

Shrink Rap Radio #29, March 19th, 2006. Mindful Leadership, Mindful Living

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Ron Alexander

(Transcribed from www.shrinkrapradio.com by Sen Rensink)

Excerpt: What helps me to be able to not get caught in the contest of those kinds of imbalanced emotional responses is that there’s a solid core that grew out of both the analytic experience and also grew out of the years of meditating. One of the things that I learned very early on -- in my teenage years I was a musician in a folk-rock group -- is that you have to tune your instrument before you go on stage. Every day I get up and I meditate and that’s the tuning of my instrument as self.

Introduction: That was the voice of my good friend Dr. Ron Alexander who many years ago was my student and whom I now regard as both colleague and teacher. Since the days when I knew him as a Masters student at Sonoma State University, Dr. Alexander has gone on to be a therapist and workshop leader of considerable note, often working with talent in the film and music industries. He also works as a consultant to the media in the Los Angeles and New York City areas. Ron conducts workshops around the U.S. and internationally on topics relating to meditation, spirituality, healing, personal growth and leadership. For the purposes of this interview, I was particularly interested in honing in on the work he does around leadership issues. As you could hear in the brief clip, all of his work is rooted in his own long-time practice as a meditator and the learning and growth that came out of his personal psychoanalysis. Let’s go to the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Ronald Alexander, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Alexander: Oh, thank you.

Dr. Dave: I’ve been trying to get you on here for some time. You are one of the busiest guys I know -- doing therapy, leading workshops around the country and in various parts of the world, coaching business leaders, teaching meditation, working on a book or maybe two books. Tell us what your year looks like. I know I was on your website, I looked at your calendar and it blew me away. Tell us a little bit about everything that you’re doing.

Alexander: Well, this year’s a very exciting year. I’ve the opportunity to start out in April in New York. I’ll be going into New York to do a three-day training. It’s the end of a 16-month training on mind-body healing therapy. That’s done at the New York Open Center. Then from there I’ll head off to a month in Europe where I’ll be doing workshops in London and in Dublin. In London I’ll be teaching workshops at the Mind-Body-Spirit Conference at the center called Alternatives, another center called the College of Psychic Studies, then be seeing some private clients for coaching sessions and mind-body healing sessions. Then over to Dublin to Jane Stephenson and Associates to do some evening talks and some one-day workshops on mind, mood, and happiness.

Dr. Dave: Wow. That’s just two months worth that you’ve given us?

Alexander: Yeah, that's just April and May.

Dr. Dave: OK. That's probably enough for now (laughter).

Alexander: I'm tired already just hearing it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Are all your other months similarly busy?

Alexander: Yes. Yeah. Heading into 2007, I'll be going down under again to do training and consulting and coaching in Australia in four or five major Gestalt therapy institutes. Just for example, in Sydney and in Lismore and most likely Perth and Brisbane and then up to Byron Bay, I'll be doing a private retreat most likely. I'll also be doing, in September, with Dr. David Van Nuys --

Dr. Dave: A-ha! Yes. We'll be coming to --

Alexander: -- your program in Tuscany.

Dr. Dave: Right. We'll come back to that at the end of the show. I want to tell people a little bit about what they might expect there if they're able to join us. You touched on a number of things there -- boy, your traveling reminds me of something I think my dad used to say, which was, "Love the life you live and live the life you love." It sounds like you're doing that.

Alexander: Very much so.

Dr. Dave: Pardon? Very much so, yeah.

Alexander: Yeah, I feel a bit like the Irish version of Zorba the Greek.

Dr. Dave: (laughter) Right. Now, you mentioned Gestalt therapy. You mentioned mind-body healing. What are the subject areas, topics, in which you work?

Alexander: Gestalt therapy is probably the cornerstone to my work. I first became exposed to that briefly while I was a student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in the early '70s. A fellow that came out from Esalen Institute, John Heider, came to the New England Educational Institute run by Jack Canfield, popular writer of the Chicken Soup book series. Then about two years later when I was a graduate student studying with you and several other people -- Eleanor Criswell, Stanley Krippner -- we had a workshop with John Heider, I believe nearby your home, and I was very, very impressed with his skill set. I found it was much different from what I had previously been exposed to, which was much more along the lines of Rogerian and/or psychoanalytic talk therapies. I was very impressed that it was experiential --

Dr. Dave: This is John Heider's work you're referring to now, right?

Alexander: Yes. My own work is influenced very heavily by Gestalt work. I had the unique opportunity to study and train with Milton Erickson -- the famed master

hypnotherapist out in Phoenix, Arizona -- and several of his senior students along the road -- Ernest Rossi Ph.D., Stephen Gilligan Ph.D.

Dr. Dave: That's quite an impressive lineup. Now, you also studied psychoanalysis as I recall.

Alexander: Yeah. In 1983 I went through a period where -- I was 33 and I already finished graduate school and I was teaching as adjunct professor in several clinical psychology departments in Los Angeles and adjunctively at UCLA and USC extensions in both the department of psychology, the behavioral sciences, the entertainment and arts department and the school of medicine. I was very successful within five years. I started my private practice in 1976 in Beverly Hills and then moved over to West Hollywood to the Cedars-Sinai West Medical Office Tower. I was involved in the beginning of one of the very first holistic and integrated medical centers in the United States and it was called the Center for Health and Healing. While I was involved there, I had the unique opportunity in just the very first year to start working with a screen writer who was also an executive producer for a television show at Universal. As I worked with him -- he had run into creative and writer's block. He'd been promoted from a staff writer. He spent the most part of his career really struggling to come up the ranks and he'd finally gotten a staff writing job and was making good money. Then he was appointed the producer of this very successful television show and then he froze. So he was referred by his doctor to me. We did a series of both meditation and mind-body healing sessions which involved hypnosis and some Gestalt therapy work. I suggested that he visualize himself as a violinist who had a frozen shoulder. I had him stand up in the room and have him stand on both of his legs and bend his knees and play an imaginary violin. The violin was his pen. I mean, the handle of the violin was his pen and the violin itself was the paper. I had him make the sounds of the violin vocally. Then he went through 10 or 15 minutes of doing this and he burst out laughing and he got filled with a lot of joy and he felt a lot of energy flow through his body. Then he left the session and he called up a couple of days later and said that he spontaneously had wakened up in the middle of the night after having a series of dreams and he was writing very fluidly and openly. Shortly after that he started to send in a lot of his colleagues -- directors, writer friends. He was involved in a leaderless men's group of noted Hollywood writers, producers, directors, development executives. So that one patient led to a whole series of patients. Then various studios such as Universal, Sony and a Disney division, which is called Walt Elias Disney, which is the division of Creative Imagineering, hired me to come into to work with both individuals and various departments to consult on creativity and stress management and the creative process.

Dr. Dave: That all sounds great. Now, I think either you didn't hear my question or you forgot it (laughter) which was that you had some involvement with psychoanalysis.

Alexander: Oh, right, right, right.

Dr. Dave: (laughter) Is this resistance?

Alexander: What's that?

Dr. Dave: I say, is this resistance that we're hearing? Not wanting to talk about your experience with psychoanalysis?

Alexander: Yeah. This is classic psychoanalytic resistance actually because what it has to do with, and what I immediately thought of as soon as you asked the questions, is those two periods of time in my life -- I had enormous creative success, but I was 32 or 33 years old and I felt enormously depressed. I was living in my dream house in Laurel Canyon, I had all the money that a person at that time could want, I had wonderful clients and job opportunities, and I had this overwhelming sense of dread and depressive anxiety. So I decided that I would do something that was outside of my own training that I had spoken to several friends and colleagues about, which was to undertake the psychoanalytic process of going to see an analyst three days a week, laying down on a couch, and the analyst really didn't say much. I spent six years in analysis and then probably a total of 10 to 12 years getting training and supervision in the psychoanalytic process.

Dr. Dave: Interesting.

Alexander: Which is extremely formative and a very useful component of my training even though I don't see myself as an analyst or someone whose primary focus is psychoanalytic. I certainly do retain the roots and the deep heritage both from the Freudian psychoanalytic vantage point as well as the British object relation school. Then, of course, I've always been deeply influenced by the Jungian analytic process.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Right. I know that when we've worked together in workshops over the past four years you've made reference to having spent a ton of money on psychoanalysis but it seems like it was money well spent.

Alexander: Yeah. It was very expensive and certainly there are probably some more efficient ways and cost efficient, less expensive therapeutic modalities to get similar results from. But it certainly was an extremely important and central part of my background.

Dr. Dave: OK. Shifting focus just a little. I know that you've been very involved in spiritual practice the whole time I've known you. Do I recall correctly that you spent some time in India?

Alexander: Yeah. I've actually had many trips to India. Interestingly enough, my earliest and original involvement with spiritual practices came about in more of a Krishnamurti model. I picked up a book by Krishnamurti where he was saying you don't need a guru. You can be your own teacher. I started studying Alan Watts because when I was a student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst we brought Alan out to speak at Amherst College. One of the things that Alan was saying was that you can be your own guru and you can become your own teacher. So when I first started studying Buddhism as a result of Alan Watts' influence -- I was able to minor at Smith College in Buddhist Studies and under the privilege of professor emeritus Ty Unno, Ph. D. who is still in the Northampton area -- at the time he was the chair of the Buddhist Studies

department at Smith. Although the courses were very theoretical on Buddhism, he also made some of them experiential. He would bring in various teachers like Swami Satchidananda, Yogi Bhanjan, Sasaki Roshi, TZ Suzuki and many others. Alan Ginsberg. Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. Later you became an ordained Buddhist monk, right? How did that come about?

Alexander: I was studying Zen from 1973 -- I'd been studying every summer at the Tassajara Zen Center in Carmel Valley -- very influenced by Suzuki Roshi, author of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. I love that book.

Alexander: It's just wonderful. It starts with a wonderful quote: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." So Zen really is the bedrock of the foundation of a lot of my spiritual background, but I also have had very diverse spiritual studies. In the mid-90s I began working with a Zen priest, Edward Brown, from the San Francisco Zen Center and we decided that it was time after some 25 years of study for me to take the Zen precepts which is called the jukai ordination, so I did and that was around 1999. Prior to that, I spent time studying the vipassana meditation in India and in Sri Lanka, and Tibetan Buddhist meditation both here in the United States and also in Nepal under the advanced Dzogchen master Tsoknyi Rinpoche who is one of the two sons -- his other brother is Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. That's the older brother and Tsoknyi is the younger brother. There's a third brother. They're the children of the late Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche who is the esteemed master out of Nepal. They all escaped from Tibet around the time the Dalai Lama did. Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche recently has been reincarnated. We got an email off the web -- they found him somewhere living in the United States of all places. They just sent a photograph of him this morning.

Dr. Dave: Wow. There must be a lot of excitement in the Tibetan Buddhist community around that.

Alexander: Yeah, huge excitement because he was an extraordinary Dzogchen master that many of the senior both American and Asian students were studying with for many years including Dan Goleman, his wife Tara Bennett-Goleman, Roger Walsh, people of that stature.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah.

Alexander: The late Francesco Variegate was head of the Louis Pasteur Institute in Paris, France who was a neuroscientist as well as a Buddhist meditation practitioner.

Dr. Dave: Mmh. So how's your own experience in analysis and your practice as a meditator informed the work that you're doing today?

Alexander: Really good question. I think analysis was extremely helpful to create a capacity of what's called in the meditation practices "self-reflection." Then from both Zen and from vipassana it helped to build an internal structure -- being able to observe, view and study the mind-body process. It's really enabled me to build both a solid and cohesive core sense of self and at the same time to develop what we call a zen mind these teachings to senior student transmission called the witness and what we call in Buddhist mind, the observing mind. In ego psychology it's often called the observing or the objective ego. I think having that as a primary fundamental core in how I view things -- that there's a me that's always present and is involved in quieting and slowing things down so that I can listen to and see my clients and the people that I teach as if I was looking through fresh eyes and ears. Almost as if I'm looking or listening through the third ear or the third set of eyes.

Dr. Dave: These might all just sound like empty words to our listeners, but I've worked with you now in these groups that we've been doing together and had an opportunity to observe your work over the years. I've just marveled at how present you are and your skill in working with people. I know that when I asked you -- that's where this question came from, a little bit of a set up -- I know I asked you how did you get to be as good as you are and you told me it's from meditation. At least that that was a real important part in terms of really being able to -- I liked what you said about the analysis. That it helped you to form a strong, central part of yourself that is the place in which you can stand. It sounds like both analysis and meditation have had that effect. I've heard you sort of stay very centered as you're being buffeted by, perhaps -- whether the person's in resistance or they're criticizing you or whatever -- you're able to kind of hold that center and come from that place and not come back from reactive anger.

Alexander: Yeah, I appreciate that. I appreciate your acknowledgement of that. To coin one of your terms, when one of our clients in one of our retreats was throwing all of her toys out the window one night on the way to a restaurant. We came back and there was kind of a fierce exchange of anger on her part because she was in some kind of projection. What helps me to be able to not get caught in the contest of those kinds of imbalanced emotional responses is that there's a solid core that grew out of both the analytic experience and also grew out of the years of meditating. One of the things that I learned very early on -- in my teenage years I was a musician in a folk-rock group -- is that you have to tune your instrument before you go on stage. Every day I get up and I meditate and that's the tuning of my instrument of self. I think one of my mentors or teachers along the way -- the late Robert Martin, who was a very esteemed Gestalt therapist. He was from L.A. then he moved up to Portland, Oregon. He died about 10 years ago. He was also an artist and a painter and a sculpturist. He said it was very important that any artist take a certain amount of time each day before they begin their art form to just sit quietly and be with themselves. Of course that's something that I learned early on from Sasaki Roshi and Suzuki Roshi. You really have to tune your own instrument.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I love that metaphor of tuning the instrument. A lot of people wonder what's the purpose of meditating, and I think you've given a good motivation. A good rationale for why it's worth spending the time in that practice. Let me move it even

a step closer towards the personal. We all face personal crises. Can you think of a personal crisis where either your psychological or your spiritual learning pulled you through?

Alexander: Yeah. In 1985 I underwent a really severe period of depression and self-doubt. I had recently gotten divorced and I ended a relationship with a German woman whom I think you may remember meeting up in San Francisco. There were a lot of extremely dark, cloudy days where I would wake up in the morning and there was a real, deep sense of existential dread. After all the years of spiritual training and meditation, the sense of existential dread and loneliness and isolation and depression over being alone after a seven year marriage and a three year relationship really left me dislocated from myself and really questioning everything. Here I was, 35 and I had all the money and all the personal affects that were supposed to make you happy, and I had professional success. I was running, at that time in my life, with what we call the Hollywood music crowd and it was very exciting -- the times sitting in on dress rehearsals with Don Henley and Fleetwood Mac and bands like that. Yet, I remember going through this long period of about 18 months really deeply feeling depressed and questioning everything. Questioning whether I didn't want to stay on the planet. The anchor, or the rudder -- because the ship clearly was taking a lot of water in those days. It had a lot of depressive water in it -- I was never somebody who would hit alcohol or drugs to temper it. I started meditating after I had some experiments with drugs between 20 and 22 and then I became a vegetarian and got involved in Kundalini yoga and Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. I really didn't have much to temper or buffer or anesthetize the pain at that time. I was really taking a lot of water. The ship itself was really starting to feel like it was going under. Then one night I dreamt. I had this dream and, being very Jungian psychologically influenced, I had a dream that the ship was starting to -- one side, the left side, was starting to fill up with water and the ship was tilting.

Dr. Dave: So you had an actual dream about a ship.

Alexander: Yeah, I actually dreamt about a ship.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I thought it was just a metaphor you were using now, and it's a great metaphor, but the metaphor came to you in a dream.

Alexander: It came to me in a dream one night and it was sort of like when a ship lists, they call it, to the left side.

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Alexander: And on the far right side of the front of the ship -- I guess that's the bow?

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Alexander: There was a little yogi meditating who looked like a Buddhist monk. I woke up that morning and I thought that's it. That's the sign, the signal to start meditating. Meditating more frequently, in addition in continuing to go through my analysis. Something dramatic and remarkable started to shift. Even my analyst noticed

it. She said to me -- I told her about the dream -- she said she wasn't very mystical or spiritually educated, so she didn't really understand why that that be significant. But she left that up to me to explain it to her. Then I started meditating two or three times a day. Within a short couple of weeks, couple of months, I started experiencing a lot of vitality and creativity and I started reading and working on some papers that I had put off. It was the importance of relying and drawing back on the spiritual disciplines. Using the Asian model to help balance out some of the psychological and emotional pain and suffering.

Dr. Dave: Thanks for sharing that. I think other people might be able to take some hints or some strength from it. There are so many different areas that you work in. Boy, we could just go on and on and I would love to. One of the things that I had really intended for us to hone in on is leadership. I know you do all these workshops on leadership. Maybe you could just tell us a little bit about that. What's the theoretical underpinning that you draw upon in those leadership workshops?

Alexander: Well, the primary theoretical model that I'm drawing on in this second book. I have to take it one at a time, but I'm already starting to do what many writers do, which is that while you're working on your first book you're thinking of your second.

Dr. Dave: (laughter)

Alexander: It's going to be called The Mindful Leader.

Dr. Dave: OK. Great.

Alexander: It's really applying mindfulness meditation and the essence of Gestalt therapy of leading from the inside out. So I really emphasize that, in a model of leadership, a leader has to lead his or herself first and foremost and that it's important to lead from a model of -- you grow people like a garden. A good leader wants to grow really strong and really healthy trees and flowers and fruit. In order to do that a leader has to have some vision and has to be out in front of his or her vision pulling all of the people that they're leading towards that vision. There's an emphasis on collaboration and team method. There's also an emphasis on positive and unconditional both self-regard -- a leader has to have positive and unconditional regard for his or her own self -- and then for the selves of the people that they're leading and growing. What's first and foremost is not the bottom line. The bottom is not to be negated because we certainly live in a world, in the business world, where many of the companies I consult with -- well, just take the music industry. A lot of the young guys that I consult with out of L.A. and the New York offices will earn promotion -- the bottom line is they got to get their records on the radio station and they got to get air play and they got to produce a certain amount of bottom line sales. But what I emphasize is it's the process of how you go about interacting with people in a conscious way. Consciously communicating, being conscious and aware that you're growing people. First and foremost what grows people is how you communicate. So I have a model where I talk about managing down, managing across and managing up. Without getting into the technical or theoretical aspects of that in this interview, what needs to be essential and primary is that you're interacting with people and seeing that as opportunities and beings who have great

capability and possess great potential. Then in each and every interaction everyday, the mindful leader is looking in the same way that a parent is growing a child to become all that they can be. A mindful leader really is growing people's potential through the job challenge. So in that model, mindful leader is really playing in what I call the consciousness game or consciously doing business, rather than the business doing them.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. This is going to be a great book. I look forward to reading it. When did you first know you wanted to be a psychologist?

Alexander: I was in my junior year at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. My first two years I majored in Business Administration at the community college and thought I was going to get an MBA. Then in my junior year I transferred to UMass Amherst and I started to study tai chi. I took a class on death and dying with the late Teresina Havens Ph.D. who was a Buddhist Studies professor. She was at Yale and then she was at Smith and then she came to UMass Amherst. Her husband -- they were both Quakers and Zen Buddhists -- his name was Joseph Havens, Ph.D. and he was a very renowned Quaker religious psychologist. He published a lot of papers on religion and psychology. He studied with a religious psychologist in Los Angeles very close to the community I now live in, in the Santa Monica Canyon. -- the man's name was Fritz Kunkel. They were all very close with Alan Watts and Christopher Isherwood and that whole early '40s and '50s existential revival of interest in Zen and existential philosophers. They hung out with Henry Miller, Anais Nin. I met these folks very early on in my junior year and just started to have a natural affinity for wanting -- like a thirst or hunger that was uncontrollable -- to be everything I could. The very first book I read was Herbert Fingarette's book *The Self in Transformation*, which is a book about mysticism and psychoanalysis. I couldn't stop reading day and night. It just opened up, almost exploded inside of me, a whole new interest in a world of personal growth and the psychology of emotions and of mysticism. Then I came upon the Krishnamurti book, and then the third book was the autobiography of the Yogi Yogananda.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Well, to round this off -- you're talking about books. I wonder if there is a book or two that you would recommend to our listeners that they might want to read today if they're looking to be ignited.

Alexander: There are so many great books out there. There's *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, which I think is wonderful. There's *Freedom from the Known* by Krishnamurti. There's Suzuki Roshi's book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which I think is really wonderful. Then Chögyam Trungpa's books, *The Myth of Freedom*, and *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which I think are wonderful. Then a classic book that I discovered at Amherst and continued to read and reread while I was a student with you at Sonoma State University was Carl Jung's famed book, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. I think that's just so rich and it can really seed in anyone the garden of self-discovery.

Dr. Dave: Nicely put. OK. Well, why don't we close with you giving a little promo for the workshop that you and I will be doing in Tuscany in the fall?

Alexander: OK. September 18th to the 24th at the Eebio Retreat Center. It's a beautiful retreat center north of Rome in Tuscany. It's an old, ancient villa that's been restored. Beautiful olive landscaping, it's a Tuscan villa. It's right near an old, ancient volcano so it has an old shamanic energy connected to it. David and I are going to spend the week with a group of people. Morning's usually devoted to -- the first part is meditation, and then we do mind-body healing work in group process where we work with dreams and people's individual psychological and emotional issues. Then afternoons usually are free to go hiking and wandering in the countryside. Then we meet again before dinner, about 5:00 to 7:30. Then we do more meditation work and some Buddhist perspectives as well as the non-dual orientation which is more Vedic and Hindu. Then we continue to work with the group and individuals in the group. We'll do that for five or six days and finish up on Saturday evening. If you want more information on that, just go to www.ronaldalexander.com and look under training and workshop schedule. There's a direct link, and there's information about David Van Nuys and myself as the leaders and a more detailed description. Then you can write to info@ronaldalexander.com and my office assistant will send you a more detailed description of fees and dates and how to get there and travel arrangements.

Dr. Dave: Hey Ron, it sounds good to me. I think I'll go there and attend.

Alexander: Yeah. Well, you'll be co-leading which is exciting. I just wrote about you in the book this morning.

Dr. Dave: Oh.

Alexander: I have a book coming out in the Fall of 2009, *Wise Mind Open Mind: Mindfulness and the Art of Change*. Last year while we were in Switzerland you made the suggestion to have one of the group members -- I thought he needed to tell people that he needed attention and you suggested that we get people to give him attention. So I wrote about that suggestion and then his involvement with telling us the story that as a little boy he wrote a story of a talk show that was hosted by a snake to all the animals in the jungle. Remember that one?

Dr. Dave: Right. Yes I do. Hey, well, I'm going to let you get back to working on that book. I know I kind of interrupted your writing morning. Thanks so much for being a guest on Shrink Rap Radio. You can consider yourself shrunk and wrapped.

Alexander: Thank you very much.