

Integral Life Practice: States of Consciousness

(Part 4 of a 5-part series)

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse
on 04 May 2008 Chip Roush

HOMILY I

“integral life practice” How many of you have seen or heard at least something from Barack Obama's ex-pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright? How many found agreed with everything Rev. Wright said? How many agreed with at least one thing that he said?

Philosopher Ken Wilber begins with the assumption that nobody is 100% wrong. Every philosopher, every scientist, every theologian must have understood *something* about our world correctly. Wilber then maps our human understanding showing where there is significant agreement among all the various experts, and looks for patterns and trends in that knowledge.

Wilber's map, thus constructed, demonstrates how the spirit of evolution acts in similar ways, over and over, from the subatomic level to the microscopic, and from the macroscopic to the galactic. Several patterns do emerge, that help us understand how the universe has evolved thus far, and where it might be headed in the future. There are five significant patterns, or five elements of Wilber's “integral map.” These are quadrants, lines, levels, states and types. We'll focus on states, in a few minutes; allow me to recap the others, first.

Quadrants are a crystallization of the insight that every event or thing or organism in the universe has both internal and external aspects, and both singular and plural aspects. Thus, everything can be examined from four viewpoints: the singular internal, singular external, plural internal and plural external.

For example, if I am drumming at a “spirit in the bone” session, one of the embodied practices we engage on the first and third Tuesday evenings, we could look at my drumming from all four vantage points. The interior individual would be my own subjective experience: my thoughts and my feelings while I am drumming. The exterior individual are the objective facts that pertain to me, like my heart rate and body temperature, or an EEG showing my brainwaves, and how they change as I drum. The interior plural would be the feel of the group, how they relate to each other within their shared cultural values. Finally, the exterior collective could include measurements of the temperature of the room, the volume and tempo of the drumming, and other objective facts about the whole-group phenomenon.

All four of these quadrants are valid and important; all four must be taken into consideration by any theory claiming to be complete.

If we wish to address the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa, for example, we must include the psychological and spiritual needs of the afflicted persons; their physical symptoms; their cultural context, how their society treats them; and their objective systems: the availability of food and medicine, and the infrastructure to deliver them. Any specific human may concentrate her or his efforts in one of those areas, but unless we are dealing with all four, our efforts are much less likely to succeed.

By keeping in mind all four quadrants in every decision, we are more likely to use all the resources we possess, and thus more likely to succeed in our endeavors.

The second element in Wilber's maps are “lines of development.” This is the understanding that there are different tracks of development for different abilities. Moral understanding is different from intellectual intelligence, which is different from a sense of aesthetics which differs from bodily, kinesthetic, abilities like sports and dance, and so on. Being very good at one thing does *not* imply that we will be good at some other thing. This explains the existence of evil geniuses: such people are highly developed, intellectually, but not well-developed at all, in their moral understanding.

The concept of “stages”, or “levels” comes from the insight that we all develop through stages in our lives. As children, we may believe in magic at first; then we demand concrete answers. As we age, those answers may appear too rigid or prove inadequate in dealing with a complex world, so we learn to deal with ambiguity and shades of grey. No one level is “better” than the others; it all depends upon how well they help us function in our particular circumstance. Philosophers often refer to these stages using the

names of colors, to help reduce the tendency to judge some stages as inherently inferior or superior.

We'll discuss the fourth element, "states," soon.

Finally, the fifth element is "types." The spectrum of gender, including male and female and transgendered people, is a type. So is the spectrum of "introvert" to "extrovert;" or the nine personality types of the enneagram.

All of these elements are things which exist in our experience, and which can help us if we are more aware of them.

FIRST READING

This is adapted from Alison Luterman's poem, *Jesus Incognito*. She refers to the Shema, which is the central prayer in the Jewish prayerbook, which many Jews say at least twice every day.

"Don't tell anyone, but I love Jesus. I love his big dark Jewish eyes, so full of suffering and soul, like an unemployed poet's, and his thick sensuous Jewish lips, and his kinky curly hair, just like mine, uncontrollable despite conditioners, and the way he always argues with everyone and will go to hell for love. He's just like that Buddhist god Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, except his name is easier to pronounce. When you're in trouble it's hard to remember to yell for Avalokiteshvara, but 'Oh Jesus!' arises naturally every time a crazy driver hot-dogs past me on the freeway. I know I should say the Shema when I'm about to die, but will I be able to remember Hebrew at a time like that? I don't want to die saying, 'Oh [crap]!' I'd like to leave my body consciously, like a Tibetan lama, sitting in full lotus with my head turned toward where I'll reincarnate next. But let's be realistic: I probably couldn't meditate enough to become enlightened in the however-many years I have left. Jesus seems easier. All you have to do is love everyone. Well, seems is the key word here. Sometimes the more you try to love people, the more you hate them. Maybe it would be better to try not to love people, and then watch the love force its way out of you like grass through cement. Anything is better than organized religion. I don't like singing in churches—all those hymns in major keys. I don't think religion should be so triumphant. It should be humble and aware of the basic incurable pathos of the human condition, and in a minor key and sung in a mysterious ancient language, like Sanskrit or Hebrew. Is it OK for me to love Jesus but not be a Christian? I could try to open my heart and give away all my possessions. It's not that different from being Buddhist, after all, except for a history of witch burnings, the Inquisition, the subjugation, rape, and pillage of indigenous peoples all over the world, not to mention twenty centuries of vicious anti-Semitism. That's a lot to overlook to get back to a baby born among animals to a Jewish mother, Miryam. And what about that other Mary, the sexy one? Jesus, I don't believe you died a virgin. I think you needed to taste everything human, to inhabit the whole mess: blood, [poop], flies, regret, envy, why-me. I owe you and all the other bodhisattvas and sages and newborn babies a debt of thanks for agreeing to come back and marry yourselves to our painful predicament again and again—and I do thank you, bowing to the infinite directions."

SECOND READING

Ken Wilber uses some technical terms in this reading. You can let go of anything you do not understand, and the overall message should still be clear.

"Let's say a person has a peak experience of seeing a cloud of radiant white luminosity, which at times appears to be a person or being of light, and then has a sense of merging into that light, feeling a sense of infinite love and unbounded bliss. Let's say that this person is a Protestant, whose Lower-Left quadrant has predisposed his interpretations to see and clothe this experience in Christian terms. What will this person see?

If he's at red altitude, he might see this as a magical Jesus who can walk on water, resurrect the dead, turn water into wine, multiply loaves and fishes, and so on.

At amber, he might see Jesus as the eternal lawgiver, the bringer of complete salvation if one believes the myths and dogmas and follows the codes, commandments and covenants given to the chosen people and found in the one and only true Book (the Bible).

At orange, this person might see Jesus as a universal humanist...teaching world centric love and morality, and who can bring salvation not just in heaven but to some degree on this earth, in this life.

At green, this person might see Jesus as one of many, equally valid spiritual teachers, and hence embracing Jesus might give complete salvation for me, which is why I passionately do so, but other individuals and cultures might find other spiritual paths to be better for them, knowing that all genuine spiritual paths, if they go deep enough, can offer equal salvation or liberation.

If this person is flying at turquoise, he might see Jesus as a manifestation of the same Christ-consciousness that everybody, including you and me, can have complete access to, and thus Jesus is emblematic of a transformative consciousness that shows each person to be part of a vast system of dynamic, flowing, and mutually interpenetrating processes that includes all of us in its radiant sweep...

In other words, the altered-state experience will be interpreted, in part, according to the stage that one is at."

HOMILY II

"states of consciousness"

How many of you have felt a "peak experience" where you felt a Oneness or a deep "rightness" in that moment? How many think that such experiences are merely artifacts, brought on by drugs or electrical misfiring in the brain? How many of you believe that some people may have had them, but have not experienced it yourself?

I have been blessed with many such spiritual experiences, and that's not even counting the Grateful Dead shows! As a child, I had an operation, and I can recall vividly floating over the table, watching doctors and nurses working on me.

More recently, a few summers ago, I was preparing to preach in Grand Rapids, when I was overwhelmed by a sense of light and love pouring through me. I knew, absolutely, that that love was always pouring through us, all of us, and that our job on this planet was to facilitate and spread that love as widely as possible.

That one kept me inspired and happy for several months.

Such an experience can be called an "altered state." That doesn't mean it is invalid or suspect, it just means it is not our usual state of consciousness. There may be a few human beings who maintain an awareness of such love and connection throughout most of their time on this planet, but for most of us, that is an altered state.

According to Wilber's research, the great wisdom traditions of the world recognize three major states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and deep, formless, sleep. All of us can achieve all of these states. Even babies dream; and all of us, except in troubled circumstances, can slip into a deep, dreamless sleep, at least sometimes.

The wisdom traditions also maintain that each of these states correspond to a "body" or mode of experience. These are named the gross body, the subtle body, and the causal body, corresponding to waking, dreaming and formless sleep, respectively.

You can consider these to be energy bodies, or just imagine them as sensitivities. When we are awake, we are aware of our gross body, the physical, material, sensorimotor body. When we dream, we are no longer aware of that body; rather, we seem to have a more subtle body, of light and energy and emotions, of fluid and flowing images. While we are dreaming, we are set free to create as we please, imagining vast worlds far beyond anything in the waking world. As we move further into a deep, dreamless sleep, the traditions say that we enter a formless realm, a capital-E Emptiness that is nothing but an empty sea of awareness. In that realm, we are also virtual awareness, our bodies even more sublime than subtle. They are referred to as causal bodies.

How many of you are with me, on the whole gross body / subtle body / causal body thing? How many are a bit skeptical that we have three so-called "energy bodies"?

It might help to know that all of these internal levels of consciousness are accompanied by a level of

exterior physical complexity. So our reptilian brain stem features a rudimentary consciousness, able to move and feel hunger or pain, but that's about it. As our mammalian limbic system developed, more sophisticated feelings became possible; and the triune brain, with its neocortex, expanded consciousness even further. Our brain stem, limbic system and neocortex house our gross, subtle and causal awareness.

Some scientists have poked and prodded and electrically stimulated our brains to the point where they can reproduce all these levels. They can make their subject acutely aware of various parts of his body, or they can induce dreamlike states, or they can put her into that formless deep, where she feels a Oneness with all things. So, whether or not we want to call them "bodies", there is some evidence that the gross, subtle and causal levels do exist in our awareness.

I do not think that it invalidates these experiences, just because we can reproduce them with an electric probe. Scientists can electrify our brain in the right place and make us feel hungry, too, and that doesn't mean that nobody has ever eaten, or needs to eat. I think we have wiring in our brain to feel these things because they are real parts of our experience.

Even if you don't accept these three energy bodies, or the fourth, which some theorists postulate, the "nondual" consciousness which would be the widest awareness possible, even if your brain hurts contemplating all that, I hope you'll agree that we all experience waking, and dreaming and deep sleep, and that some of us have had peak experiences which we call "spiritual."

Now, this is a place where our language is limited, so things can get sloppy. Let's take just a moment to be a little more precise about the word "spiritual." People use it all the time, and they don't always use it in the same way.

Wilber lists at least four ways that the word "spiritual" is used.

The first way is the way we just used it, to describe a peak experience, with wonder and awe and a sense of oneness with the universe. When people say, "it was a spiritual experience," that is often what they mean.

Another way the word "spiritual" is used is to describe an experience that is far advanced along any particular line of development. Sometimes when Michael Jordan played basketball, it was just so smooth and effortless and surprising, even to him, that he felt like something spiritual was happening.

Sometimes a gifted musician will say, "it felt like the music was playing me" or a writer will exclaim that a poem just poured through him, without any thought or interference on his part. Or a genius mathematician will report that a theory just sprang into her head.

If we go far enough along any line of development—cognitive, emotional, moral, kinesthetic, or any other way humans interact and evolve—people sometimes use the word "spiritual" to describe it.

A third way the term is used, is as if it were a developmental line of its own. We talk about spiritual growth and spiritual progress. In this case, "spirituality" is another human developmental line and we can be poorly developed, or we might be quite advanced along our spiritual development.

Finally, a person is sometimes referred to as "spiritual" if she or he demonstrates an attitude of love and compassion. At whatever stage of growth they are, if they are widening their horizons, expanding their circle of care, then their peers might call them "spiritual."

And that gets us to the heart of our topic, our second reading.

Wilber says that anyone can have a peak experience, like merging with a luminous white light, or feeling totally in "flow" on the basketball court, and that we will understand that experience based on what stage we inhabit. He gives examples from a number of color-coded stages, from red and amber, through orange and green to turquoise.

Let me reiterate, that these are not ways of classifying or judging people. All people have inherent worth and dignity. And, they all have different worldviews, different ways of understanding their place in the world.

People and societies at the red stage believe in magic, and any altered state they experience will be

explained as something magical occurring.

Other peoples and other societies have different beliefs—and different explanations for any peak experience. Some will feel it verifies and validates the highly-structured religious framework they've been taught. Some will seek scientific explanations. Some will recognize that they are glimpsing the same thing that others see, and appreciate the wide variety of interpretations.

None of these understandings is necessarily wrong, or bad, and all of them—even the higher levels, turquoise and beyond—are incomplete. Our understanding is always evolving, just as we and our universe are.

In our first reading, Alison Luterman used Jewish, Christian and Buddhist metaphors. Any of those might work for a given individual or culture. As long as they work in your life circumstance, and as long as they promote life-affirming behaviors, any of these stages are valuable.

It's when our understandings hamper us, cause us more suffering than liberation, that we begin to judge or reject them, and seek a new, wider understanding.

When an athlete celebrates a victory by giving praise to God, that is how she or he understands the accomplishment. If her faith then leads her to do good works in the world, then it is working appropriately. If his faith causes him to be intolerant, and call for the expulsion—or death—of certain other people or groups, then the limitations of his stage are causing problems.

The current *Time* magazine, the "Time 100" issue, dated May 14th has the most recent advertisement from our Unitarian Universalist Association. It begins with the provocative statement, "My god is better than your god" then goes on to say: "Is this any way to talk about religion? Maybe you yearn for an open-minded, spiritual community where people respect each other's beliefs and worship together as one faith. Where no one's idea of God is better than another's. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism." I am glad that we are advertising, getting our message out to more people who yearn for our religious freedom. And, I insist that if an individual's idea of god includes the instruction to kill unbelievers, then my idea of god IS, in fact, better than theirs.

Our spiritual experiences are valid and important, and the way we understand and contextualize them is even more important.

When a scientist feels deep awe and wonder when contemplating the mysteries of the universe, and works to further our knowledge, and invents things to improve our lives, we are appreciative. If a scientist asserts that her explanations are the only appropriate ways of understanding the world, and denigrates and tries to "disprove" all other worldviews, then we might hope for her to undergo an epiphany powerful enough to lead her toward the next stage.

That is the other half of the dynamic between states and stages. The stages we are at, determine how we interpret the states we experience, and the states we experience can lead us toward new stages. All stages are incomplete, all understanding is partial, so of course a deeply affecting altered state can dissolve or explode our old understandings.

That is one of the things that church is for. One of the things we try to accomplish on Sunday mornings is to create an experience of an altered state, a "spiritual" state with more joy, more right-ness, more connection to each other and our planet, so that we simultaneously dissolve the limitations of our older worldviews, and move toward new, wider, deeper stages of understanding.

So may we be.