviews that can help illuminate other chapters. It describes the “unity” and “multiplicity” worldviews and offers a more inclusive worldview that synthesizes them. Contrasting their three concepts of time shows the limitations and implications for life on Earth of time-negating mystical worldviews. It also reveals quandaries and hidden biases in the prescription to “Be here now.” (Which aspect of the multi-faceted now should one be in? Where does “here” stop and “there” begin?) Change and evolution occur in time, so the present contains the past’s cumulative effects and the seeds of the future. Trivializing the past and future as merely thought’s creations is not only misleading, but counter to survival. Past causality and potential future consequences need to be taken into account more—not less. Our brain’s complex time awareness was an evolutionary breakthrough bringing greater hindsight and foresight. Unless we develop greater “far-sight” now, our now may not have a future.

Note: While the section on time is complete in itself, the “Time” chapter is a good introduction and its commentary a useful supplement to “Meditation.”

Chapter 9. “Meditation” addresses the strengths, problematics, and limitations of traditional Eastern inward approaches to insight—including the paradoxes and pitfalls of spiritual seeking and practices. Though meditation can be a doorway to a different way of being, it can also reinforce misleading or rigid beliefs and conditioning. This chapter examines the effects, benefits, and hidden drawbacks of various approaches. Motivations range from reducing stress and improving health to gaining insight and spiritual realizations. Most meditation aims at stilling thought to calm and clear the mind. But whether meditation heightens, deepens, or dulls awareness, clears or programs the mind, depends on the nature of the worldview and values underlying it and how it’s taught, practiced, and interpreted. It can become an insidious form of mind control if it programs renunciate values and beliefs that are adopted as “the way to be.” Zen is an example of promoting nonattachment and “self”-negation as a path to enlightenment. But nonattachment easily becomes an emotional defense mechanism that promotes self-protective armoring. This limits and distorts relationships because human bonding is based on attachment. When you care about anything—including yourself—you’re attached to it.

9-Commentary. “Control Through Surrender” focuses on meditations geared at controlling the mind and emotions through surrendering to prescribed practices such as *Vipassana*. This can detach the mind from its usual contents and control mechanisms, but beliefs are then frequently implanted that are their own form of mental conditioning. Spiritual worldviews commonly generate practices that reinforce their beliefs by producing predicted effects said to “prove” them—a closed, circular system. Pre-Darwinian and purportedly non-dual worldviews, like much of Buddhism, characteristically negate the self as thought’s illusory construction that hinders spirituality. Such no-self, anti-thought frameworks are contrary to our nature, producing confusion and inner conflict. Awareness is not simply presence or stilling thought. Worldviews that devalue thought negate meaning, interpretation, and implications—essential aspects of understanding. Human awareness, including self-awareness, was a great evolutionary leap that needs to evolve further—not be undermined.

Chapter 10: “Evolution.” Where we are as a species is an expression of who we are and have been—not who we can be. Developmentally, humanity’s current precarious state represents our adolescence, not our essence. The evolutionary factors that made humanity successful are now putting us and other species at risk, forcing us to evolve personally and socially. This involves developing our extraordinary social potential by examining what in our nature, beliefs, and institutions is propelling us toward nonviability. Seeing clearly what works for us and what doesn’t has its own evolutionary momentum. The driving force within evolution lives in each of us—offering hope. By enlarging our capacity to become conscious participants in the process that made us, we take our fate more into our own hands.

10-Commentary. “Intelligence Without Design” reframes the “intelligent design versus scientific materialism” controversy. The design argument claims that the extraordinary intricacy and exacting precision of the universe’s construction is proof that a designer (God) created it. Scientific materialism claims that physical laws entwined with random events explain the cosmos sufficiently. This section presents a broader evolutionary framework that we believe explains existence better than either side. It includes science but is not limited by materialistic reductionism. Instead existence is portrayed as having an inherent “intelligence” that manifests as an open, undetermined, evolutionary momentum toward complexity. On Earth, this cosmic motor of change led to experience, self-consciousness, and eventually self-reflection. As complex, thinking social beings, we humans are one of the myriad ways that existence can experience itself through evolution.