

The Three Faces of Spirit

The Three Faces of Spirit is one of the most important insights that Integral theory offers to the field of spirituality. All human approaches to spiritual practice and mystical realization can be seen to fall into three broad categories — First-Person Spirituality, Second-Person Spirituality, and Third-Person Spirituality.

The Mystery of existence, the matter of ultimate concern, is the ultimate profundity. No perspective can possibly capture it. By its very nature, Spirit itself, the great Mystery, *transcends* all perspectives.

But human nervous systems are perspective-making machines. We can't help taking perspectives. And thus, since the most ancient times, our spirituality, and our descriptions of it, always make use of our fundamental perspectives. The structure of language gives us a hint to the deep structure of our perspectives and our spirituality — we organize our speech in three broad categories.

The first-person. There is "I" or "me" the first-person perspective; from this vantage-point I can explore the rich depths of interior experience, of what it's like inside me, of my consciousness, my intuitions, my thoughts, my experiences, and my feelings. In language, the first-person is the one *speaking*.

The second-person. When I am able to connect with someone, that one goes from being (for me) an "it" to becoming "you." We connect. There is at least the most basic kind of communion. We are able to understand each other, reach mutual agreements, and a culture can arise. And in any kind of inter-subjective connection, a "we" arises. In language, the second-person is the one *spoken to*.

The third-person. When I contemplate anything or anyone, or when I act upon anything or anyone in my world, whatever I contemplate or act upon is the *object* of my attention or action. I can see it, observe it, examine it, sense it, and affect it. This is the domain of objective information and experience. Herein lies all objective knowledge, including all our sciences. In language, the third-person is the one *spoken about*.

Based on the distinctions between the first, second, and third person perspectives, we can see three distinct "families" of spiritual experience and practice. We'll consider third-person spirituality first, then first-person spirituality, and finally second-person spirituality.

Third-person spirituality often involves *contemplating* the mystery of existence (“looking at it.”) This can take a wide variety of forms; two of the most important and familiar expressions of third-person spirituality are (1) nature mysticism, and (2) philosophy or theology. Nature mysticism is found in all spiritual traditions, and it is important in the lives of most post-postmodern practitioners. It involves contemplating the natural landscape, light, sky, sun, moon, stars, and creatures, seeing them, in a sense, as the body of the Mystery of existence. In reading, writing, or discussing philosophy, we contemplate existence, noticing the abstract patterns that connect and underlie our world and experience. Philosophy and nature mysticism are entirely different undertakings, but they both involve “*contemplating it,*” looking at aspects of the Mystery, and letting that process transform us. In Integral Life Practice, the core third-person spiritual practice is called **Kosmic Contemplation**.

First-person spirituality involves awakening to the unchanging IAMness that is always present as the still and silent Witness of experience. This IAMness is the pure consciousness that is present during every experience, every sound, sight, smell, taste, sensation, thought, or feeling, however pleasant or unpleasant. Such pure consciousness is often described as the ultimate realization, the goal of Eastern mystical paths. It is experienced when eyes open after meditation, and there is an experience of Oneness with all existence, of Union, of non-separation. And long before we achieve any ultimate nirvana, we can experience a glimpse of IAMness (also called *Suchness*) via meditation, inspiring conversation with a spiritual teacher, or spontaneously, as a graceful accident. The paths that focus on first-person spirituality usually focus on meditation, on transcending our “monkey mind” tendency to be absorbed in our constant stream of thoughts, and on the open field of consciousness that naturally arises when the mind relaxes. In Integral Life Practice, the core first-person spiritual practice is called **Integral Inquiry or Integral Awakening**.

Educated post-postmodern Westerners tend to feel a natural openness to both of these forms of spirituality. Modern science questions the idea of personal identity and validates the inherent oneness of the cosmos. Both first-person and third-person spirituality make sense to a contemporary worldview. The Western discovery of Eastern spirituality has primarily sparked trans-rational explorations of first-person, and to a lesser degree, third-person spirituality.

Second-person spirituality involves communion with the Mystery of existence as one's universal beloved intimate. It is a direct relationship between the individual "I" with the "you" of Spirit, turning directly into feeling-contact with the universal beloved. It can be expressed through prayer, and through a devotional life of worship, service, and celebration. Second-person paths usually begin with insight, the acknowledgment that the heart tends to close, cutting us off from others and life. On that basis, there is practice, the intention to open the heart, loving surrender to the source of grace, and devotional enjoyment of intimacy with Spirit.

Second-person spirituality is a difficult sticking-point for many Westerners. One reason is that Western culture was long dominated by Christian second-person religion with a dogmatic mythic conception of God. When Western cultures made their transition into modernity, they (rightly!) rejected mythic religious conceptions of God. But they threw out the baby (second-person spirituality altogether) along with the bathwater (a mythic version of God.) It can be especially difficult for Westerners to accept trans-rational prayer, since they often imagine that communing with the Mystery must inherently presume a metaphysical conception of God. ("First, tell me exactly who I would be praying *to*?") But that dogmatic skepticism fails to notice that we can relate to Spirit trans-rationally, as the graceful nature of reality, the universal "other-ness" implied by the experience of "me-ness."

But second-person spirituality is essential—and it's one of the most transformational opportunities opened up by an Integral view. Human brains and nervous systems evolved in hunter-gatherer bands, and therefore we are mentally and emotionally structured for *relating to others*. Those relational capacities are not engaged by first-person awakening to IAMness or third-person contemplation of nature or philosophy.

A love relationship with existence is the essence of second-person spirituality—and love enables us to access tremendous power and energy. Second-person spirituality implicates us personally, revealing our closed hearts and contraction for what they are—a violation of our inherent love-relationship with the Mystery of existence. The universal drama of a love-relationship with the universal Beloved quickens our blood and brings us alive. Love is what unleashes the power of our whole being. And what is spirituality without love? In Integral Life Practice, the core second-person spiritual practice is called **Integral Communion**.