

INTEGRAL TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE: A PARTICIPATORY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Most psychospiritual practices in the modern West suffer from favoring growth of mind and heart over physical and instinctive aspects of human experience with many negative consequences. Michael Murphy and Ken Wilber have each made excellent contributions in offering prescriptions for “Integral Transformative Practice” (ITP) which include various physical and psychospiritual disciplines. Their prescriptions, however, can easily perpetuate the mind-centered direction of growth characteristic of the modern West in that they inherently ask one’s mind to pick and commit to already constructed practices. Needed is an approach that will permit all human dimensions to co-creatively participate in the unfolding of integral growth. As one possible solution, the author presents a program of ITP developed by Albareda and Romero in Spain. Their Holistic Integration is based in group retreats to practice “interactive embodied meditations,” which involve contemplative physical contact between practitioners that allows access to the creative potential of all human dimensions.

In an age of spiritual confusion, a consensus is growing among transpersonal authors and spiritual teachers about the importance of an integral growth of the person—that is, a developmental process that integrates all human dimensions (body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness) into a fully embodied spiritual life.¹ This emerging understanding stems in large part from an awareness of the many pitfalls of a lopsided development, such as spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 2000), spiritual materialism and narcissism (Caplan, 1999; Lesser, 1999), offensive spirituality and spiritual defenses (Battista, 1996), ethical and psychosexual problems in the guru-disciple relationship (Butler, 1990; Kornfield, 1975; Kripal, 1999), difficulties in integrating spiritual experiences (Bragdon, 1990; Grof & Grof, 1989), and a devitalization of the body and inhibition of primary-sexual energies (Romero & Albareda, 2001), to name only a few.

Although the idea of an integral spiritual life that is firmly grounded in psychosomatic integration can be found in the world’s religious literature—for example, in Sri-Aurobindo’s synthesis of yogas and the Christian phenomenon of incarnation—not many efforts exist in contemporary Western culture that are aimed at the exploration and development of an *effective praxis* to actualize this potential in human lives. More specifically, not much attention is given to the maturation of the somatic, instinctive, sexual, and emotional worlds, and the unfolding of genuine integral growth in spiritual practitioners seems to be the exception to the rule. As several authors note, even spiritual leaders and teachers across traditions display an uneven development; for example, high level cognitive and spiritual functioning combined with ethically conventional or even dysfunctional interpersonal,

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emotional, or sexual behavior (e.g., Feuerstein, 1991; Kripal, 2002; Wilber, 2001). A related outcome of this unbalanced development is that many honest spiritual efforts are undermined by conflicts or wounds at somatic, sexual, or emotional levels. Too often, spiritual seekers struggle with tensions existing between their spiritual ideals and their instinctive, sexual, and emotional drives, recurrently falling into unconsciously driven patterns or habits despite their most sincere conscious intentions.

What is more, a lopsided psychospiritual development may have detrimental implications not only for human flourishing, but also for spiritual discernment. As I suggest elsewhere, it is likely that many past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing—ways that emerge predominantly from emotional or mental access to subtle forms of transcendent consciousness but are ungrounded from vital and immanent spiritual sources (Ferrer, 2002). For example, spiritual visions that hold that body and world are ultimately illusory (or lower, or impure, or a hindrance to spiritual liberation) arguably derive from states of being in which the sense of self mainly or exclusively identifies with subtle energies of consciousness, getting uprooted from the body and immanent spiritual life. From this existential stance, it is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that both body and world are seen as ultimately illusory or defective. But if our somatic and vital worlds are invited to participate in our spiritual lives, making our sense of identity permeable to not only transcendent awareness but also immanent spiritual energies, then body and world become *hierophanies*—sacred realities that are crucial for human and cosmic spiritual evolution.

An examination of the numerous historical and contextual variables behind the tendency towards what we may call a “heart-chakra-up” spirituality goes beyond the aim of this paper, but I would like to mention at least a possible underlying reason. As Romero and Albareda (2001) suggest in the context of Western culture, the inhibition of the primary dimensions of the person—somatic, instinctive, sexual, and certain aspects of the emotional—may have been actually necessary at certain juncture to allow the emergence and maturation of the values of the human heart and consciousness. More specifically, this inhibition may have been essential to avoid the reabsorption of a still relatively weak, emerging self-consciousness and its values into the stronger presence that a more instinctively driven energy once had in the individual. In the context of religious traditions, this may be connected to the widespread consideration of certain human qualities as being spiritually more “correct” or wholesome than others; for instance, equanimity over intense passions, transcendence over sensuous embodiment, chastity over sexual exploration, and so forth. What may characterize our present moment, however, is the possibility of reconnecting all these human potentials in an integrated way. In other words, having developed self-reflective consciousness and the subtle dimensions of the heart, it may be the moment to reappropriate and integrate, while retaining these values, the more primary and instinctive dimensions of human nature into a fully embodied spiritual life.²

But what does it really mean to live a *fully* embodied spiritual life? Is it actually possible to integrate the many needs, desires, dynamics, and understandings of the various dimensions of our being harmoniously? Can we in fact cultivate the voice

and wisdom of our bodies, instincts, hearts, minds, and souls without generating tensions or dissociations within us? And, perhaps most importantly, *how* can we lay down and walk a truly integral spiritual path that respects the integrity of the many voices dwelling within us? In other words, how can we foster the maturation of these dimensions, not only honoring their nature but also facilitating their creative participation in our spiritual lives?

To begin exploring these complex questions, this paper opens with a brief review of some contemporary proposals of Integral Transformative Practice (ITP). I then outline a participatory perspective on integral growth that may complement and expand these accounts. Finally, I introduce Holistic Integration, an integral approach created by Ramon V. Albareda and Marina T. Romero which may offer a practical answer to some of the difficulties that beset modern individuals attempting to develop an integral life in the modern West. The paper concludes with some reflections on ITP as an incarnational praxis.

INTEGRAL TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE (ITP): CONTEMPORARY PROPOSALS

The three main contemporary proposals of Integral Transformative Practices (ITPs) are Murphy (1993), Leonard and Murphy (1995), and Wilber (2000a, 2000b). We will look at them each in turn, although we will see that they overlap one another.

The foremost ITP proposal is from Michael Murphy, who, inspired by Sri-Aurobindo's integral vision and synthesis of yogas, co-founded with Richard Price the Esalen Institute in 1962 to advance the development of the whole person. In his rigorously researched book, *The Future of the Body*, Murphy (1993) offers not only a compelling case for the evolutionary significance of ITPs, but also the most extended discussion to date regarding their guiding principles and potential benefits.

After outlining four possible shortcomings of conventional transformative practices—reinforcement of traits, perpetuation of limiting beliefs, subversion of balanced growth, and partial focus on specific experiences—Murphy designs a rich inventory of exercises, techniques, and practices that can be used to foster a more integral development. Some of these include: Sensory Awareness and the Feldenkrais method for somatic awareness and self-regulation; depth psychotherapy, athletic training, and somatic disciplines for increasing vitality; empathic visualizations, mutual self-disclosure, and self-examination for the growth of love; psychotherapy, philosophical reflection, and study of philosophy, myths, artistic works, or religious symbols for mental cognition; witness meditation, cultivation of mystical states, and karma yoga for individuation and the sense of self. (This list is only a representative sample of the various human attributes and practices presented by Murphy, and the reader is encouraged to read his work to properly appreciate the extent of possibilities.)

Murphy then describes a set of five interdependent virtues and traits he considers vital for integral development—honesty, creativity, courage, balance, and resilience—stressing that “The cultivation of any virtue or capacity can facilitate more than one creative attribute” (p. 579). Finally, among other important considerations,

Murphy convincingly argues that these practices must be suited for each practitioner's unique dispositions, and, therefore, "there can be no single or 'right' kind of integral discipline with a universally applicable and strictly specified set of techniques" (p. 579).

In *The Life We Are Given* (1995), Murphy joins George Leonard—another pioneer of the Human Potential Movement—and together define ITPs as "a complex and coherent set of activities that produce positive changes in . . . the body, mind, heart, and soul" of individuals and groups (p. 12). Leonard and Murphy's (1995) ITP program is based on the combination of aerobic exercise, a low-animal-fat diet, mentoring and community support, positive affirmations, and, most importantly, the regular practice of what they call the ITP Kata. Drawing on such disciplines as hatha yoga, martial arts, and modern exercise physiology, the ITP Kata begins with a series of balancing and centering movements, followed by a period of transformational imaging (intentional use of mental imagery to promote body health, heart openness, creativity, or other qualities selected by the practitioner), and ends with a time for meditation that combines self-observation with contemplative prayer. The ITP Kata can be completed in forty minutes, but its duration can be extended according to individual needs and desires.

Leonard and Murphy's ITP program embraces the Greek principle of *antakolouthia*, "mutual entailment of the virtues," according to which the cultivation of any skill at any level—somatic, emotional, mental, etc.—has a beneficial impact on other levels. This cross-training synergy is one of the chief guiding principles of ITP: Due to the interdependence of all human dimensions, mental, emotional, and physical practices are expected to have an impact on the entire organism. According to Murphy, the ultimate goal of ITPs is "integral transformation" or "integral enlightenment," that is, "the flowering, in all our parts, of all our attributes, of all the various capacities we have, of this latent divinity" (in Cohen, 1999, p. 90).

More recently, Ken Wilber (2000a, 2000b, 2001) has also offered some reflections on ITPs. Drawing on Howard Gardner's (1983/1993) theory on multiple intelligences, Wilber points out that the various developmental lines—cognition, morals, affects, sexuality, self-identity, and so forth—are relatively autonomous, in the sense that a person can be highly developed in some of them but poorly developed in others. "According to this body of research," he tells us, "a person can be at a relatively high level of development in some lines (such as cognition), medium in others (such as morals), and low in still others (such as spirituality)" (2001, p. 259).

Wilber (2000a, 2000b) uses the term "ITP" to refer not only to Leonard and Murphy's integral program but also to any set of practices that cultivates all human dimensions. A consideration added by Wilber is that the fruits of these practices should not be confused with the attainment of absolute realization. Interestingly, Wilber sees ITPs as "facilitation factors" for achieving what he considers the ultimate goal of human life: "nondual enlightenment" or "One Taste." Echoing Richard Baker Roshi, Wilber (2000b) states that enlightenment is an accident, and that although these practices can not cause it, they can make one more prone to it: "The idea behind ITPs is simple: in an attempt to become more 'accident-prone,' the more dimensions of the human bodymind that are exercised, then the more

transparent to the Divine they become, and thus the more accident prone the individual is” (p. 39).

Wilber (2000b) offers his own inventory of practices to exercise the basic human dimensions. To this end, he first suggests envisioning six columns representing the physical, emotional-sexual (*prana* or *chi*), mental or psychological, contemplative or meditative, community, and nature. Then he offers a variety of possible practices to train each dimension: aerobic exercise, weight lifting, and healthy diet for the physical; yoga, qi gong, and tai chi chuan for *prana*; psychotherapy, visualizations, and affirmations for the psychological; *zazen*, *vipassana*, or centering prayer for the contemplative; community service, compassionate care, and engagement with others for the community; and recycling, hikes, and nature celebration for nature. Wilber (2000b) states that “The idea of ITP is simple, pick at least one practice from each column and practice them concurrently. The more dimensions you practice, the more effective they all become, the more you become one big accident-prone soul” (p. 39). Finally, Wilber (2000b) aptly cautions the reader that ITPs can not only become narcissistic games for egoic control, but also that their “pick and choose” nature can easily degenerate into the spiritual “cafeteria model so prevalent in our culture” (p. 126).

To sum up, contemporary ITP programs are largely based on an eclectic mixture of practices and techniques selected from the many somatic, psychological, and spiritual disciplines available today in the modern West. Through these programs, practitioners design their own personalized integral training to exercise their various attributes. According to their proponents, ITPs may ultimately lead to an “integral enlightenment” (Murphy) or optimize the emergence of a “nondual One Taste” (Wilber).

A PARTICIPATORY PERSPECTIVE ON INTEGRAL GROWTH

In this section, I offer some reflections on integral growth that may complement and expand contemporary proposals. As we have seen, modern ITP programs consist of a combination of techniques or practices imported from Western and Eastern traditions and schools. I concur with Wilber’s (2000b) caution about the potential spiritual “cafeteria model” (noted above), and here I would like to suggest that there may be a more subtle, and potentially more pernicious, pitfall implicit in the very attempt to develop an integral life in the modern West.

Briefly, ITP programs can easily turn into a “*mentally*” *devised integral training in which the practitioner’s mind decides what are the best practices or techniques to develop his or her body, sexuality, heart, and consciousness*. This is understandable. After all, modern Western education focuses almost exclusively on the development of the rational mind and its cognitive functions, with little attention given to the maturation of other dimensions of the person (see, for example, Gardner, 1983/1993; Hocking, Haskell & Linds, 2001; Miller, 1991). As a result, most individuals in our culture reach their adulthood with a fairly mature mental functioning, but with poorly developed somatic, instinctive, and emotional worlds. Given the extreme

“cognicentrism” of the Western way of life, the mental direction of integral growth seems nearly inevitable.³

I believe the greatest tragedy of cognicentrism, however, is that it generates a vicious circle that justifies itself: *Because modern education does not create spaces for the autonomous maturation of the body, the instincts, and the heart, it becomes true that these worlds cannot participate in an evolutionary path if they are not mentally or externally guided. The problem is that insofar as they are always mentally or externally guided, these human dimensions cannot mature autonomously, and thus the need for their mental or external direction becomes permanently justified.*

Complicating this situation further is that, after many generations of mind-centered education and life, often combined with the control or inhibition of the body, instincts, sexuality, and passions, these non-discursive worlds may be not only undeveloped but frequently wounded, distorted, or manifesting regressive tendencies. Thus, when such an individual seeks guidance in these worlds, the first thing that he or she typically finds is a layer of conflicts, fears, or confusion that perpetuates the deep-seated belief that these worlds need to be mentally regulated in order to be wholesome or evolutionary. What is normally overlooked, however, is an essential primary intelligence that lies beneath this layer which, if accessed, can heal the root of the conflict while fostering the maturation and evolution of these worlds from within.

What is needed, then, is *to create spaces in which these human dimensions can heal and mature according to their own developmental principles and dynamics, not according to the ones that the mind thinks are most adequate.* Only when our body, instincts, sexuality, and heart are allowed to mature autonomously, will they be able to sit at the same table with our minds and co-create a truly integral development and spiritual life. In developmental terms, we could say that, before being integrated, these human dimensions need to be differentiated. Bearing these reflections in mind, let me offer a tentative definition of integral growth, and suggest the heuristic need to discriminate between integral practice and integral training as two essential but unique elements of integral growth.

Integral growth is a developmental process in which all human dimensions—body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness—collaboratively and co-creatively participate as equals in the multidimensional unfolding of the human being. This process can be understood as having two basic elements: integral practice and integral training.

Integral practice fosters the autonomous maturation of all human dimensions, preparing them to manifest their own intelligence, to be harmoniously integrated, and to co-creatively participate in the developmental process. Integral practice “engenders” and “brings forth” novel potentials, qualities, and capabilities at all levels.

Integral training exercises all human dimensions according to their own developmental principles and dynamics. Integral training “exercises” and “strengthens” potentials, qualities, and capabilities that emerge from integral practice at all levels.

The distinction between integral practice and integral training is crucial. In a way, modern ITP programs seem more geared to “training” or “exercising” already known skills than to facilitating conditions for the emergence of novel qualities and capabilities, some of which may be unique to the individual. An exclusive or predominant reliance on training, however, may parallel the “masculine” paradigm of Western education, which is essentially based on skills acquisition and the mental direction of learning. When integral growth is primarily based on integral training, both the mental colonization of other human dimensions and the mental direction of the process become nearly inevitable. At best, a mentally structured ITP program may promote the integral health of the person, but, although they usually overlap, integral health should not be confused with integral growth and transformation. At worst, the mental management of the other human dimensions may repress or abort their genuine voice, intelligence, and wisdom—and, in the long run, have detrimental consequences for integral health. Although intentional training is important, it is therefore fundamental to complement that with the more “feminine” creation of spaces that facilitate the organic emergence of the infinite potentials dwelling within us.

Furthermore, to avoid the risk of aborting the natural unfolding of unique potentials and developmental dynamics, *integral practice needs to precede integral training*. Most psychospiritual practices and techniques are intentional in that they shape and direct human experience and growth in specific directions (see, for example, Fenton, 1995). While surely beneficial in many regards, however, engaging intentional practices before the maturation of our somatic, instinctive, and emotional worlds may not only hinder the emergence of their most unique potentials, but also leave untouched many wounds or conflicts. Before the design of an integral training program, then, these somatic, instinctive, and emotional worlds need to enter a process of healing, maturation, and germination according to their own developmental principles. Otherwise, integral programs can lead, in the long run, to a psychospiritual life that is devitalized, stagnated, conflicted, or lacking genuine creativity.

An example may help to clarify the distinction I am trying to make here. There are many practices and techniques for the cultivation of the body, from hatha yoga to aerobic training to weight lifting. Clearly, these practices can be of value and effectively promote health and growth for many individuals at specific junctures of their development. The risk of cultivating the body exclusively through these techniques, however, is that insofar as they are either selected by the mind or regulated by external standards (e.g., regarding the body’s position, posture, movement, or appearance), these practices can block the emergence of somatic autonomous intelligence. In other words, these practices may prevent the body from engendering the very positions, movements, and attitudes that may be more natural and vital for its optimum development. Although appropriate in cases of low muscular tone, for example, weight lifting may foster the pride of the body, and build an energetic armor that makes the physical organism impermeable to the flow of both the vital energy and the energy of consciousness.

To foster a genuine somatic growth, it is crucial to make contact with the body, discern its current state and needs, and then create spaces to engender its own practices and capabilities—devise its own yoga, so to speak. As Sovatsky (1994)

points out in his rendition of yoga as *ars erotica*, yoga postures (*asanas*) first emerged spontaneously from within the body and its vital energy: “guided by its inner intelligence, prana moves the body exactly as it needs to be moved” (p. 96).⁴ Indeed, as Leonard and Murphy (1995) stress, “There is a profound wisdom in the body, in the pulsing of the blood, the rhythm of the breath, the turning of the joints” (p. 145), and, I would add, when it becomes permeable to vital and conscious energies, the body can find its own rhythms, habits, postures, movements, and charismatic rituals.

In short, this process can be outlined in four roughly consecutive stages: (a) connecting with the current state of the body; (b) listening to its needs, calls, and creative urges; (c) regulating its healing and/or maturation through developing or selecting practices that respond to those needs, calls, or creative urges; and (d) training of emerging skills and capabilities according to somatic developmental dynamics. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the development of other human dimensions.

Two important clarifications need to be made here. First, it is essential to sharply differentiate this approach from a self-comforting integral practice in which an egoic mind is in control of the process. In contrast, this approach demands the mind to humbly let go of its egoic control, first by being at the service of the maturation of the other dimensions, and then by opening itself to learn from them. When the mind lets go of its pride, rigorous practices can gradually emerge from within.

Second, it goes without saying that this integral approach does not render existing practices useless or obsolete. On the contrary, it is perfectly possible that, once our bodies, instincts, and hearts mature and can communicate with us, they may call us to engage an already established discipline. What I am suggesting, however, is that although the cultivation of these dimensions have traditionally followed external standards devised by exceptionally gifted human beings (and often refined by generations of communities), an increasing number of individuals may now be ready for a more creative engagement of their integral growth. In any event, the starting point cannot be the mental imposition of a given practice upon our bodies, sexuality, heart, or consciousness simply because our mind has somehow adopted the belief that it is the best or most beneficial. A creative indwelling life resides in us—an intelligent vital dynamism that it is waiting to emerge to orchestrate from within the unfolding of our becoming fully human (cf. Heron, 1998).

To end this section, I offer three interrelated guiding principles of integral growth:

1. *Integral growth is co-created by all dimensions of human nature.* A genuine process of integral growth cannot be exclusively directed by the mind, but emerges from the collaborative participation and creative power of all human dimensions: body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness.
2. *Integral growth unfolds from within, grounded in our most vital potentials.* When the various human dimensions mature and co-creatively participate in a developmental path, integral growth organically unfolds from within. A genuine integral growth that is grounded in our most unique potentials rarely follows a pre-given path already traveled by others, nor can it be directed by

external standards. External sources of guidance can be essential reference points at certain junctures of the journey, but the path towards the emergence of our most unique qualities cannot be directed from outside of us.

3. *Integral growth balances the feminine and the masculine.* Integral growth combines the more masculine element of “exercise” and “training” of skills, with the more feminine element of “engendering” new qualities and capabilities from within. To optimize the grounding of the process in the most vital potentials of the individual, the feminine dimension needs to precede the masculine one.

A NEW INTEGRAL PRAXIS: ALBAREDA AND ROMERO'S HOLISTIC INTEGRATION

In this section, I would like to introduce Ramon V. Albareda and Marina T. Romero's Holistic Integration, as an example of an innovative integral approach that may complement and expand contemporary proposals while avoiding the pitfalls identified in the previous section.

Originally developed in Spain, Holistic Integration is an approach to integral growth and healing that is not based on already existing practices or techniques.⁵ Holistic Integration emerges from more than three decades of practically-based inquiry, with the help of the experience of hundreds of individuals in healing and psychospiritual processes. According to Romero and Albareda (2001), its main purpose is to facilitate natural conditions that allow each person, free from the potential constraints that are subtly imposed by psychospiritual models and ideals, to lay down his or her path of integral evolution.⁶ Through this work, they add, practitioners learn to self-regulate a process in which the different dimensions of their being—body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness—autonomously mature and are gradually integrated. As I explain below, this goal is pursued through simple but potent practices that seek to open these human dimensions to the essence of both the vital energy and the energy of consciousness. Romero and Albareda (2001) claim that, when these dimensions become aligned to these energies, a new energetic axis emerges that guides and fosters the person's evolution from within, not according to external standards or ideals. Before describing the general structure of the work, however, it may be important to say a few words about the central place that the vital-primary world and sexuality have in a genuine and creative integral growth in general, and in Holistic Integration in particular.⁷

Besides the energy of transcendent consciousness, Romero and Albareda (2001) suggest that there is an immanent spiritual source in the cosmos: the *dark energy*. The adjective “dark” does not have negative connotations, but simply refers to an energetic state in which all potentialities are still undifferentiated and, therefore, cannot be seen by the “light” of consciousness. The dark energy is considered to be inherent spiritual life that dwells within the manifest and is the source of genuine innovation and creativity at all levels (cf. Heron, 1998). In other words, the dark energy is spiritual *prima materia*—that is, spiritual energy in state of transformation, still not actualized, saturated with potentials and possibilities. In human reality, they add, this energy is the source of our sense of vitality and natural wisdom, as well as the organizing principle of our embodiment, sexuality, and instinctive life. For these authors, the energy of

consciousness and the dark energy are ultimately the same energy but in different states. Whereas the dark energy is dense, amorphous, and undifferentiated, the energy of consciousness is subtle, luminous, and infinitely differentiated.

This distinction may have important implications for spiritual praxis and creativity. For example, it can liberate us from traditional “monopolar” spiritual visions, which understand spirituality as emerging exclusively from the interaction of our immediate present experience and subtle or transcendent forms of spiritual consciousness (see Heron, 1998). In this context, spiritual practice is aimed either at accessing such overriding realities (“ascent” paths) or at bringing such spiritual energies down to Earth to transfigure human nature and/or the world (“descent” paths). The problem with this “monopolar” understanding is that it may ignore the existence of a second spiritual pole—the dark energy—whose engagement may catalyze a spontaneous and creative spiritual unfolding from within. Let us look at the creative potential of the dark energy in more detail.

Elsewhere I argued that human spirituality is “participatory” in the sense that it can emerge from (a) the active participation of all human dimensions (body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness); and (b) our co-creative interaction with a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power or Mystery (Ferrer, 2001, 2002). Here I would like to stress that these two dimensions of participation are intimately intertwined. In other words, *the more human dimensions actively participate in spiritual knowing, the more creative spiritual life becomes*. In this regard, it is important to discern that in the same way that our mind and consciousness constitute a natural connecting bridge to transcendent awareness, our body and vital-primary energies may constitute a natural connecting bridge to immanent spiritual life (the human heart being the place where these two energies naturally meet when body, heart, and mind are free from conflicts and blocks). This is important because whereas through our mind and consciousness we tend to access subtle spiritual energies already enacted in history that display more fixed forms and dynamics (e.g., specific cosmological motifs, archetypal configurations, mystical visions and states, etc.),⁸ our connection to our vital-primary world may allow us to access the dark energy and its generative power.

In short, *the engagement with our body and vital-primary energy may be essential for a genuine and creative integral spirituality*. On the one hand, to be *genuine*, integral spiritual growth needs to be grounded in our most vital potentials—those that make us unique individuals and which are stored at the deepest levels of our primary energy. On the other hand, to be *creative*, integral growth needs to emerge from our interaction with spiritual power in its generative state, which may be naturally accessed through our embodied vital energy.

As for the significance of sexuality, Romero and Albareda (2001) state: “Sexuality is, potentially, [one of the] first soil[s] for the organization and creative development of the dark energy in human reality. That is why it is so important that sexuality is an ‘open’ soil based on natural evolutionary principles, and not on fears, conflicts, or artificial impositions dictated by our minds, cultures, or spiritual ideologies” (p. 13). Due to the general inhibition of primary and sexual energies throughout Western history, they continue, a layer of accumulated conflicts, wounds, and fears exists

between the modern self and the essence of the dark energy. In addition to individual dynamics, a nearly universal ingredient of this layer is organically embedded shame.

Organic shame, which should be sharply distinguished from psychological shame (and can exist without it), manifests through unconscious energetic contractions in the body that block the flow of the dark energy and its creative power within us. In a process of integral growth, therefore, it may be fundamental to heal this conflictive sediment and reconnect with the creative essence of the dark energy. When bodily embedded shame is cleared out (and the heart is freed from struggle and the mind from pride), this energy naturally flows and gestates within us, undergoing a process of transformation through our bodies and hearts, ultimately illuminating the mind with a knowing that is both grounded in and coherent with the Mystery. Because of the dynamic nature of Mystery, as well as our historically and culturally situated condition, this knowing is never final, but always in constant evolution (Ferrer, 2002).

Although many variables are clearly at play, the connection between sexuality and spiritual creativity may help to explain why (a) human spirituality and mysticism have been to a great extent “conservative,” i.e., heretic mystics are the exception to the rule, and most mystics firmly conform to accepted doctrines and canonical scriptures (see, for example, Katz, 1983); and (b) many spiritual traditions have strictly regulated sexual behavior, and have often repressed or even proscribed the creative exploration of sexual energies and sensual desire (see, for example, Cohen, 1994; Faure, 1998; Feuerstein, 1998; Wade, forthcoming; Weiser-Hanks, 2000). I am not proposing, of course, that religious traditions regulated or restricted sexual activity *deliberately* to hinder spiritual creativity and maintain the status quo of their doctrines. In my reading, I have found no indication suggesting that traditions ever made such connection, and all evidence seems to point to other social, cultural, moral, and doctrinal factors (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Parrinder, 1980). What I am suggesting, in contrast, is that *the social and moral regulation of sexuality may have had an unexpected debilitating impact on human spiritual creativity across many traditions for centuries*. Although, as noted in the introduction, this inhibition may have been necessary in the past, it is my position that an increasing number of individuals may be prepared for a more creative engagement of their spiritual lives in the present.

Structure of the Work

Although Holistic Integration can take many forms, the usual format involves a group of individuals who commit to work together for either a week-long intensive retreat or a cycle of six or seven months. These cycles typically include: one weekend encounter a month, supervised work between these encounters, and a concluding week-long intensive retreat. Despite the group format and the dimension of community that naturally emerges from the work, Holistic Integration is not primarily focused on group dynamics (which are addressed if necessary) and can be better understood as individual work within a group context.

Essentially, Holistic Integration is composed of four elements or processes: (a)

interactive embodied meditations; (b) multidimensional contemplative practices; (c) individualized integral practices; and (d) integrative work in everyday life. Although these four processes tend to unfold sequentially to some extent, the reader should bear in mind that not only do they often overlap, but also that this progression can vary significantly among individuals.

1. Interactive Embodied Meditations

With the notable exception of certain tantric techniques, traditional meditation techniques are practiced individually and without bodily interaction with other practitioners.⁹ One of Holistic Integration's major innovations is that it features a variety of meditative and contemplative practices that, in a structured and respectful setting, are developed "in contact" with other individuals.

Interactive embodied meditations are the starting point of the work. Through them, practitioners collaboratively experiment with several forms of meditative contact among the various energetic centers of the human body: feet and legs for the body as physical structure that provides support and containment; lower abdomen and pelvic area for the vital center and instincts; chest, back, arms, and hands for the heart and emotions; and head and forehead for the mind and consciousness.¹⁰ To optimize the emergence of richer information about and from these centers, two clearly differentiated roles are established in each practice: an *agent* role, which initiates and develops the contact, and a *receptive* role, which receives the contact. Since the experience of the same practice can drastically change (and therefore offer different data) depending on the role, practitioners usually start their processes by exploring their experience in both roles. Regardless of their role, practitioners are encouraged to sustain an attitude of non-intentional, open receptivity to their own experience throughout the practice, like the one cultivated through mindfulness meditation techniques.

The general aim of these practices is to allow practitioners to experientially discern the deep energetic state of their various dimensions—body, vital-sexual, heart, mind, and consciousness—as well as their mutual integration or dissociation. In other words, they seek to provide practitioners with an "experiential radiography" of their structural and energetic organization as the foundation of their integral growth.

In this context, physical contact is considered essential because Albareda and Romero see the body as the natural doorway to the deepest levels of the rest of the human dimensions. In their view, due to their consecutive emergence in human development—from soma to instinct to heart to mind—each dimension grows by taking root in the previous one(s). This developmental sequence should not be confused with a hierarchy, where dimensions that emerge later in time are seen as necessarily higher, more evolved, or more integrative than earlier ones. One of the orienting principles of Holistic Integration is that all human dimensions, especially when mature, are equally valuable for individual and collective health, growth, and evolution. Since the biological organism is the first dimension that emerges after conception, however, Albareda and Romero consider it necessary to engage the human body in order to access the deepest energetic potentials and dispositions not only of the body, but also of our instincts, hearts, and minds. Leonard and Murphy

(1995) share a similar view: “body, mind, heart, and soul [are] coequal manifestations of the human essence. But where deep down human change is concerned, there is no more effective teacher than the body” (p. 145).

As an example, let us consider a practice that explores the connection between the heart and the mind/consciousness. One of the actions that the person in the agent role can develop during this practice is a meditative contact between his or her forehead and the center of the back or chest of the person in the receptive role. The sustained contact between the embodied energetic centers of mind/consciousness and the heart can lead to a variety of important psychospiritual insights for both practitioners. In the context of Holistic Integration,¹¹ however, Albareda and Romero claim that this apparently simple contact can help first, the receptive person to access the essential energetic state of his or her heart; and second, both agent and receiver to experientially learn about the quality of the connection between their hearts and their minds/consciousness (e.g., along the following polar realities: differentiation/undifferentiation, integration/dissociation, harmony/struggle, clarity/confusion, autonomy/dependency, and so forth). In order to gain more precise information through experiential contrasts, individuals can repeat the same practice a number of times or with different variables (e.g., different people or genders, only in one role, for an extended time, in a different setting, etc.).

Before proceeding further, two points need to be emphasized here. First, although these practices can be used to explore relational dynamics, their typical use in Holistic Integration is not interpersonal, but intra-personal. In other words, in a consensually arranged “contract,” practitioners function as satellites or mirrors for each other, facilitating the perception of their own potentials, dynamics or energetic states.¹² Interactive embodied meditations, then, should be sharply distinguished from any kind of intentional hands-on healing, energetic or body work. In practical terms, this means that, regardless of their role as receiver or agent, practitioners attempt to remain mindfully anchored to their own experience during the practices, letting go as much as possible of any concern or intention regarding their partner’s experience. This focus on one’s own experience is facilitated by the participants’ commitment to stop the practice at any given moment if necessary. One example of this might be during cases of physical contraction, fear, or confusion that the practitioner may not be ready to explore deeply or handle constructively. If the agent knows that the receiver will stop the practice if needed, then he or she will be able to develop the action without distracting preoccupations regarding the receiver’s experience. And if the receiver knows that the agent will stop the practice if needed, then he or she will be able to receive the action without distracting preoccupations regarding the agent’s experience.¹³

Second, interactive embodied meditations should not be confused with techniques aiming at shaping human experience in specific directions. To be sure, some form of intentionality is arguably inevitable in any human activity, and even non-intentional practices such as *wu-wei* (“without doing”), *shinkan taza* (“sitting-only”) or *zazen* take place within contexts of spiritual aspiration (for discussions, see Faure, 1993; Loy, 1988; Shaw, 1989; Slingerland, 2000). Judging by their practical fruits, however, Albareda and Romero believe that these embodied meditations can be better under-

stood as *structures of contact* that facilitate the direct perception of the deep energetic state of the various human dimensions, as well as their dissociation or integration.

2. *Multidimensional Contemplative Practices*

After introducing the interactive embodied meditations, Albareda and Romero present a number of contemplative practices to facilitate a more nuanced, focused, or intentional exploration or transformation of the somatic, instinctive, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Many of these practices are also carried out in interactive embodied contact with other practitioners in both agent and receptive roles. No matter which role is chosen, practitioners cultivate a contemplative attitude of open presence, non-intentional receptivity, and unconditional acceptance toward their moment-to-moment experience.

The structure of these multidimensional practices is extremely diverse, but most are oriented by the following aims: (a) differentiation, maturation, and integration of all human dimensions (body, instincts, heart, mind, and self-consciousness); (b) making these dimensions more porous to both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies; (c) differentiation, maturation, and integration of the “masculine” (agent) and “feminine” (receptive) capabilities at all dimensions; (d) healing and transformation of wounds, conflicts, or dissociations stored at deep energetic layers of these dimensions; (e) creation of spaces for the natural emergence of new capabilities, qualities, or potentials from within those dimensions; (f) training in the development of these emerging capabilities, qualities, or potentials; and (g) integration of polar realities, such as mind/body, sexuality/spirituality, masculine/feminine, individual/community, or strength/gentleness.

Although space does not allow me to discuss all of these goals here, it may be important to hint at two distinctive elements of these practices. The first is the differentiation and integration of human dimensions and polar realities. Albareda and Romero consider that the various human dimensions—body, instincts, heart, mind, and consciousness—and polar realities—masculine/feminine, sexuality/spirituality, individual/community, and so forth—mature through a process of differentiation and integration. This process, they claim, leads not only to the strengthening of each integrated dimension or polar reality, but also to the emergence of novel human qualities. When strength and gentleness are integrated, for example, strength can be fully strength because its incorporated gentleness prevents it from becoming aggression, gentleness can be fully gentleness because its incorporated strength prevents it from becoming weakness, and their integration brings forth a number of new qualities such as passionate humbleness or tender instinct. The “heart-anger” described by Masters (2000), in which “openly expressed anger and compassion mindfully coexist” (p. 34), can be seen as another example of a novel quality emerging from the integration of instincts, an undivided heart, and consciousness.

The second is the special attention given to primary-sexual energies. Given their possible centrality for a genuine and creative integral growth, a number of contemplative practices focus on exploring and, if necessary, transforming the primary-sexual dimension. According to Washburn (1995, in press), the power of

the Ground or primordial source of life—the dark energy, in Albareda and Romero’s terms—undergoes a primal repression in early childhood that allows the resolution of the preoedipal stage and the emergence of a differentiated mental ego. Despite its benefits, primal repression not only causes “a loss of plenipotent energy, fully alive corporeality, imaginal creativity, and rootedness in the Ground” (in press, n. p.) but also confines the power of the Ground to the sexual system and genito-pelvic area of the body. “In restricting the power of the Ground to an instinctual organization,” Washburn (1995) explains, primal repression “makes the instincts the gateway to spirit” (p. 199). For Washburn, then, a genuine spiritual regeneration can only occur when this previously repressed primary energy is reawakened and gradually assimilated into a higher level of instinctual-spiritual integration.

Due to the tremendous, indeed potentially overwhelming, power of the primary energy, as well as the layer of wounds and conflicts usually stored therein, Albareda and Romero consider fundamental that this reawakening occurs in an extremely gradual and careful manner that permits the appropriate assimilation of this energy. This is in part why Holistic Integration’s practices focused on this level do not involve ordinary sexual behavior, which tends to not only activate more energy than most people can integrate, but also evoke biographical and cultural associations that may interfere with connecting to the deepest essence of this energy. With this in mind, Albareda and Romero have developed a set of original contemplative embodied practices, which, in a safe and respectful environment, are directed to allow practitioners to gently reawaken their primary energy and gradually integrate it. These practices—some of which focus on the vital center or involve the most primary senses of taste and smell—seek to facilitate the gradual assimilation and creative transformation of this energy through body, heart, mind, and consciousness. In this context it may be appropriate to mention the importance given in this work to alternating cycles of *experience* (i.e., direct access to experiential contents or energies) and *assimilation* (i.e., gestation and elaboration of the experiences through meditation, nature walks, movement, dance, expressive arts, verbalization, or journal writing).

Although the aim of these primal contemplative practices is diverse and, as we will see below, becomes individualized in the process, they are devised to free the body from its organically embedded shame; heal or transform a number of wounds, conflicts, or inhibitions stored at this energetic level; allow a more fluid movement of the primary energy through body, heart, mind, and consciousness; align the vital-primary energy and the energy of consciousness; cultivate the “masculine” (agent) and “feminine” (receptive) aspects of the primary energy, which are considered essential for a healthy and creative life regardless of gender or sexual orientation; and foster the activation, gestation, and creative transformation of the primary energy in order to bring forth novel qualities and potentials at somatic, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels.

As with the basic meditations, practitioners can repeat any given practice with the same or different parameters, partner(s), role, duration, place, and so on, in order to gain further precision and experiential contrasts, train new capabilities or qualities, or foster the vitalization, differentiation, and maturation of certain dimensions or potentials. Where possible, many of these practices are carried out in nature, and the

work also features contemplative practices specifically designed to be developed in contact with nature's healing and transformative resources.

3. Individualized Integral Practices

Since each individual is similar to others in some regard, but singularly different in others, Holistic Integration includes both common and individualized practices. At a certain moment in the process, practitioners start to design their own individualized practices, first with the guidance of the facilitators, and then completely on their own. Individualized integral growth properly begins when practitioners, out of a clear awareness of their present limitations and potentialities, lay down their own personal integral path. According to Albareda and Romero, individualized practices are essential because only through them can practitioners access the deepest domains of their being and hence ground their integral process in their unique vital potentials.

It is fundamental to stress that, even though the facilitators may offer practical advice about the design of personal practices, *the integral growth process is primarily regulated by the practitioner's own multidimensional experience*. In other words, the specific form of a given practice is organically shaped or inspired by whatever happens somatically, energetically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually in the previous practice (e.g., difficulties or tensions, desires or impulses, confusion or questions, insights or inspirations, visions or spiritual openings, and so forth). This is why integral growth unfolds through a route that can never be predetermined and that takes as many forms and directions as the individuals involved.

In order to illustrate the dynamics of the inner guidance of this process, Romero and Albareda (2001) offer the following image:

Imagine that we face two magnets and keep them at a certain distance. Unless other forces are present, a magnetic field will be generated that will arrange any metallic object that enters the field across identical lines.

Now imagine that one magnet is the dark energy and the other the energy of consciousness. This situation generates a new energetic movement in the interior of the person. The movement affects the individual just as a magnetic field influences metallic objects. Essentially, the individual is impelled toward a new order *from within*. Under this influence, and depending on a variety of factors, an individual can have two kinds of experiences: First, he or she can experience dissociation, which reveals those personal structures or energetic tendencies that preclude or hinder the alignment of both energies, for example, conflicts, blockages, struggles, fears, empty holes, and so forth. In this case, the individual can become aware of, relate to, and start to transform those elements. It must be stressed that the orientation of this process is neither external to the individual nor provided by already learned schemes. Rather, the orientation naturally emerges out of the new energetic axes generated by the alignment of the dark energy and the energy of consciousness.

Second, an individual can experience connection without resistance between the dark energy and the energy of consciousness. Such an experience can become an inner reference point for that person to lay down [his/her] path, even in those moments when it may seem very hard or impossible. It will also be an experience of profound regeneration and pacification of both the primary and the spiritual worlds of the individual. Both types of experiences are necessary to develop [an integral] path. (p. 10)

According to Albareda and Romero, most of the practices of Holistic Integration can be seen as structures that facilitate the organic emergence of experiential contents (e.g., energetic blockages, deep emotions, psychological insights, and so forth). Once the various parameters of a practice have been clearly established—structure, type of meditative contact, persons, roles, boundaries, duration, etc.—practitioners let go of their intentions and expectations, and simply remain present, open, and receptive to their experience. Arguably, one of the main catalysts for the emergence of experiential materials may be the embodied contact between consciousness and the deep layers of the other energetic centers. Albareda and Romero believe that human consciousness has the capability to impregnate the energetic seeds of our somatic, instinctive, and emotional dimensions, catalyzing a process of conception, gestation, and emergence of new life within. In their experience, this process can have two different, but not mutually exclusive, outcomes. On the one hand, it can engender new qualities, capabilities, or potentials within these worlds (“feminine” phase), some of which may require intentional development, elaboration, training, and/or communal legitimization to become fully installed in the person (“masculine” phase). On the other hand, and perhaps more strikingly, the presence of consciousness can impregnate so deeply the essence of those worlds that they can become aligned with the conscious spiritual orientation of the person, spontaneously and creatively collaborating in his or her integral evolution (see Romero & Albareda, 2001).

4. Integrative work in everyday life

When Holistic Integration is offered in cycles of six or seven months, participants are encouraged to carry on with their practices between monthly encounters to strengthen their process and facilitate its integration into their everyday lives. A dimension of community naturally emerges from this social network that can also be more intentionally cultivated through a variety of social gatherings and group activities. Both the presence of a community of support and the importance of integrating one’s personal transformation into everyday life are central to Holistic Integration.

In addition to a creative transformation of everyday life, a more focused creative project—educational, artistic, intellectual, healing, community building, organizational, ecological, religious, and so forth—can either guide the process of some practitioners or naturally emerge from its culmination. The number of social and cultural projects that have emerged from Holistic Integration during the last few decades is vast, so I will simply mention here a few examples: an educative project for female prisoners; various university graduate courses; an alternative governmental political and social project in the Canary Islands, Spain; a project for the

integration of immigrant women; several innovative therapeutic modalities, including one based on human-animal interaction; an educative project for the youth in a religious community; an institutionally incorporated approach to childbirth called “Welcome to Life”; several alternative community and ecological projects; and a large variety of artistic projects, exhibitions, and shows (sculpture, photography, painting, visual and plastic arts, music, and cartoons), including a dance performance called “Eros & Spirit: Evolution from Within”, which was presented in 2002 at the Brava Theater for the Women in the Arts in San Francisco.

CONCLUSION

Modern ITP proposals can be seen as important efforts to explore and foster in the modern West an integrative spirituality that is not only free from the tensions and contradictions of a lopsided development, but also grounded in the maturation and integration of all human attributes. In this paper, however, I have identified two potential pitfalls of ITPs: given the underdeveloped condition of the somatic, instinctive, and emotional worlds of the individual, mentally designed ITP programs may perpetuate their mental colonization, prevent their autonomous maturation, and paradoxically undermine the very possibility of a multidimensional, co-creative integral growth. And, given the hyper-masculine thrust of modern Western life and education, an emphasis on the exercise and training of these human dimensions through already existing practices and techniques may hinder the more feminine organic emergence of their most unique qualities and potentials.

What is needed is to complement modern ITP proposals with participatory approaches that (a) facilitate the autonomous maturation of all human dimensions according to their own developmental dynamics; and (b) balance the exercise of human attributes with the creation of spaces for the coming into being of novel qualities and inner potentials. Then a genuine integral growth—one that is both grounded in our most vital potentials and co-created by all human dimensions—may have some possibility to unfold.

To illustrate this participatory perspective on integral growth, I have introduced Holistic Integration, an integral approach created by Ramon V. Albareda and Marina T. Romero. In this work, practitioners learn to first make contact with the present state of their somatic, instinctive, emotional, mental, and conscious worlds, and then design practices to foster their maturation, vitalization, and integration. Through a variety of innovative embodied and interactive contemplative practices, practitioners seek to access the creative power of their vital energy and gradually align it with the energy of consciousness. This alignment is said to bring forth an energetic axis in the person that orients his or her integral growth from within. The form and structure of individualized integral practices, for example, emerges from the practitioner’s somatic, vital, emotional, mental, and conscious experience. Although systematic research to assess the actual effectiveness of these practices is obviously needed,¹⁴ the multidimensional organic unfolding of integral growth holds a promise to short circuit the danger of egoic control of ITPs rightly identified by Wilber (2000b). Besides possibly engendering unique developmental paths, this

process entails or culminates in the transformation of everyday life and the world through a variety of personal, cultural, social, and ecological creative projects.

To conclude, I would like to stress that, from a participatory perspective, ITPs may optimize the emergence of not only Zen-like nondual realizations, but also other spiritually significant enactments of self and world, some of which have been described by the world contemplative traditions, and others whose novel quality may require a more creative engagement to be brought forth. In any event, I believe that ITPs can be seen as modern explorations of an “incarnational spiritual praxis,” in the sense that they foster the creative transformation of the embodied person and the world, the spiritualization of matter and the sensuous grounding of spirit, and, ultimately, the bringing together of Heaven and Earth. Who knows, perhaps as human beings gradually embody both transcendent and immanent spiritual energies—a twofold incarnation, so to speak—they can then realize that it is here, in this plane of concrete physical reality, that the cutting edge of spiritual transformation and evolution is taking place. For then the planet Earth may gradually turn into an embodied Heaven, a perhaps unique place in the cosmos where beings can learn to express and receive embodied love, in all its forms.

NOTES

¹ For example, see Leonard and Murphy (1995), Murphy (1993), Rothberg (1996, 1999), Welwood (2000), and Wilber (2000a, 2001).

² This possibility is arguably connected to the contemporary revisioning of many religious traditions, such as Matthew Fox’s (1988) *Creation Spirituality for Christianity*, Michael Lerner’s (1994, 2000) *Jewish Renewal and Emancipatory Spirituality*, or Donald Rothberg’s (1998) *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. These and many others spiritual leaders and authors propose reconstructions of their traditions that seek to integrate human dimensions that had been hitherto inhibited, repressed, or even proscribed (such as the role of women and feminine values, body appreciation and sensual desire, or intimate relationships and sexual diversity). The importance of grounding an integrated spiritual life in primary potentials and instinctual life is also central to Michael Washburn’s (1995, in press) spiral model of transpersonal development, as well as to Haridas Chaudhuri’s revision of Sri-Aurobindo’s integral yoga (Shirazi, 2001).

³ I am using the term “cognicentrism” to refer to the privileged position that the rational-analytical mind (and its associated instrumental reason and Aristotelian logic) has in the modern Western world over other ways of knowing, e.g., somatic, sexual-vital, emotional, aesthetic, imaginal, visionary, intuitive, contemplative, and so forth. By no means am I suggesting, then, that the other human dimensions are not “cognitive” in the sense of not being able to apprehend knowledge or creatively participate in its elaboration.

⁴ Interestingly, Sovatsky (1994) reports that some yoga texts state that there are 840,000 yoga asanas.

⁵ Since 2000, this approach has been introduced in the United States at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, and through several groups of integral growth in the Bay Area of San Francisco.

⁶ Although a body of experientially grounded knowledge has gradually emerged from the work (Albareda & Romero, 1990, 1999; Romero & Albareda, 2001), Holistic Integration is offered virtually free from ideological or metaphysical luggage. It is probably this non-sectarian character of the work that makes it appealing to people from very diverse psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual orientations, who, according to Albareda and Romero, usually bring a renewed sense of creative vitality back to their personal lives, professions, communities, and/or traditions.

⁷ Because of its distinctive focus on sexuality, understood as vital-primary energy, this work is also known as Holistic Sexuality.

⁸ As modern consciousness research shows, for example, human consciousness can not only access but also understand spiritual insights, esoteric symbols, mythological motifs, and cosmologies belonging to specific religious worlds even without previous exposure to them (Ferrer, forthcoming; Grof, 1988, 1998).

⁹ Holistic Integration, however, needs to be distinguished from tantric and neo-tantric practices, in which sexual energies are often used as fuel to catapult human consciousness to expanded, transcendent or even transhuman states (see, e.g., Feuerstein, 1998; White, 2000). In addition, and for the reasons outlined below, Holistic Integration avoids sexual exchange among practitioners.

¹⁰ Albareda and Romero are not claiming a strict correspondence between these bodily areas and the various human attributes. A human being is a multidimensional unity, and any attribute can therefore potentially manifest throughout the entire organism. As Albareda and Romero have repeatedly noted, however, this fact does not preclude that the sustained contact with certain bodily areas tends to facilitate, in an overwhelming majority of the individuals with whom they have worked, access to specific experiential worlds.

¹¹ The significance of context cannot be emphasized enough. Holistic Integration embraces an ecological approach in which many factors come into play to facilitate the appropriate conditions for these contemplative practices. Therefore, their transformative power is to a large extent due to the carefully crafted context provided in the work, and it is likely that, without the pertinent “set and setting”, most of the practices would be not only sterile but also potentially confusing or problematic. The structure and safety provided by the context, as well as the emphasis placed on mindfulness, necessary boundaries, and gradual integration, makes Holistic Integration stand in sharp contrast to most of the interactive and group explorations developed in the 1960s.

¹² This intra-personal emphasis is especially important in the first stages of the process. As practitioners gradually become more clear about their energetic dispositions and necessary boundaries, practices can also be used to explore mutuality, interpersonal dynamics, and relational forms of spirituality.

¹³ Of course, knowing when to stop a practice, or being able to stop it, requires a learning curve for some individuals. If stopping a practice is especially hard for a participant, this difficulty is simply taken as one more area to explore and work on. In this case, the practitioner may be encouraged to carry out some practices specifically designed to gain discrimination and/or reinforce his or her capability of expression and boundary setting.

¹⁴ Sponsored by The Salamander Fund (www.salamanderfund.org), Beverly Hills, California, a research project is being pursued that will inquire into the healing and transformative effects of Holistic Integration in a group of individuals, as well as explore its impact on the evolution of their creativity, love, and altruism. This research consists of a longitudinal study involving qualitative methodologies/questionnaires and physiological/bio-electrical measures, in an ongoing examination of the influence of the work on the lives of these individuals, and possible repercussions on their communities.

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