

What is Integral Life Practice?

Since I've recently co-authored a book titled *Integral Life Practice*, I am often asked,

“What is ILP?”

Integral Life Practice is best understood not as a new approach to personal growth, but as a clarifying, highly-efficient way of approaching (and understanding) every and any approach to personal growth.

At a certain point in the school of life, we spontaneously begin to want to evolve—we want to wake up, to see more clearly, to open up, to love more, to show up more completely in every moment of living. We want to “be all that we can be.” We want to grow in awareness, care, and presence. In various ways, we begin, sincerely, to cultivate personal excellence. Integral Life Practice (often referred to by its acronym, “ILP”) is simply a smart, up-to-date way to understand and practice that universal matter. It is a way to more quickly and authentically wake up, show up, open up, and live fully.

Although personal growth always involves realizing greater wholeness, it is usually approached in a fragmented way. Implicit messages tell us that peak performance in business (or sports) is entirely distinct from getting a liberal education. And both are entirely separate from the matter of attaining wisdom or spiritual maturity. But they're not.

In fact, a core principle of ILP is “Integral cross-training.” It's based on a key insight. New meditators who take up strength training grow faster in meditation than those who do not. Why?

Meditation and strength training have nothing to do with each other, right? Well, yes and no. Each human being is holistic and interconnected. So if you do shadow work, your meditation will not get stuck in ways that it otherwise might. If your mind becomes more flexible and open and clear, your spiritual growth will have smoother sailing.

ILP is a new, clear, rational and trans-rational understanding of the “how to” of human

development. It's new “skillful means” for devout (or irreverent) people of any faith (or no faith at all.) It can be the basis for communities of practice of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists and agnostics—or (uniquely!) for communities of practice that include “all of the above.” It can be a bridge between sincere, intelligent people that can cross our sectarian divisions. It's the first approach to living that fully integrates ancient, modern and postmodern wisdom. It's a clarifying context for anyone serious about growing, about becoming more and more good, true, and beautiful, and for anyone serious about contributing to their world.

ILP is not narcissistic. Its four “core modules” (Body, Mind, Spirit, and Shadow) do

focus on cultivating individual excellence. But ILP is practiced through an embodied, caring integrated life of service in relationship to others and our whole multidimensional world.

ILP integrates our basic human aspirations. ILP does not view the impulse to grow (to become all that you can be) as if it is separate from the impulse to contribute (to make a difference, to be of service to others and our world.) We cannot live a fully self-actualized life without making contributions to others and our world. We cannot make our fullest contributions to others and our world without growing and waking up and actualizing our potentials. ILP appreciates the unity of the being, and helps to heal the false divisions that seem to divide us from ourselves.

ILP has an “open architecture.” Instead of dictating any particular practices, it provides

principles for designing a personalized set of practices that are tailored to your needs—and that can work in your busy life. It honors the existing practices you are already doing, and helps you notice whatever you might be leaving out. It’s just a more intelligent, clear-eyed, effective way to approach the great matter of self-cultivation.

And, finally, Integral Life Practice makes it possible to have a rich practice, even in the midst of our busy post-post-modern lives. ILP is scalable. When necessary, you can do it in as little as 10 minutes a day. Simultaneously, it shines the light of practice on every moment of living. And ILP offers a whole host of immensely practical and specific distinctions that help you cut through the confusion and muddling that otherwise can hold back your growth, awakening, and highest excellence.

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 intersubjective 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 sensation, thought, or feeling, however pleasant

or unpleasant. Such pure consciousness is often 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 Cosmic Contemplation.

F *first-person spirituality*

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, 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.

S *second-person spirituality*

S econd-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 “otherness” 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.

Author Bio

Terry Patten, is a seminar leader, integral life coach, spiritual practitioner, and a key member of the team that developed *Integral Life Practice™* with Ken Wilber. Previously the founder of the leading-edge company *Tools for Exploration*, and author of four books, Terry has guided hundreds of people in deepening their integral practice and actualizing their higher potentials. He lives in San Rafael, California, where he works as a coach, consultant, writer, teacher, entrepreneur, and grassroots conservationist. His personal web site is www.integralheart.com.