

## WHAT IS “INTEGRAL”?

“Integral” is fast becoming a very loosely applied term, supplying a bit of contemporary heft to otherwise pedestrian nouns, while it slides ever further into that once-was-fashionable territory that has swallowed up such terms as “holistic.” This does not mean that we ought to dump “integral” or start dumbing it down or hoist it up onto a post-postmodern soapbox, but rather that we define it as clearly as possible, both directly and through comparison with related terms.

“Integral” to me basically means inclusive in a radically comprehensive manner. I say “radically” for a number of reasons: (1) What’s being brought together constitutes not just parts of a totality, but also as much as possible of that totality’s presence, in as many directions and depths as possible; (2) such a bringing-together is far more than just a get-together or reunion or conference of partially connected items or qualities; and (3) the circle of extension that reaches from within out beyond every part illuminates and deepens the connections between all the pieces or qualities being brought together, literally integrating them without any requisite homogenization or dilution of individual differences. (Implicit to this is the fully embodied realization that everything exists through relationship, along with the invitation to become *intimate* with it all.)

“Holistic” (and “wholistic”) was the pseudo-hippyish ancestor of “integral” (even though Aurobindo was using “integral” long before the 1960s), as full of New Age, anemically grounded optimism as it was lacking in genuine practicality. “Holistic” meant well, but didn’t rise for long from the kind of sloppy/fluffy thinking and metaphysical quicksand that made it an easy target for probing minds that didn’t give a damn about spiritualized cognition and its sidekick clichés. “Integral” is a more sober term than “holistic,” more imbued with a sense of true inclusiveness, but nevertheless is in growing danger of shipwrecking itself on overly intellectual reefs, especially as it busies itself theorizing about its theorizing. Where “holistic” had an anti-intellectual quality

to it, “integral” can tend to lean too far the other way. In both cases, however, there is a lack of real *embodiment*.

“Integral” is an increasingly popular adjective. Placing it before words like “parenting” or “cooking” or “dog-grooming” tends to give them a touch more respectability. It’s easy to stick “integral” in places where it may not belong. So use it sparingly. Don’t trivialize it. Be discerning in your use of it.

An integral approach is not just sophisticated eclecticism or a neatly mapped mixture of applied methodologies. We may be meditating, working out, doing a bit of shadow-work, and keeping up with the latest in integral theory, but this does not necessarily mean that we are actually being integral. We can only say that we’re being integral if our various practices and ways of being are functioning together (and not just in our eyes!) as a consistently embodied, more-than-adequately functioning whole, through which we are, however gradually, cultivating intimacy with all that we are. We may not have fully arrived yet, but are on our way, and have the momentum to back this up, along with an integrity that runs more and more deeply through all that we do.

Being truly integral means, among other things, developing intimacy with everything that constitutes us. A genuinely integral consciousness lives such intimacy both conceptually and nonconceptually.

An integral approach works with our physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions, level upon level, consistently taking all of it into more-than-just-intellectual account, without losing touch with the totality that includes and pervades it all.

Overly intellectual approaches to being integral pay insufficient attention to emotions, in part perhaps because emotions are just too messy and too nonlinearly inclusive of the rest of our dimensions to be able to be neatly mapped. Emotions implicate us as a totality. They obviously involve the physical/physiological and the cognitive, but also include

the social, and sometimes also the spiritual. (Very briefly, affect is the intrinsic, biological dimension of emotion; feeling is our conscious experience of affect; and emotion is the framing and dramatization of feeling. Where affect is reaction, and feeling the recognition of affect, emotion is adaptation.) Emotion involves feeling, cognition, social factors, related action tendencies, and perspectival capacity, all of which interact and work together. Any integral approach that only superficially deals with emotions is only superficially integral.

An integral approach is not going to be much of a reality for us if we ourselves are not already living, to a significant degree, in an integral fashion. Part of what is needed is a clear recognition of where we are *not* integral, not in healthy relationship to some aspect of ourselves, not in integrity. Facing our fragmentation rather than trying to rise above it or only superficially deal with it is a step toward integrity. “Integral” is a bit like “love,” in that both terms are actually quite profound in their meaning, but are often used too readily or superficially. The intention to be integral is not in itself integral.

May we do whatever is needed to make “integral” a fitting term for how we are actually living. May we align ourselves with what-really-matters in every area of our life, so that “integral” becomes not something we believe in, but rather something that we cannot help but live.

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