

Integral Evolutionary Spirituality, Spiritual Teachers, Cultism, and Critics

Terry Patten's response to a request for comments from Germany's Integrales Forum, in response to your position paper, "Integral Spirituality and Spiritual Teachers."

Summary

The Integrales Forum "Position Paper" on validating spiritual teachers offers philosophically rich leadership, and is much appreciated. I have articulated similar principles and actively apply them to myself. I work transparently, and entirely non-coercively. But the principles articulated in the paper can be applied well or poorly, with potentially great good or bad consequences. Remember, it takes a nearly superhuman force to break free of the gravity of the ego and common worldly human society and to achieve "escape velocity" to go into the orbit of sustainable higher spiritual realization of transpersonal states and stages of consciousness. "Hard" schools of intense challenge arise for good reasons and should not be legislated out of existence or unduly constrained by the limited understanding of the unenlightened. Experiments at the leading edge can't be consensually validated by those a half-step behind. We can establish criteria for evaluating spiritual teachers, yes, but let's hold them humbly. In the process it is no less valid to evaluate the critics, and even students. This discussion is part of how we can birth the kind of sangha that can become the next Buddha, so this is great and honorable work. But let's proceed humbly, recognizing the tentativeness of our hypotheses. Let the culture of integral evolutionary spirituality be rich and open, fed by some streams of wisdom that run through watersheds fed by thunder, floods and lightning, and not only ones watered by healing rain.

The Context of this Appreciative Inquiry: "Yes, And..."

Thank you, Integrales Forum and DIA, for tackling these issues, undoubtedly engaging in some deep conversations, and forging a first-draft document that is thoughtful and thorough. . It offers some philosophically rich leadership (perhaps even with dose of Habermasian rigor?) within the Integral movement, and much appreciated. It arrived, synchronistically, the day after I completed a draft of a paper for the 2010 Integral Theory Conference titled "Towards the Emergence of Integral Evolutionary Spiritual Culture." In it (following a longer 2007 paper in which I discussed some of these themes more extensively) I articulated remarkably similar perspectives.

For example, quoting my paper, here are the qualifications I enumerated for an integral evolutionary coach or teacher:

1. *An active, regular practice:* Integral evolutionary coaches must sincerely attempt to practice what they preach, embodying regular Integral practices supporting holistic hygiene, including a conscious diet, exercise regime, conscious relationship to sleep, competent self-management practices, and regular study and growth of perspective. They don't have to be perfect, but they must keep working sincerely to walk their talk.
2. *Light in shadow:* Integral evolutionary coaches must have deep self-awareness and a history and ongoing practice of doing serious shadow work, deepening their self-awareness, psychological self-understanding, and somatic integration.
3. *Self-responsible and successful:* Coaches must have met the challenges of survival and have achieved at least basic functional success. They must have used their will and self-management to empower themselves, so they can take

- effective stands, enroll others, and manifest results in their lives and work. Thus they can speak with authority in coaching clients to master this same curriculum.
4. *High level of maturity:* Their center of gravity must have achieved at least stable 2nd tier development in terms of vertical “structure-stage” growth, embodying the lived experience of having freed themselves from limiting perspectives and grown their capacity to take more complex meta-perspectives. This should be evident in their cognition, identity, values, morals, and additional lines of development.
 5. *Spiritual practice and realization:* They must embody real experience with and understanding of meditation, communion, contemplation, Samadhi, and self-transcending service. Coaches should be characterized by enough spiritual maturity in terms of “state-stage” development that they regularly inhabit transpersonal perspectives in a way that exerts an ongoing active teleological pull and guidance.
 6. *Knowledge of all aspects of practice:* They must understand the nature and terrain of the five kinds of practice and growth, and be able to direct their clients to the best available supportive resources (in all five areas) that may be of assistance to them.
 7. *The presence and skills of a coach, mentor, and spiritual guide:* They must have an authentic impulse to help others, must have studied, practiced and mastered the art, craft, and science of doing it well, and they must have integrated their learning so that they show up in a way that is sufficiently transparent to be catalytic and instructive.
 8. *Transmission:* Their spiritual realization must have sufficient depth that they are able to transmit a field of awareness that catalyzes greater freedom and contact with high subtle, causal, and/or nondual awareness in others.
 9. *Evolutionary Activation:* They must have established an authentic vocational connection to serving the emergence of a positive evolutionary future through their work with others so that they can embody that commitment in a way that can transmit it to others.

Your position paper engaged this same type of consideration, and took it in some similar, but distinct and valuable directions. Thus, for the most part, obviously, I am in sympathy with it. But you have written a brief and abstract treatment of a complex topic that lives itself out in rich human and profound spiritual terms, and there are many nuances that deserve further discussion. So my response, in general, takes the form of “Yes, and...” I hope the “Yes!” rings out loud and clear. And, here, in the spirit of co-creative dialog, I’ll focus on just one cluster of polarizing nuances within that “and”.

This whole conversation takes place in a cultural context that has only very recently appeared — one informed, simultaneously by (1) all the world’s pre-modern spiritual wisdom traditions, (2) modernity’s rational frames for scientific evidence and discourse, (3) postmodern philosophical and psychological insights, (4) the important insights of integral theory and practice (especially those relating to a truly “integral” spirituality) and (5) honest engagement with the moral implications and imperatives of our largest context — the great story of evolution (generating an “evolutionary” spirituality.) We agree that something essential and important has emerged, which we all (independently, interestingly enough — perhaps that’s significant) have decided to refer to as “Integral Evolutionary Spirituality.”

Also, (although it is not explicit in your position paper) our conversation also takes place in a context in which (a) many recent spiritual teachers have misused their spiritual

authority, creating a series of scandals over their cultic exploitation of students for sex and/or money, (b) a series of contemporary spiritual teachers and philosophers have attempted to refresh and embody the liberating realizations of the ancient traditions in contemporary terms, sometimes teaching in extreme, unconventional and controversial ways, and (c) a series of critics have attacked one or both categories of teachers, some regarding all unconventional teaching approaches as “abusive” and, (d) some have gone further, attacked still other “non-abusive” teachers and philosophers, including Ken Wilber and me, simply for appreciating and cooperating with, learning from, or having studied with unconventional teachers without publicly condemning their so-called “abuse.” So it would be great if we could agree on standards of conduct.

Both your position paper and my essay — and even this response — are located in a cultural context with a whole range of implicit and explicit assumptions. Among them is the assumption that spiritual teachers and their methods should be subject to a process of consensual validation by a larger community. (This relates not just to issues of power but also to the quality, level, and validity of teaching offerings.) I think this is a necessary and mostly valid attempt. But this is tricky territory. And the principles you articulate could be applied well or poorly, with potentially great good or bad consequences.

The Gravity of the Ego and the Big Invisible Cult of the World

Remember, most human beings alive today are not only not-yet-enlightened, they are neurotic and selfish, and in denial of it. Most are also integrally illiterate. And most also have complicating resentments and prejudices, unexamined shadow projections, and seriously limiting structures of meaning-making. Only members of a “community of the adequate” can realistically be expected to be capable of competently performing the consensual validation of a spiritual teacher. But neither your documents nor mine has tackled the sticky problem of defining the “adequacy” of those *doing* the validating (or of students, which is a whole other matter.) If we did, I suspect our “elitism” would offend some readers — but if our standards were *not* extremely high, our process of validation would tend to reduce a very profound consideration to something superficial and potentially hurtful to the evolution of consciousness and culture.

This points out that we all come to this discussion out a worldly unenlightened culture, which is distorted by widely-held oversimplified or inaccurate beliefs and unexamined attitudes rooted in (and amplifying) fear, resentment, craving, and unprocessed grief. It’s been called “the consensus trance” with good reason. To word it more vividly (if perhaps also in a more inflammatory way) the common context of modern and postmodern popular culture is itself a great “cult” of unconscious unenlightened defenses, anxiety, greed, and consoling illusions that fiercely and viciously defends its epistemic closure. Any attempt to create an inspired subculture of transformative practice must defy the consensus of that larger consensus cultism, and in the process, it will tend to seem very much like what is derisively called a “cult” in our current popular conversation. It is true that pathological “cultic” brainwashing can be extremely dangerous and is worth guarding against, but we must remember, it is not the only cultism in play today, and the popular cultural alternative (the likely default for those who don’t attempt to create a spiritual culture) is itself so unhealthy that has created a species-wide moral, economic, environmental and political crisis.

(Like all “true” perspectives, the paragraph above is also “partial” — that is, the glass is both half-empty and half-full. Culture evolves, and integral evolutionary culture is emerging, growing and awakening. We do see wisdom appearing. Moreover, there is

already a kind of wisdom in post/modern consciousness' skepticism toward received forms of authority, including especially spiritual authority. This skepticism has been a driver for countless forms of innovation and expressions of personal freedom. AND, the longstanding, well-founded recognition of the egoic, contracted nature of human tendencies cannot be ignored....)

Spiritual traditions, since ancient times, have regarded the gravitational pull of the ego, the power of the self-contraction, and the deluding power of common human society as an enormously formidable force. Monastic orders from ancient times have endeavored to create an alternate cultural reality within which something else might be possible. They also viewed the process as an adventure, not a science. To use a contemporary metaphor — it takes a nearly superhuman force to break free of the gravity of the ego and common worldly human society and to achieve “escape velocity” to go into the orbit of sustainable higher spiritual realization of transpersonal states and stages of consciousness.

Is Spiritual Teaching a “Professional” Discipline?

The criteria suggested in the Integrales Forum position paper are essentially congruent with the criteria I apply to myself as a spiritual teacher. Transparency and authentic self-disclosure can create deeper, more authentic contact. Accountability arises naturally in that spiritual intimacy. I am interested in participating in (and helping to convene) a culture of integral evolutionary spiritual teachers (*and coaches*, by the way — I suggest that integral evolutionary spirituality is best served by a whole new “ecology of helpers” rather than only the ancient teacher-student dynamic, and that elder peer “coaches” providing a professional evolutionary service, can be a central role in that emerging ecology.) The questions you ask of teachers are legitimate ones I try to answer in the way I approach my own work with people.

But I hope you will not insist on applying them as absolute or formal requirements of *all* teachers, or on regarding anyone who chooses not to submit themselves to these criteria as ipso facto illegitimate or dangerous. Asking and answering your questions will tend to democratize the whole affair of spiritual teaching, allowing for professionalism and clarity, and reducing the potential for abuse. But can spiritual teachers be regarded as mere “professionals” or are some of them authentically transcendent, of a higher status, deserving a reverence more like that traditionally accorded to them (even if many who presumed that status in the past have fallen short)?

It is intelligent and responsible to try to raise the level of the discourse and discrimination, asking and trying to answer key questions. How do we hold teachers to an ethical standard? Can we define a single code of conduct that applies realistically to them all, regardless of their own level of awakening and vision? Are there multiple categories of teachers and standards? What criteria apply? Who sets them? How? What are they exactly? But since spiritual teaching addresses, by its nature, the unknowable and ineffable Mystery of existence and the leading edges of human potential, I doubt if it is possible to answer all these questions finally and completely. Spirituality and the adventure of spiritual awakening strive to exceed the limits of what we already know and understand.

Recognizing that context, I want to focus on another question: Is it realistic or even desirable to render the great matter of spiritual transformation utterly “safe”? Isn't it at least potentially legitimate for an advanced teacher to assert a higher status based on an

extraordinary realization, and on that basis to create a “hard school” of fierce demands fit only for the most passionately committed, a cauldron of transformative fire that people are warned to “enter at their own risk”? Our criteria, if applied rigidly or programmatically, would run the risk of taming the stormy vitality of the evolving edge of human spiritual evolution, turning all spiritual teachers into professionals bound to professional standards. Teachers thus bound would not really be free to “go for it” in the spirit of passionate experimentation. If we inadvertently contribute to an attempt to domesticate every single member of this wild species, we risk losing or marginalizing something vital and necessary to our continued growth and development.

Gratitude for Enlightened Wildness

I spent fifteen years as a student of Adi Da Samraj, a truly great spiritual teacher who is often publicly denounced as an abuser. My view of him is complex, full of nuances and paradoxes, and impossible to adequately summarize in this short space. One telling phrase I have written about him is that he was “one part Jesus Christ, one part Picasso, one part Nagarjuna, one part Marlon Brando, and one part Genghis Khan. And more...” I am inexpressibly grateful for the incomparable education I received during my time with him. My devotional love affair with him transformed me and set the course of my life. At the same time, I was always a critical student, a practitioner of “*defiant devotion*.” I was a devotee who objected to his choices and behaviors, criticized him, disobeyed some of his commands, and even ended my membership in his ashram altogether over twenty years ago. It was the nature of my (truly blessed) relationship with him to struggle with him intensely and tenaciously even after I left, for a total of thirty-five years — all in the context of a profound and transcendent spiritual relationship.

This sounds strange, if not utterly incomprehensible, to most people, and I know it’s not realistic to expect my paradoxical experience to be deeply understood very widely in contemporary culture. But I received transformative blessings not just from the aspects of Adi Da that people would regard as legitimate and praiseworthy. I got tremendous value from aspects of my experience that others would regard as preposterous, “abusive” and/or unreasonable. Some of my most profound learnings came after I left; they were printed, as it were, “on the inside of the label” (and visible only upon tearing it apart.) I don’t endorse or excuse all his behaviors. Again, I’ve been a fierce critic (and, viewed conventionally, also a *victim*, or *survivor*, of “abuse” — who suffered real injuries and processed a great deal of rage over them) but grew tremendously in the process. And now I hold all of it with gratitude, even though I remain not only devotional but also critical.

Walking a Fine Line with Sacred Responsibilities on All Sides

I cannot in good conscience acquiesce to impoverishing future generations of spiritual aspirants by endorsing an approach that could so completely sanitize the cultural space in which spiritual teaching can take place that others could not benefit from the remarkable ordeal that has been my brutal privilege.

At the same time I don’t want people to be seduced or pushed into situations where their autonomy is violated and they are damaged. Group psychology is powerful; small spiritual groups can easily become cultic and unhealthy, especially when they have a charismatic leader and an overarching mission. Tragic damage can result, and Jim Jones and Charles Manson are icons of how extreme it can get. The integral

evolutionary spiritual movement will be damaged if we don't find a way to clarify standards that prevent or at least challenge even much milder versions of these unhealthy dynamics.

Personally, I would never teach in a domineering mode, and I have no intention ever to do so. I'm drawn to a more transparent, dialectical, gentle, honoring, sincerely respectful, and accountable way of relating to people. It is my style, my "dharma" to be a "spiritual friend", a teacher who is also a coach, and who aspires to transform my students and clients into colleagues and peers. I recoil even at a whiff of the violation of the boundaries of my students and clients, and will have nothing to do with it. I strive to be impeccable in this regard, and I continually examine the issues that might taint the field. I probe my peers when their students are hurt or offended. Teachers take a role that tends to engender reverence and great openness, which confers sacred responsibility. I want us to take very much to heart the ways others might be wounded—even by our well-intentioned and loving attempts to serve them.

But I reserve the right to grow as a teacher, and if I find ways to love and teach more fiercely and effectively, it is imperative that I be free to stretch. Challenge is an essential aspect of teaching. Experimenting with challenging students in new ways wouldn't be evil. I don't want to have helped build a cultural world space that constrains that potentially healthy impulse in a bureaucratic morass of "spiritual correctness." The principles in your document are entirely helpful if they are held as "orienting generalizations" but could be oppressive if held as if they were held as "laws."

Hold It Lightly, Notice its Costs

So I suggest that your position paper be accepted, largely, as it is, but *held* modestly and lightly. As my friend and colleague, Marco Morelli puts it, there is really no "official community of rational actors, consciously applying intelligent standards and principles in their discourse and activities, like a vast review board whose job is to evaluate and judge all social arisings." Acting as if this ideal is real may be the shadow potential of an overly ambitious application of universal integral evolutionary principles. As you can see, the reality is a lot messier, driven by neuroses, cultural assumptions, and systemic distortions (like the "echo chamber" effect of the blogosphere). In reality, judgments are quite often more individually motivated, reflecting the experiences, fears, drives—and also (but not purely) the rational faculties—of the individual.

Please don't forget that this attempt to establish universal standards may have costs. Not all spiritual teaching involves disseminating established wisdom. Some involves pressing the leading edge of consciousness and culture. If an experiment really presses the envelope, very few of us will be in a position to judge or validate it. If these experiments are vital to the spiritual and cultural evolution, we want to be humble enough to avoid constraining evolution itself.

What tradeoffs are we willing to endure here? The question boils down to calibrating how tightly we want to police such experiments. On one hand we want to avoid the risks of serious Jim Jones-like abuse, but on the other we want to avoid overly constraining the creative intensity that powers our rapid spiritual and cultural advancement. Let's recognize and acknowledge that bold experimentation is important too. The conventional world cannot acknowledge this at all, but participants in integral evolutionary spiritual

can. Under certain circumstances we may have a responsibility to defend religious freedom. In others, we need to protect aspirants from irresponsible teachers.

Both Thunder and Rain — Conclusion

My own teaching work is located firmly in a culture of mutuality. In my opinion, that's where the creative action is right now — the emergence of a truly relevant evolutionary spiritual culture. If "the next Buddha will be a Sangha" this is how we can work today to participate in serving that important evolutionary emergent. Esoteric "hard" schools of intense challenge should be the rare exception, not the rule. And of course, I would never condone truly criminal or dangerously negligent behavior on the part of a teacher toward his or her students. But I want the culture of integral evolutionary spirituality to be fed by some streams of wisdom that run through watersheds fed by thunder, floods and lightning, and not only ones watered by healing rain.

When I attune myself to a positive evolutionary future, I find that I (and the vast majority of my colleagues) can best serve modestly, by sincerely honoring the dignity, vulnerability, and autonomy of aspirants. But I was transformed in part through a tantric alchemical process that violated my boundaries ruthlessly, and from which I emerged somewhat wounded and much more profoundly and enduringly transformed. Let's make room for the whole elephant, not just the contours we have been able to grasp so far in a process that is still young, not yet entirely illuminated in all its nooks and crannies, and, thank God, dynamically alive.

End.