



Integral Spiritual Practice *presents*

The Seeker's Dilemma

How to Become an Authentic Practitioner of an Integral & Evolutionary Spiritual Life

by **Terry Patten & Marco V Morelli**



2011, Terry Patten

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***MOST OF US BEGIN OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE AS SEEKERS.
Yet there comes a time when we graduate into a new
relationship to life—when we become PRACTITIONERS.***

Pablo Picasso famously said, “I do not seek. I find.” Yet what Picasso primarily did, as an artist, was **practice**; he created an estimated 50,000 works during his lifetime. Some were elaborate and are now famous, worth millions of dollars. Many others were small—studies, sketches, even what we might call “doodles,” if made by an average artist. All were equally the expression of a certain lived philosophy: art not as a struggle or search for grand, elusive visions, but rather as a daily practice, as a way of seeing—*as a way of life*.

The point is not to compare ourselves to a unique genius like Picasso. But in any field, be it art or law, medicine or cooking, gardening or science, something profound (and beautifully ordinary) occurs when we're no longer merely dabbling in a certain skill or profession, but when we're actually *doing* it—when it has become an integral part of who we are. We may continue learning and refining our craft for the rest of our lives, but a fundamental aspect of our identity is no longer in question. We've earned the right to call ourselves an “artist,” “scientist,” “carpenter,” “entrepreneur,” or... fill in the blank.

However, in the world of spirituality, many of us go on for years or even decades struggling to define a life of practice we can commit to wholeheartedly and permanently. Others of us dedicate ourselves to a particular path, only to later find (no matter how true and rich it originally seemed) that it fails to engage the full dimensionality of our life. We may wish to continue honoring our practice, or our teacher, or our ideals—yet *something else* is obviously needed. So, again, we become seekers.

It's perfectly natural to outgrow some of our practices, teachers, and communities as our life unfolds. But as seekers, the direction we take is motivated by feelings

of *separateness*, *inadequacy*, and *lack*. Thus, even when we move on to the next thing, we are often merely orbiting around (and reinforcing) our existential “pain points.”

That's why as seekers we can never be satisfied, and why the glow of what's new and exciting fades so quickly. We hop from one “answer” to the next, but each one ultimately disappoints us. This pattern frequently repeats itself many times over.

The problem is not our practices, teachers, or communities. It's us. Or rather, it's our chronic habit of expecting something outside ourselves to resolve our core dilemma. Our practices, teachers, and communities will always be limited, partial, and flawed to some degree. But it's up to us to take 100% responsibility for our spiritual life. It's up to us to go from being seekers to being authentic practitioners.

Until we make this leap, we will continue seeking—*and not finding*. And the world will offer us endless enticements to perpetuate the search.

THE SEEKER'S DILEMMA is that we have more opportunities for practice than ever before – we have access to more teachers, traditions, books, workshops, teleseminars, and so on – yet we still aren't radically living or embodying our spiritual truth.

The life of a seeker is dynamic and beautiful in many ways, and there's always something new to explore. We can learn, grow, and evolve infinitely. And in our digital age, all it takes is a click to sign up for a mailing list, register for a retreat, download a guided meditation, or order a book that arrives on your mobile device in a few seconds, or on your doorstep a day or two later.

The spiritual marketplace is full of exciting possibilities, each of which, in its own way, promises us an *experience*—and we pursue those experiences that seem the most interesting, attractive, or compelling. We can even choose the types of experience we'd like to have. For example, certain forms of meditation cultivate inner silent spaciousness, while others generate a feeling of tender loving-kindness. Styles of yoga can be “hot” or “cool,” unabashedly devotional or

stringently secular. We can turbocharge our sense of purpose, mission, and empowerment—or we can surrender to the mystery, and trust in divine grace.

Culturally, we now have access to the mystical and esoteric dimensions of all the world's great religions. We need not identify as “religious” to tap into these ancient founts of wisdom. We can practice Buddhist insight meditation on Monday, Christian centering prayer on Tuesday, sing Hindu kirtans on Wednesday, and the rest of the week, take our pick from indigenous, nondual, new age, new edge, and other non-traditional paths.

With the development of “consciousness technologies,” such as binaural brain entrainment (not to mention chemical and plant-based entheogens), we can directly manipulate our brain states to induce changes in awareness. We can target specific frequencies such as “alpha” or “delta” states, heighten our creativity, trigger out-of-body experiences, and so on.

While on the surface it would seem this cornucopia of spiritual opportunities is a pure bounty, it also tends to turn us into consumers at the spiritual “cafeteria.” We can easily grow self-indulgent in the presence of unlimited choices, as we gorge

on a buffet of insights, moments of clarity, loving feelings, and expanded states of consciousness. Instead of absorbing the rich nutrients of a daily, integrated practice—one that serves as a vehicle for the journey of ongoing development—we are often only reinforced in our seeking. We taste everything, but chew on nothing slowly or deeply enough to digest it properly. And these empty calories don't build strong bones, emotional resilience, grounded sanity, or discerning wisdom—nor do they truly quench our insatiable hunger.

*Then, there's **HARDCORE SEEKING**—which can happen when we devote ourselves to a radical path, vigorously pursuing our ideals. But if our zeal has blind spots, we can fall out of balance. We might forfeit some of our critical discernment; idolize our path or teacher; look down on others; or suppress our foundational needs. In essence, we can morph into “higher” fundamentalists.*

We need not identify as born-again conservative Christians to suffer from a kind of fundamentalism. Even sophisticated minds can slip into unnecessary rigidity, unrealistic idealism, and self-defeating self-denial.

Integral and Evolutionary practitioners are not exempt from lapsing into “higher fundamentalism.” In our quest for higher states and higher development, all-encompassing insights and transpersonal excellence—and even in our noble desire to serve a higher human possibility—we can ignore, disregard, or reject

the ostensibly “lower” parts of ourselves. We can become so focused on a future, transcendent possibility, or on a big-picture map or evolutionary perspective, that we lose touch with the rich territory of the present moment. Or, our hearts can close to whatever in ourselves or others seems “egoic” or “conventional,” and we can become self-righteous and self-divided. In embracing the tough-love of cleaving to a higher ideal, we can have trouble holding space for simple compassion—we can disown our tender, mortal, wounded, common humanity.

Both the “intensity glutton” and the “evolved fundamentalist” are defined by compulsive seeking. The glutton seeks special experiences, self-fulfillment, and escape; the fundamentalist seeks purity, transcendence, and deliverance from difficult emotions. *Both strategies are ultimately unsustainable.* The question is: How can we go beyond them? Given the abundance of spiritual choices we’re privileged to have, how can we choose wisely? How can we build a healthy, wholesome, balanced spiritual “diet” that nourishes our full-spectrum development, not just our passing cravings or rigid ideals?

THE SEEKER IS PLAGUED BY PARTIALITY – seduced by illusions of wholeness in this or that practice, insight, teaching, teacher, or even preferred state of consciousness. The first step toward real wholeness is to relax into wider perspectives and engage a more integral framework; the second, simultaneously, is to adopt a more integral practice.

What does “integral” mean in this context? What exactly are we “integrating”?

Many things, ultimately everything—but here are some of the most salient points:

1. We're integrating what tends to be *fragmented*, what our world and minds tend to construe as separated and in tension—going from an “either/or” to a **“both/and” way of thinking**.
2. We're integrating the **multiple practices** we do—including those for body, mind, soul, awareness, relationships, work, and so on. We sometimes call this “integral cross-training.”

3. In addition to specific practices, we're integrating **all of life as practice**—in other words, the recognition that any and every moment is an opportunity to practice being more present, wakeful, and caring.
4. We're integrating the **gradual school** and the **sudden school**—i.e., the path of incremental, open-ended growth and the “pathless path” of simply being awake *right now*.
5. We're integrating **levels of consciousness** both in ourselves and others—becoming friendly with all the stages of growth that human beings naturally go through (such as egocentric, ethnocentric, and worldcentric), without vilifying any one, yet still promoting the higher and more inclusive levels.
6. We're integrating our capacity for self-discipline and tough love (**masculine self-compassion**) and our ability to go with the flow and forgive ourselves when we fall short (**feminine self-compassion**).
7. We're integrating our passionate **care for the world**—including the sincere desire to alleviate suffering, solve global problems, and contribute to human evolution—and the recognition that **everything is perfect** (or

everything simply *is*) **just as it is**, and nothing we do ultimately changes anything in the Absolute.

Of course, that's just a starter list of what practice can integrate. It doesn't mean that, as practitioners, we're actually doing all of the above, all the time. That's why it's called a *life* of practice. It's dynamic and never-ending. It's not like we ever finally "get it" once and for all. But the more we practice, the more seamlessly and effortlessly we can learn to include these multiple dimensions of life, and more.

There's one important addition to the list. Two things we're *especially* called to integrate, in these challenging times for our planet, are our **personal practice** and **social commitment**. While an important part of an integral practice focuses on our consciousness, health, relationships, and so on, an equally necessary part engages the bigger context of our evolutionary moment.

And there's a koan here. As planetary citizens, we might feel inspired to assume a higher level of responsibility for our world—yet how can we take a stand for meaningful change without, in some sense, *seeking* it?

THE SEEKER SEEKS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE – in his or her own life, and sometimes in the world at large. Seekers have always been the passionate drivers of evolutionary change. But without an integral practice, the seeker tends to enact only partial solutions, often sowing conflict and division along the way. The global, interconnected nature of the challenges we now face requires a whole new level of engagement – one that calls us to become practitioners, and ultimately, integral practitioners.

It is said that we must “be the change” we wish to see in the world. This bumper-sticker line, however, masks an inconvenient truth. To “be the change” is easier said than done, and usually, it is only merely said. To “walk the talk” means not only hoping for, intending, or “attracting” change, but literally *practicing change* in all dimensions of life.

Ultimately, “practicing change” means embodying an integral orientation, an awareness and engagement in the multiple, interpenetrating spheres of our human existence—body, mind, soul, spirit, emotions, relationships, community, ecology, technology, culture, politics, and so on. It’s an orientation of 360° and 100% commitment and responsibility.

Paradoxically, “change” in this sense is not different from “stillness,” or the “always already” perfection and fullness and acceptance of *what is*. It’s rooted in the *prior unity* of existence. It includes all the fragmented perspectives and stresses and chaos of 21st-century life—and it includes the felt urgency of the evolutionary impulse—but it keeps a foot planted in the timeless and formless and infinite realm, which it knows is just as real as (indeed, not other than or separate from) the relative, changing world.

As practitioners, we do not seek change in a world we perceive as separate from ourselves. Nor do we heroically try to bend the world to a fixed conception of what we may regard as beautiful, good, or true. We know that seeking (even with the best of intentions) only reinforces separateness, leading to perpetual frustration and eventual burnout.

The practitioner's way of being-in-the-world *is* change. It's the enactment of beauty, goodness, and truth as a way of life.

To be an actualizing spiritual practitioner today implies becoming a responsible citizen of your community and our world. This needn't look or feel like partisan, ideologically-driven activism. Nor should it mirror the vague, mushy, ungrounded, passive stance that prevents many "spiritual" types from gaining respect in the wider culture and being effective.

Integral evolutionary activism is a full-spectrum, whole-being, big-picture activism that's grounded in spiritual realization, yet pragmatic in its means of actualization.

It's human-sized and human-scale, so it's do-able, not grandiose in its ambitions. Yet it doesn't shrink from our biggest challenges. It's not necessarily tied to what may be getting the most eyeballs in the current news cycle or on the web. It's unique to each person and the karma of their life-situation, yet also intimately connected to our larger shared context. It might express itself very visibly, in the local or global public square of trending events, or it might influence the interiors of others "under the radar," subtly and energetically.

In one way or another, directly or indirectly, our practice/activism *makes things happen*. It “downloads” our higher and deeper potentials, both in our personal lives and in the collective spheres of our social, economic, technological, political, and cultural evolution—where integral/evolutionary consciousness has a pivotal role to play in resolving the unsustainable patterns that have put humanity on a collision course with the limits of our planet and our own growth.

AS INTEGRAL EVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISTS, we can develop a practice of becoming more deeply engaged, open, conscious, loving, compassionate, connected, informed, innovative, and capable of “being the change” that is already emerging in the the world – change that, in a deep sense, wants to become real, that yearns for our partnership and participation, service and sacrifice.

We can respond to that call.

We can, in the authentic ways that are appropriate for us individually, enact a **healthy, adaptive response** to the crises of our world.

We can know that we're playing our small (but unique and not insignificant) role in the **evolution of consciousness and culture**.

We can earn a new level of **self-respect**, because we are living an existence that is not fragmented, that is honest and humble about its contradictions, yet that is

not itself a “performative contradiction” (i.e., we are not saying one thing—if only to ourselves—and doing another).

And finally, we can become **trustable**.

In any moment that we are sincerely, integrally practicing, we are essentially trustable. This doesn't mean we're perfect, or that we're not working with limitations. But it does make us capable of a new kind of relationship with others. It means that we can participate in a global movement of integralists, evolutionaries, and other fellow practitioners—synergizing to birth the next chapter in our human story.

Being a practitioner doesn't mean that we've figured everything out, resolved all our personal issues, or risen above our ordinary humanity. As integral practitioners, we remain the problem-solving, wired-for-struggle, shame-prone, all-too-human beings who populate planet Earth. *But at an even more fundamental level than our identity as flawed human beings, we can discover and enact our divine character as practitioners.*

HOW DO WE BECOME TRUSTABLE? By trusting. By taking responsibility. By renouncing victimhood. By choosing to practice, again and again. By finding our radical “yes” to life, truth, goodness, beauty, evolution, consciousness, death, suffering, ignorance, disaster, rebirth... the whole catastrophic symphony of this terrible, wonderful mystery that we find ourselves in, and indeed, that we are.

This radical “yes” to life is our ultimate saving grace and connection. We cannot seek it. We can only find it. And when we find it, we must practice it. Every morning, day and night, moment-to-moment, in every context. In all the ways that an **Integral Spiritual Practice** makes possible and do-able, that it helps illumine and clarify.

We can begin by getting in touch with our profound ambivalence about being alive, especially in this moment of history with its overwhelming challenges. We're all Hamlets in a way. Simply existing is traumatic—and so a deep part of us questions whether we really want to *be*, whether we want to face what being-in-the-world entails for us.

It's not easy to feel, acknowledge, or reveal to others, but there is a deep existential ambivalence at the core of our lives. It's in the very DNA of our postmodern condition. We may seek to avoid it, deny it, or appear that we're above or beyond it—but this doesn't make it go away.

Our seeker's dilemma can only be resolved when we face our deep ambivalence—the woundedness, fear, aggression, shame, and sense of lack at the center of our being—and gradually, suddenly, let it all go.

Then we can discover, and begin to trust in, our **radical yes**.

And that's something we can practice anytime—like right now....

Notice the condition of your heart... your center of *feeling-intelligence*. It's a center of the kind of intelligence that can flow only to the degree that this area is warm and open, rather than cold, contracted, and closed.

When you're most anxious or agitated or irritated, the heart is shut down, and your heart intelligence doesn't flow much at all. But in any moment – in this moment – there's an opportunity to restore the flow.

Notice your heart, then close your eyes and take a couple of deep breaths. Relax whatever tensions you notice....

Then, bring your attention to the area around your heart. You can put your hand there if you like, to help you keep your attention on the heart.

Breathe, and feel....

Keep breathing to and from the heart and tune into a positive current. You can just notice whatever you sincerely appreciate. You can try to re-experience a time when you felt really happy and good. Or you can think of a favorite pet or a dear friend or family member. The important thing is to feel that good feeling, sincerely, while you keep breathing to and from the heart.

Sometimes it's hard. In some moments it's all you can do just to make a shift to neutral, to a feeling state that's not so negative — maybe not even positive, just one that feels "okay." If you actually do that, it's a big deal! And maybe then it can begin to grow, to open into appreciation, gratefulness, and even joy.

Let yourself feel that happy feeling as a wave of warmth extending from the heart and washing into and through the rest of your body.

And see if you can trust that. See if you can surrender to trust.

While you're feeling this, consider what it would be to "just trust."

What if you could just "trust completely"?

You might be thinking of trusting yourself or Life or love or the Mystery of existence....

Take another deep breath, and imagine that you can just let go and trust completely. Imagine that you can trust so much that you can even face your distrust – and let it be there. Let your trust be so deep it even trusts in the face of your own fear! And smile.

Consider the invitation to close your eyes, now, and breathe, and feel, and trust, and smile. Just for a minute or so. Or longer. And then come back to this text, right here.

That was a moment of practice.

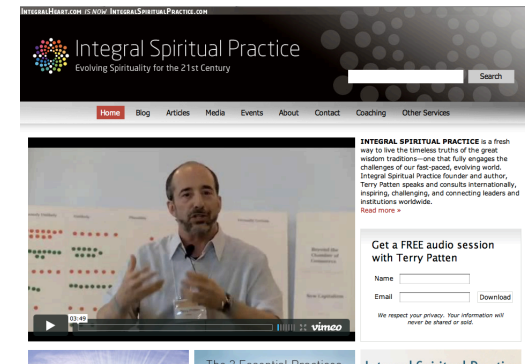
And many moments, chosen and enacted again and again, become something more than momentary.

They become a whole life of practice.

And we become practitioners.

Want to learn more about Integral Spiritual Practice?

Visit www.IntegralSpiritualPractice.com for more free resources, including videos, audios, articles, and Terry's blog.

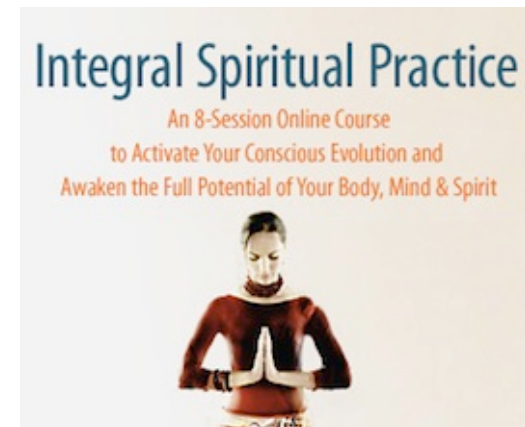


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About Terry Patten

Integral Spiritual Practice founder, **Terry Patten**, is a vital, leading voice in the fields of integral evolutionary practice, leadership, and spirituality. He speaks and consults internationally, inspiring, challenging, and connecting leaders and institutions worldwide. A community-builder, entrepreneur, and author of four books, Terry has worked for over three decades as a philosopher, activist, coach, and teacher, helping leaders embody higher consciousness in practical actions that transform complex systems. He is the author, with Ken Wilber, Adam B. Leonard, and Marco V Morelli, of [Integral Life Practice: A 21st-Century Blueprint for Physical Health, Emotional Balance, Mental Clarity, and Spiritual Awakening](#), and the host of the teleseminar series [Beyond Awakening: The Future of Spiritual Practice](#).



About Marco V Morelli

Writer, poet, thinker,
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communicate their ideas creatively and effectively, using his background in philosophy, literature, marketing, and integral theory to craft uniquely powerful statements and tell compelling stories. He is the author, with Ken Wilber, Terry Patten, and Adam B. Leonard, of [Integral Life Practice: A 21st-Century Blueprint for Physical Health, Emotional Balance, Mental Clarity, and Spiritual Awakening](#). His professional website can be found at www.IntegralWriter.com.

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