

# Facing the Challenges of Integral Spirituality

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*Path; photo, Cetta Kenney*

Today many individuals are turning to more than one religious tradition to inform their spiritual path. Some call themselves “interfaith”; others prefer terms like “multifaith”, “integral” or “universalist”. All are faced with the challenge of how to integrate two or more traditions. I am one of these integral practitioners and have devoted my professional life to teaching at interfaith and integral institutions and to counseling individuals seeking to live an integrative spiritual life. In this essay, I examine some of the challenges and suggest some ways of responding to them.

Let me begin by briefly describing my own spiritual path. For over two decades, I have been exploring the world’s religions, and in the past five years have consciously been on an integral path. Raised and educated in the Conservative movement of Judaism, I briefly affiliated with the Orthodox movement in my late teens and early twenties and began a course of rabbinical studies. At age twenty two I experienced a crisis in faith and walked away from a traditional Jewish life. When I recovered from that bitter disillusionment with Orthodoxy, I began exploring other religions. In my early thirties I discovered the Jewish Renewal movement and for many years have been an active member. Jewish Renewal blends ancient mystical ideas and practices with contemporary progressive thinking. Since the mid-1990s, I have been practicing Buddhist meditation and a variety of Sufi and Hindu meditations and chants. Nature and the creative arts also contribute significantly to my spiritual path. A crucial dimension of my integral spiritual life is my relationship with my wife. Born a

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Catholic, she was initiated into the Sufi Order and into Tibetan Buddhism in her thirties.

Since 1999 I have been teaching and counseling at various interfaith universities, institutes and seminaries (in the San Francisco Bay Area) that encourage interreligious dialogue, explore common ideas, values and practices, and respect differing perspectives and approaches. My insights into the challenges of an integral spiritual path derive from observations of my own life as well as the lives of my students, colleagues, clients, and friends. I have gotten to know hundreds of individuals who consider themselves interfaith, multifaith or integral.

#### JOYS AND BLESSINGS

I will use the term “integral spirituality” to indicate a spiritual path that integrates two or more spiritual traditions. The integral practitioner may live those traditions completely or blend elements from them. The degree of integration may vary widely. For some, the integration may look like a tapestry of selected beliefs and practices. For others, there may be a deeper fusion or integration of traditions. Some work from a set of universal spiritual principles and adopt practices that express those principles. Many practitioners rely on intuition and creativity to shape their integral path. Most of the integral practitioners I know tend to be rooted in one tradition and have grafted onto their practice elements from other traditions. Some individuals are fully committed to two traditions, and several are fully initiated into three.

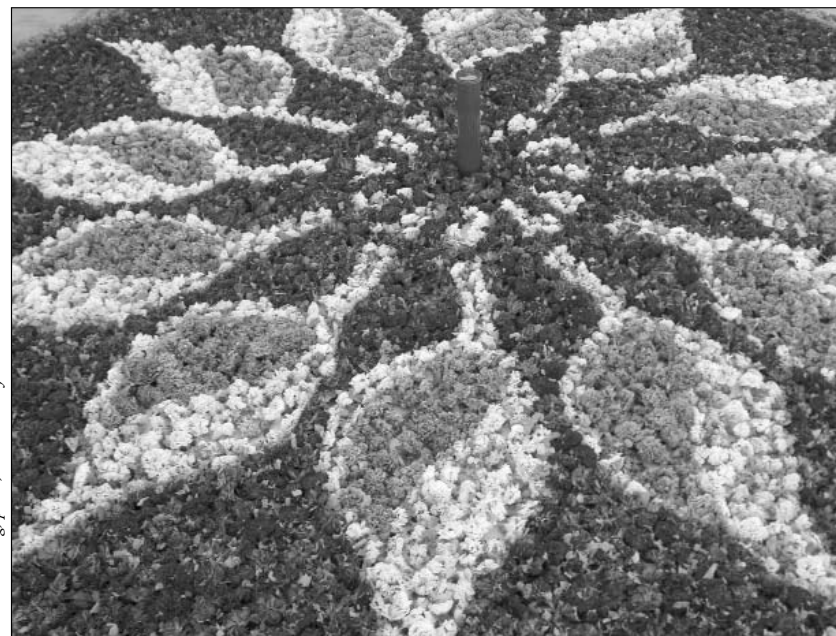
Before discussing some of the challenges of integral spirituality, it is important to mention some of its joys and blessings. The integral path is a wondrous way of worshipping “The Multi-Faceted Unity”. Many integral practitioners experience the different religions as diverse expressions of an underlying divine wisdom. Moreover, they see all peoples, all species, all beings as unique and united offspring of The One. Thus, they honor diversity in many forms – religious, cultural, racial, gender, species – and seek to protect the lives and rights of all beings. Because of their openness and inclusiveness, interfaith practitioners benefit from the huge storehouse of powerful insights and practices not only of the world’s religions but also of the sciences, humanities and arts. All of human insight and creativity is potentially

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available to them. Many practitioners have a more universal perspective on truth, goodness and beauty while at the same time honoring the differences between perspectives. Most are creative contributors to their professions, and many are involved in peace-making, justice-making, conflict resolution, mediation, community-building, and other reform and transformational activities. Finally, many experience sheer joy in being able to worship, celebrate, grieve, commune and create with diverse individuals and communities.

I believe that integral spirituality will become even more accepted and practiced as this century proceeds. The globalization of communication has made it possible for more and more indi-

or “smorgasbord” spirituality. Even the philosopher Ken Wilber, who is a brilliant advocate of integral spirituality, has felt the need to distinguish his “deep” approach from what he considers more



Flower Painting: photo, Ceata Kenney

viduals to become informed about the riches of other communities and traditions. It is becoming increasingly clear to many people that one way to overcome the parochial, tribal, regional, national and international tensions that we learn about everyday is to reach out to others, and to share ideas and practices.

With the rise of integral spirituality has come the rise of criticism. In recent years, various critics have attacked integral or multifaith spirituality as shallow, superficial, confused, and narcissistic. Some have caricatured it as “supermarket”

superficial and syncretistic forms. Wilber believes that most of these paths are only loosely integrative. I do not wish to pass judgment on the different forms of integral spirituality and will continue to use the term to refer to all attempts to integrate two or more traditions. I am convinced that every path, traditional or integrative, has its merits and limitations.

Let us now consider the actual and practical challenges facing the integral practitioner. One real challenge is confusion and uncertainty. On what basis

do practitioners selectively borrow ideas and practices from various traditions? How do they avoid a “salad bar” approach to spirituality? How do they differentiate between unjust, untrue and unloving beliefs and practices and those that “don’t feel quite right” but should be embraced anyway. All of these questions are concerned with discernment: how to know when the inner voice one hears is from God and when it is from one’s ego. Though we all possess

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powers of discernment, these capacities can easily become clouded over, obscured. Or they may just be undeveloped and unexercised. Our inner powers of knowing are profound but not infallible.

Confusion is often a sign that the ego is overly involved in the discernment process. If integral practitioners heed the insistent but hollow dictates of the ego, rather than the deeper, fuller intuitions of the soul, they run the risk of leading a self-centered, even narcissistic, life. Even if they try to rely solely on the guidance of their own conscience, they will necessarily encounter error and illusion because conscience is fallible and ego is strong. Indeed, given the strength of the ordinary ego, and the subtle ways in which it sometimes operates, it is inevitable that egoistic attachment to comfort, ease, safety, and pleasure will regularly infect and afflict the decision making process.

Related to the potential for selfishness is the temptation to superficiality: to do many different practices but not

go deeply into any one of them. Practitioners may be tempted to shorten or eliminate a practice because it feels too challenging. If they continually avoid or abandon challenging practices, they will never learn the value of discipline and of going deeply into things despite the difficulty of doing so.

Practitioners may also be tempted to do what feels right in the moment since this is often the path of least resistance. That “feels right” quality – which is an aesthetic quality – may or may not come from the depths of the soul. Sometimes, the ease of doing a practice is a sign that it is in alignment with spirit; sometimes, it is a sign that the person is hiding out from the challenges of spirit. Ease may be a sign of sloth. Discerning the different kinds of ease and of discomfort is crucial.

Another difficulty with selectively borrowing from other traditions is the potential difficulty it creates for members of the other traditions. Often, members of a particular community do not want “outsiders” to borrow, adopt or adapt their beliefs and practices. They don’t want their religion “appropriated” by others. Most of the interfaith practitioners I know were taught practices by unusual individuals who believed that their practices should be shared more widely. Some of these teachers were given “permission” to teach “outsiders” by their religious community leaders or lineage holders. But many community members object to those who teach “outsiders”. They don’t want their practices “stolen”, misunderstood and misused.

Facing and overcoming these many challenges and difficulties is essential if integral spirituality is to develop and

expand and be an authentic contribution to the spiritual evolution of our species. The less integral practitioners rely on traditional authoritative guidance – clergy, scriptures and communities – and the more they rely on their own personal experience, the more they need to be vigilant and scrutinizing about the quality and integrity of their experiences. That is to say, they must place a high value on spiritual discernment. Indeed, discernment is one of the keys to the integral path.

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Spiritual discernment involves accurately recognizing the divine presence, movement and voice in one’s life and then making decisions consonant with that realization. Discernment involves distinguishing God’s voice from the ego’s voice, but that distinction is not always clear and is in fact paradoxical. On the one hand, there is no absolute distinction between the divine voice and the egoistic voice because, in my view, all that exists – ego included – is an expression, a manifestation, of The One. There is nothing outside, or separate from, The Infinite Godhead. On the other hand, there is an infinite difference between the two voices because the ego is only a part, an infinitesimally finite aspect, of the Infinite. It is a member of God that acts as if it were separate from God. It is an isolated and alienated aspect of divinity that needs to be re-integrated with the whole.

Through spiritual practice, the ego slowly becomes more integrated into the entire being of a person and begins to lose its dangerously self-centered quality. Over many years – decades – of practice, the ego is induced to more fully serve the whole self, which can then more fully serve The One. For most of us, the challenges of the ego never completely disappear. In fact, I think it is a mistake to ever assume your ego has completely vanished or been subsumed. Nevertheless, spiritual

progress is associated with deeper and more frequent reliance on and identification with the integral self. The “still, small voice” heard by the integral self is each person’s clearest, fullest hearing of the inner “voice” of God. To hear and heed the voice of God is to bring the entirety and integrity of one’s particular being into conscious loving attunement with the Infinite Source. Our own unity is then experienced as unified with the Supreme Unity.

#### HONEST DISCERNMENT

Historically, many traditional Jews and Christians have tied spiritual discernment to collective authority: “if the inner voice of the individual contradicts collective authoritative understanding and practice, then it is not from God”. The vast majority of integral practitioners I know are not willing

to follow such strictly authoritative approaches. But how can they trust their own authority, their own inner guidance?

Wise and compassionate discernment requires focus, dedication and ruthless honesty. This conscious, daily – even moment to moment – commitment to discernment is essential. Some of the integral practitioners I know live this commitment by practicing mindfulness or ceaseless prayer. Mindfulness is the Buddhist practice of bringing one's full awareness to every moment, to every action, to every state of being. It is about paying attention, being awake, being present to the ongoing unfolding of life. Ceaseless prayer is just that: maintaining a constant dialogue with the divine about everything one does or is considering doing. God is consulted for every action. Some practitioners continually chant or repeat a name of God subvocally, while others make use of prayer beads. Any of these practices, and others, can serve to sustain a near-constant process of discernment. Mindfulness and prayer are essential to the integral path since they are crucial to discerning the authenticity of one's experiences and responses.

The process of discernment can also be dramatically deepened by a regular meditation practice. Meditations of all kinds are potent techniques for focusing attention, sharpening perceptual discrimination, aligning mind and body, deepening understanding, strengthening intuition, expanding consciousness, and tapping compassion and creativity. Compassion itself is a powerful form of discernment because it recognizes the suffering in others and in oneself. When meditative awareness is

brought into prayer, prayer becomes a more profound and transformative experience.

Another powerful way to refine one's powers of discernment is to examine and keep track of the consequences of one's discernments and the decisions based on them. True alignment with spirit generally yields the gifts of spirit: love, wisdom, peace, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, humility. Alignment with ego usually does not bear these fruits. Devoted practitioners are continually mindful of the consequences of their discernments, decisions and actions and will adjust them accordingly. Of course, one can never know definitively what the consequences of one's actions are, which consequences matter most, and whether those consequences are good or ill.

The world's religious traditions generally agree that overcoming confusion, selfishness, superficiality and sloth requires not only discernment, but also commitment. This commitment is reflected through holy intention, discipline, and accountability. And it requires will power, persistence, and patience. Certainly, sustained dedication to a daily spiritual practice is necessary to promote the steady and gradual – or even sudden and spontaneous – deepening of one's spiritual awareness and activity.

Another way that integral practitioners can strengthen their discernment process and increase their accountability is to discuss their challenges and joys, their breakdowns and breakthroughs, with other practitioners. Indeed, I sense it is crucial that integral practitioners dialogue with others about their spiritual



*Spiritual Direction; photo, Cetta Kenney*

path, progress and difficulties. No one else can determine the authenticity of a person's experience or response, but others can be compassionate, wise witnesses and can question the experience, challenge the response, and encourage the person to go deeper into the process of experiencing, understanding, deciding, and acting.

This process of deep listening, reflecting, questioning and challenging is formalized in the practice called "Spiritual Direction". Though developed in the Catholic Church, it is now becoming ecumenical. The practice is probably more appropriately named Spiritual Companionship because many of the new approaches are nondirective. The spiritual director simply helps individuals – one-on-one and in small groups – to go deeper into their experiences and discern the movements of God in them. I sense that as more individuals move away from relying on outer spiritual authorities and toward listening to the voice of God within, there will be a greater and greater demand for spiritual direction and other forms of spiritual companionship. It is

extremely difficult – almost impossible – to live a deep and authentic integral path unassisted by regular dialogue with a friend, small group of committed seekers, or spiritual director.

Even when interfaith practitioners discern and decide truly, there is the challenge of integrating different practices from different traditions. Should the traditional prescriptions

and proscriptions for these practices be followed? Should they be tailored to the specific life situation of the interfaith practitioner? Isn't there a danger of taking prayers and rituals out of context?

What is the right order or pattern for encompassing and unifying these practices? All of these questions come up, and all require discernment assisted by prayer, meditation, dialogue, study and experimentation. There are no easy answers. And the appropriate response is often unique to the particular integral practitioner. It is the process of discernment itself that has to be emphasized, a process carried on internally and in community with others. It is an ongoing lifelong process.