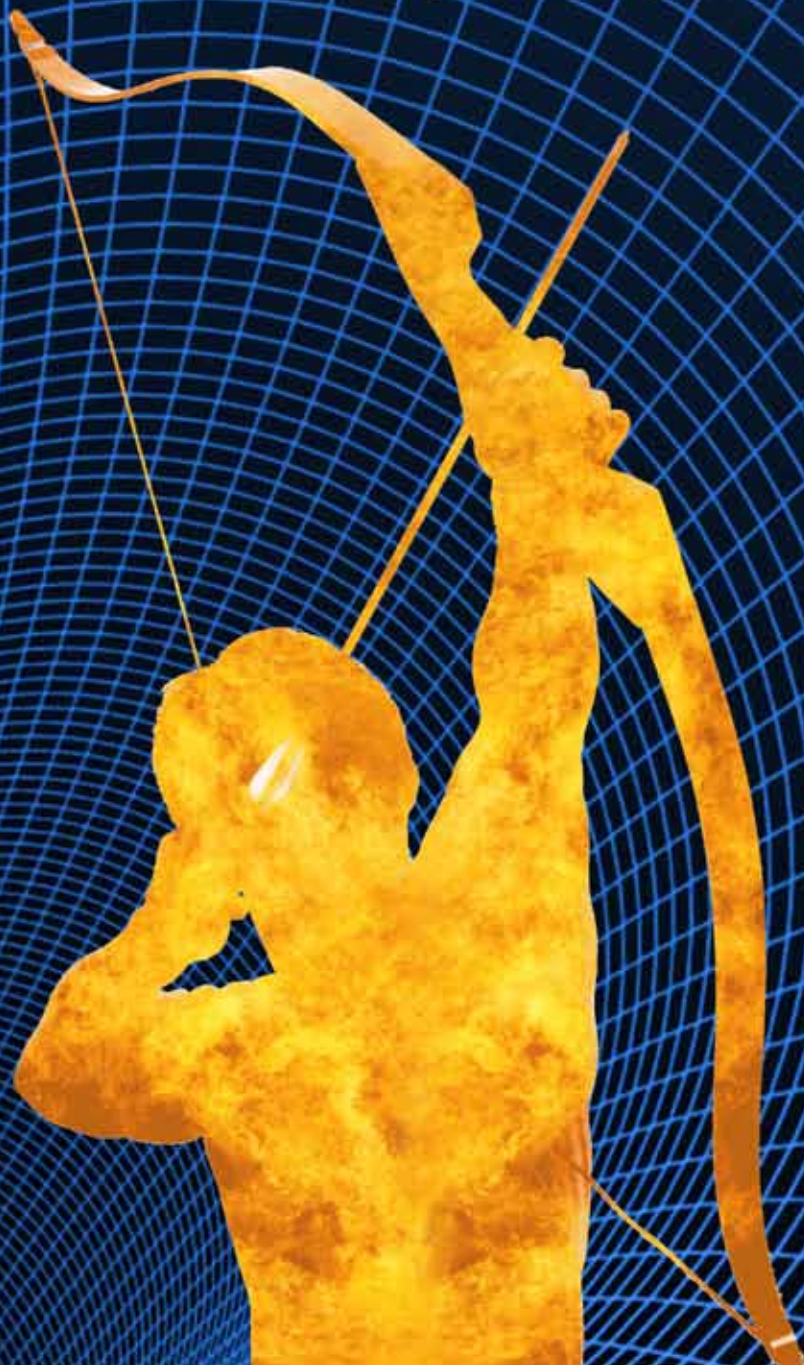


The Ever-Unreasonable Nature of Spirit

by Andrew Cohen



The Ever-Unreasonable Nature of Spirit

Dear Integrales Forum,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in your brave efforts at both opening up and convening such an important conversation. This is a conversation that **MUST** take place if we're all going to find a way to move forward together—a way to move forward that at least a significant number of us will feel comfortable and good about. This is obviously a very complex and challenging subject, made that much more difficult because of the fact that culture is evolving and we are all, as individuals, striving to evolve within and as the leading edge of that culture itself. I read carefully your position paper and found myself for the most part in agreement with your points. In fact, most of the relevant questions that face us all right now, you brought up and explained with the unique clarity of the integral perspective. Therefore, because I am fundamentally in agreement with you, I don't think it is necessary for me to cover the same territory that you have. What did occur to me was to make some additional points that I feel are important to include in the picture—points that will I hope enrich and deepen the dialogue that you have already started.

First of all, I need to state openly from the very beginning that my perspective on this subject is entirely biased by a wholehearted embrace of an evolutionary worldview. Also, my thoughts and opinions come from an unapologetic position that declares first and foremost that Spirit, or that which is Absolute or nonrelative, is *always* higher. And it is from that perspective that the world of relative (but not unimportant) distinctions are seen.

Andrew Cohen

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Part I

Integral Spirituality and the Absolute

The glory, majesty, and incalculable significance of an integral worldview is that it is able to include multiple perspectives in its embrace of just about any subject without diminishing important distinctions. This is a stunning (and ultimately world-changing) capacity that no lesser philosophy has so far been able to accomplish. My own cognitive life has been so enlightened by the integral lens that it's now hard for me to remember what the world looked like before I began to see through its remarkable clarity. It is a vast perspective that always insists upon the inclusion of the multidimensional complexity that the real world of self, culture, and cosmos is always made up of.

But as our colleague and integral mentor Ken Wilber has so often stated, every great leap forward also brings with it

a whole new set of challenges and problems. The integral perspective not only requires but also demands a high level of cognitive development and a capacity to embrace rational thinking with a degree of intensity and commitment that is way above average. One of the great strengths and one of the tell-tale signs of the enlightened thinking of human beings who are truly integrally informed is their often dazzling capacity to embrace multiple perspectives simultaneously, while remaining grounded to an unusual degree in their own higher human qualities, such as compassionate awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. And this is almost always because of their advanced abilities for self-reflection and self-reflexivity.

Paradoxically, these evolved capacities for higher cognition and rational discernment, while illuminating so much of

the interior and exterior of our cosmos to us, can also obscure some of its deepest and highest dimensions. Obviously, this is not a new idea. All the greatest mystics throughout history have made this same point loudly and clearly: in order to truly see and know the face of God, one must be able to transcend the compulsive and mechanical drive of the cognitive process altogether. But paradoxically, what one discovers is that the degree to which one has actually been able to transcend compulsive identification with thought as self is the degree that one will be able to *use* the powers of higher discernment and rationality as the inspired expression of Spirit in action.

In considering many of the very important questions that you have brought to the table, we are faced with an enormous challenge. On one hand, it is only an integral lens that will enable us to address them in any manner that would be even close to adequate. And on the other hand, it may be some subtle biases of that integral lens that inhibit its ability to embrace some important dimensions of this challenge.

Only an integral lens has the capacity to see the spiritual impulse in humanity arising in its very different forms and expressions—both traditional and mystical—throughout a complex process of cultural evolution over a period of about 5,000 years. That’s why we can now begin to address the question of what is a truly appropriate expression of the religious and mystical impulse at our unique time in history.

As you’ve clearly stated, the emergence of modernity during the Western Enlightenment freed the leading edge of humanity from the limitations of mythical thinking and the philosophical and religious dogma of the institution of the Church. Modernity freed our minds to soar to unprecedented heights on the wings of reason and a liberated passion to know what’s true. The modernist revolution was a reaction to the psychic control and mythic absolutism of an outdated religious worldview that could no longer constrain the human drive to innovate and to evolve. What I call the evolutionary impulse just couldn’t be stopped and that great revolution, as all integrally informed individuals know, was an enormous leap forward. And it still is. The great social and personal freedoms that were the gifts of the postmodern revolution were made possible only by the enormous cultural changes that modernism initiated.

The challenge at hand for integral thinkers, as we contemplate the appropriate role of Spirit in self and in culture (and in spiritual teachers), is, I believe, that in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways, integral thinking suffers from a similar mistrust of the Absolute. This is a very interesting predicament. Why? Because of course we want to embrace the great enlightening truths of modernity and postmodernity, but at the same time we have to be sure that our inspired rationality doesn’t inadvertently overshadow and implicitly deny the true nature of Spirit, which in the way that I’m defining it here is always nonrelative or absolute.

Speaking from my own experience, unless our direct access

to higher intuition and enlightened awareness is more powerful than our ability to embrace higher cognition and multiple perspectives, then rationality will inevitably win over the ever-unreasonable nature of Spirit. (“Unreasonable” here refers to the infinite, uncontainable, unimaginable nature of Spirit.) In fact, it’s the dance between the overwhelming unreasonableness of God as Absolute and the ongoing cultivation of our human gift for ever higher and more inclusive and more subtle cognitive capacities that is the evolution of Spirit in the world. But this dance, I believe, must be led by the “too-muchness” of God in order to achieve genuine and significant developmental leaps forward in the evolution of our humanity. What I’m pointing to here is the awakening to our own true Self as Spirit *empowered* by reason—and *not* the other way around (not our own true Self as reason inspired by Spirit). But oh, what a delicate and ultimately challenging balancing act this is in real life.

Being an integrally informed individual doesn’t necessarily adequately prepare one to be able to negotiate the subtlety of the higher and deeper dimensions of the self. Being intellectually familiar with our higher capacities is very different from those capacities having become our actual center of gravity. As Ken Wilber has pointed out on countless occasions, “the map is not the territory,” etc. And this point becomes infinitely complex because, as you’ve already pointed out in your position paper, the rare attainment of higher states may and often does occur within the context of a lower cultural stage of development and/or within a psyche that is in many ways still unconscious to some of its own motives. But this obviously problematic developmental hurdle mustn’t obscure the fundamental point I’m trying to make. Unless the nonrelative nature of Spirit leads the dance of psycho-social-spiritual evolution at the integral stage, then that development will inevitably be inhibited by the very powers of reason that originally liberated our Spirit from the bondage of mythical thinking.

Part II

Translative Versus Transformative Spirituality

There are several further points that I think are important to bring into this discussion. The first is Ken’s all-important distinction between what he has called “translative spirituality” and “transformative spirituality.”¹ The former refers to the essential role and function that religion has historically played in providing a context for interpreting the human experience in relationship to cosmos and culture. The latter points to breakthroughs of mystical insight that catalyze temporary or lasting transformation to higher states and stages. In my own teaching of Evolutionary Enlightenment, I am actually trying to serve both functions. My teaching is transformative because awakening to enlightened awareness is the bedrock of any authentic higher spiritual transformation. It is

translative because it emphasizes that unless we individually and collectively take responsibility for our shared cultural predicament as ourselves and change, then at least at this particular moment in history at the leading edge we won't be going anywhere new.

In any case, the way in which teachers are regarded and judged always needs to be seen in relationship to what it is they are actually trying to accomplish. Is their teaching translative? Or transformative? Or both? And in relationship to both translation and transformation, how deep and profound is the change that they are striving to catalyze? Are they fundamentally focused upon improving people's personal lives in important ways for the better? Or are they attempting to radically transform people at a level so deep that our shared culture is affected, at least to some measure, as a result? When considering the value of any teacher's contribution (or the extent of their failure), the question of how far they are actually trying to take people and how important it is that they succeed has to be taken into consideration here. Not all paths, practices, spiritual teachers, or masters are taking people to the same destinations. When endeavoring to create a new moral contract upon which to build a broad agreement about how we can all move forward together, we continually have to have in our sights where we're trying to go. The reason I'm saying this is that I feel this all-important point, more often than not, seems to be taken for granted by too many of us. Where we're trying to go is not necessarily the same place, and also, that destination may be evolving even as we speak! The meaning of spiritual attainment or enlightenment and the goal of spiritual practice changes and evolves along with culture. Where we are going may be significantly different from where others have come to, even in the recent past. In order to grapple with many of these challenging and often confusing questions myself, many years ago, as a young teacher, I started a magazine with the name "What Is Enlightenment?"

Masters, Teachers, Coaches, and the Complexity of Spiritual Hierarchy

A further important question to consider is: what is the level of attainment of the teacher? Are they a spiritual teacher or are they a spiritual master? These are not the same thing. A spiritual teacher or coach, to varying degrees, is an individual who has a lot of experience of spiritual practice, is well versed in their own particular school of dharma or spiritual philosophy, and may even have had glimpses of enlightened awareness. Some are still inspired seekers. Others are still inspired but are no longer seekers because they have chosen to settle in somewhere "halfway up the mountain." They are "further along the path" and therefore are able to be helpful and supportive and hopefully trustworthy spiritual guides and friends. But they have not yet crossed over to the other side once and for all and forever, never to return again.

A spiritual master is an individual who has unmistakably

crossed over. What that means is that he or she is now *more identified with Spirit* as self than with the mind or ego, at a level that is pre-cognitive. A spiritual master choicelessly and spontaneously awakens spiritual awareness in others and inspires spiritual passion and commitment in the hearts and minds of sincere seekers. A difficult and admittedly challenging truth of mastership is that such an individual has become a light unto him- or herself. It's not possible to be a master unless that's the case, and once again, the reason for that is that masters are now more identified with the infinite and unbound nature of Spirit than with the mind and the ego (their own or anyone else's). That is why, in the end, their only master could really be Spirit itself. This is just the way it is.

Spiritual coaches and teachers can only benefit enormously from applying the kinds of criteria you suggest in your position paper, such as being part of a committed and serious peer group. And there are many reasons why this is important. First of all, to further and support their own ongoing development. Also, because of the enormous power and influence they have over the minds and lives of other human beings, the (hopefully) higher mind of the collective will help rein in their own lower tendencies and narcissistic impulses. But with respect to spiritual masters, well, this presents an enormous conundrum indeed. Why? Because in the way I understand it, at whatever moment fate and karma have come together to create the unique conditions that make that profound leap possible, a mysterious event happens at the level of the soul of such an individual. Ready or not (whatever that means) that person becomes an autonomous expression of Spirit in action — warts and all. Within an integral framework, that also means including whatever personal shadow, cultural prejudice, and narcissistic impulses that may still have been active and unexamined at the moment of that individual's enlightenment. The last forty years of East-meets-West spiritual history tells us that this seems to be just the way it is. Which to put it in plain English means that yes, even slightly crazy and/or somewhat ignorant people can also actually become very enlightened individuals. Can such individuals overcome their shortcomings and evolutionary blind spots? In a perfect world, the answer would be yes, but in the real world, it seems unlikely. And the simple reason for this is because they are already so firmly established on the other side of the ego that, rightly or wrongly, they will probably never experience the evolutionary urgency that others appropriately may experience in relationship to their own need to develop morally, psychologically, etc. This is just one of the big challenges of this important discussion. Of course, there also are and have been spiritual masters who are highly integrated and morally developed individuals with much less shadow and much more light than most, and who are still aspiring to evolve. So . . . is it better to work with a spiritual teacher or coach who still appears to be diligently working on themselves or with a spiritual master who is firmly established on the other side of ego? Obviously it all depends on so many factors . . .

There's one other very important and complex piece of this puzzle to consider, and that is the question of hierarchy. How do

we judge who are the most intellectually discerning, emotionally developed, morally evolved, and ultimately spiritually enlightened individuals, within an integrally informed and evolutionarily inspired hierarchy? As integral philosophy has helped us to appreciate, human beings have different lines of development or “natural intelligences.” Which means to say that in some or several of these higher human capacities, a coach may be more evolved than a master, a coach may be more evolved than a teacher, a teacher may be more evolved than a master, etc.

The Evolution of Enlightenment

Another issue here, which is obviously close to my own heart, has to do with the nature of mysticism and enlightenment itself. The majority of my published dialogues with Ken Wilber in the pages of *EnlightenNext* over the last ten years have been focused in one way or another on a singular theme: the evolution of enlightenment. As I have been stating and restating for many years, the goal of traditional enlightenment and mystical awakening is the attainment of a state of transcendence of, and freedom from, the world of mind, time, and form. If this is the philosophical context in which one has realized higher awareness, then there will be a not-so-subtle bias within the self towards what the Buddha called the Unborn, which inevitably takes one away from the world of time and evolutionary becoming. In this context, the urgency to perfect ourselves is always trumped by the mystical knowledge that everything is always already perfect. This is one of the reasons why I have become such an ardent advocate for evolutionary spirituality and an evolutionarily biased enlightenment. Because in this perspective, the evolution of the self is the evolution of Spirit in form, which is the profound awakening to the shocking truth that God is no more or less evolved or enlightened than you and I are, in time. This approach, in the most positive, philosophically provocative, and morally implicating way, places the greatest emphasis on self-cultivation at all levels, including moral development, psychological self-knowledge, and integral understanding, not to mention awakening to enlightened awareness!

The Hero's Journey Is Fraught with Real Dangers

I think it's important to say that I don't believe spiritual evolution ever has been or ever will be a “safe” endeavor for students or teachers. Any human relationship that involves a serious commitment is fraught with danger. There is danger of disillusionment and disappointment on *both* sides of the spectrum. How many times have I been disappointed and disillusioned by my own teachers? How many of my own students have disappointed me and tempted my own cynicism with

regards to what human beings are capable of? Indeed, how many of my own teachers have I disappointed? And how many people, over all the years I've taught, have felt let down or betrayed by me? Any way one looks at this evolutionary razor's edge, it is very tricky and ultimately challenging territory for anybody who has the courage to engage with psycho-spiritual evolution for real.

The teacher-student relationship is such a complex predicament! After all, we can experience frustration and disillusionment for valid reasons because we may have been legitimately disillusioned and/or betrayed—student by teacher, or teacher by student. And also we may experience those very same emotions and come to the very same conclusions for reasons that, on closer scrutiny, are not really legitimate. Maybe the teacher, for various reasons (psychological or cultural), has unrealistic expectations of his or her students or makes demands that are unreasonable, but because of his or her own lack of self-knowledge or cultural development is unable to see this for what it is. On the other hand, a student may experience overwhelming frustration and intense despair due to the enormity of his or her own reluctance to make the heroic effort towards enlightenment and blame others for his or her own lack of courage and moral fortitude.

The hard truth is and always will be that permanent and abiding higher states of consciousness and higher stages of development are not given to us for free. The attainment of authentic vertical development requires enormous long-term commitment and a rare degree of dedication from both the teacher and the student—a collective hero's journey, for sure! So sincere engagement with spiritual evolution is not safe for anybody involved—and why should it be? After all, the evolution of Spirit as self is the leading edge of that epic adventure. If we tell someone we want to climb Mt. Everest, everyone knows that it's a bold and exciting aspiration and that it's also fraught with dangers. If we want to travel to Mars or even begin to populate the near corners of our own galaxy, it's going to be a thrilling and dangerous adventure. The journey to inner space is the most thrilling journey that there is, but it has never been nor will it ever be danger-free. We are, after all, tampering with our very own psyches in the process of spiritual evolution, and that's always a tricky business. So at least a part of this discussion needs to acknowledge the inherent challenges of the spiritual adventure and the need for all involved—both teachers and students—to take responsibility for that all-important fact.

In my own case, I've always been forthright that I was a teacher who intended to go “all the way” whatever that was going to mean, and invited others to come with me on that journey wherever it was going to lead us. Because of how committed I've been to succeeding and how hard at times I've been willing to push to get there, some real breakthroughs have been made that otherwise simply just wouldn't have occurred. Inertia is not just the nature of matter, it is also one of the

attributes and tendencies of our own humanity—biologically, psychologically, and even spiritually. The evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris has stated that “stress is the *only* thing that creates evolution.” This is important information for both spiritual teachers and students. The individual ego hates stress, for sure. But even more importantly, our culturally conditioned self (traditional, modern, *and* even, yes, also postmodern) rarely appreciates the evolutionary necessity and inevitable stress required to get us to let go of old ways of thinking in order to make room for that which is new. Psycho-social-spiritual evolution always requires letting go of outdated and in many ways no longer relevant or even appropriate ideas, beliefs, and conventions about what human life means and how it is supposed to be lived. If it is true that, as I firmly believe, stress or what I call “evolutionary tension,” *not* bliss or spiritual insight, is almost always the actual catalyst to higher development, then the obvious question arises about the role of the spiritual teacher or master as the catalyzer of that stress. And this leads to the question, how much is enough, and how much is too much? There are no easy answers here. The simple answer, of course, is that it’s enough when tangible evolution is the result. But if the individual moves closer and closer to his or her own evolutionary edge and then suddenly finds themselves unwilling to continue to go further, to continue to consciously participate in their own higher development, this is what could be called a “spiritual emergency,” and the result can at times be breakdown. But it’s also true that this same threshold is the very place where other individuals discover, in a dramatic and infinitely inspiring manner, their own inherent potential to evolve at the level of consciousness, in ways they had never imagined possible. In translativity spirituality, it’s unlikely this kind of stress point will ever be reached or rise to the surface. And that makes sense. But in transformative spirituality, it’s inevitable and even desirable.

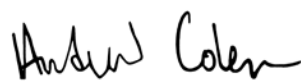
So how to avoid this inevitable evolutionary crisis point at one’s own leading edge? I suppose it would be to avoid transformative spirituality altogether or else to practice it with extreme caution. In that light, it also must be said that those heroic individuals who make significant breakthroughs to higher states *and* higher stages inevitably have an impact on our larger cultural evolution in subtle and also profound ways. But what is the cost of these breakthroughs? Extremely high, of course. As a teacher and advocate of translativity *and* transformative spirituality, I have no doubt that without these individual and collective leaps forward, we all wouldn’t really be going anywhere new. I recognize that some of my own breakthroughs and accomplishments as a teacher have now entered into the cultural zeitgeist at the leading edge. And the reason for this is their cultural relevance to so many other forward-looking souls at this particular point in time. Honestly speaking, looking back on the almost twenty-five years of my teaching career, I can say that if I had been participating in a democratic spiritual culture where consensus ruled, and which

exercised ultimate control over my autonomy as a teacher, I would never have been permitted to do what I needed to do to ensure that these breakthroughs actually occurred. That doesn’t mean the idea of spiritual democracy or collective inquiry and standards is unworthy or of no use. Quite the opposite. As part of an evolutionarily inspired integral embrace of what it means to take the next step, I’m all for it. But we need to simultaneously hold in our awareness the fact that for many reasons, some of which I’ve already mentioned, it won’t necessarily create the conditions for every possibility from which we all will benefit.

An Evolutionary Worldview Is What Makes the Next Step Possible for Us All

When Ken Wilber and I started our “Guru and Pandit” dialogues over ten years ago, almost nobody was speaking about evolution in the context of the awakening to enlightened awareness. I believe perhaps due to the influence of our dialogues about the evolution of enlightenment, as well as my own work and that of some others who are teaching various forms of evolutionary spirituality, it’s become more and more commonplace. In fact, these days the word “evolution” is often put before the word “integral” whenever it relates to spiritual development. The reason this is so important is because it is only the actual awakening to a living evolutionary worldview that makes this discussion a real possibility. Only when we look at spiritual attainment and spiritual mentorship within a context of ongoing individual, cultural, and cosmic evolution can we be in a position to put everything on the table for question. And that’s why this is such a thrilling moment for us all.

Indeed, this is an exciting and important time because so much is possible and imminent that just wasn’t even a few years ago. So many of us are still evolving, still developing, still growing. That’s the secret ingredient to authentic and significant development for the individual and collective self. I know I’m definitely still on this journey. I’m still in the process of getting there. And it’s my sincere aspiration to *always* be in the process of getting there and not quite being there yet. As the Buddha seated firmly and serenely in full lotus posture is the metaphor for the old traditional Enlightenment, for “abiding on the yonder shore”; the posture of the new Evolutionary Enlightenment is that of Eros, standing tall, archer’s bow stretched to its maximum tension, ever-ready for vertical liftoff.



(Endnotes)

1 Wilber, Ken. “A Spirituality that Transforms,”
What Is Enlightenment? Magazine, Fall-Winter, 1997.