

# An Introduction to Integral Life Practice

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Integral Life Practice—the conscious exercise of body, mind, and spirit in self, culture, and nature—uses the AQAL Integral map to orient the many growth techniques invented by humans throughout the ages. Practitioners achieve vertical and horizontal health through a cross-training synergy where growth in one area beneficially impacts other areas. An Integral Life Practice module refers to any accessible component of the human being capable of development. Four essential modules in an Integral Life Practice include the kinesthetic, psychodynamic, cognitive, and meditative. When creating their Integral Life Practice, beginners often go through the simple process of scanning their current practices, identifying gaps using the AQAL map, evaluating their commitment, choosing new practices, and practicing together diligently. Finally, we recognize the paradox that ever-present Awareness is the absolute context for all the relative development fostered by an Integral Life Practice.

## Introduction

An Integral understanding of practice honors all forms of health. On the one hand, an Integral view is an evolutionary perspective, one that implicitly values the healthy expansion of awareness. When development rises freely with few hang-ups, “vertical health” can be said to exist. On the other hand, an Integral perspective simultaneously acknowledges “horizontal health” by including the foundational dimensions where growth occurs: the self, relationships with others, and the world. Integral Life Practice involves cultivating both vertical and horizontal health by nourishing the full spectrum of human capacities in participation with all areas of life. Ken Wilber has defined Integral Life Practice as “the conscious exercise of body, mind, and spirit in self, culture, and nature.” Ultimately, Integral Life Practice draws the practitioner into a way of life that expresses an overarching intention to serve the well-being, happiness, growth, and awakening of all beings, starting with one’s self. One of the first ways people encounter this is through a set of *practices*.

From our first steps in Eden to the present, practice has played an intrinsic role in our development. A practice entails some form of disciplined action, repeated custom, or regular exercise performed with intention. Spurred by the irresistible push and pull of evolution, humanity never ceases to invent practices for growth. The creative Kosmos continues to invent new methods of furthering its own evolution.

The coexistence of two special circumstances allows our current historical period to birth a new breed of practice. First, thanks to the globalization of knowledge, a person can access the world’s entire collection of growth techniques—across cultures and through time. The diversity of transformative practices is truly astounding, from the complex to the simple, the mainstream to the obscure, the scientific to the artistic, the traditional to the outrageous. All of these are available to us right now.

Second, thanks to the efforts of pioneers around the world, a comprehensive vision of reality—an Integral vision—is taking form. Integral mapmakers chart the many dimensions and waves of the evolving human being. The resulting Integral maps create enough space to include all facets of being in a balanced manner. But the Integral embrace involves more than just recognizing multiple clumps or listing eclectic jumbles. It joins, links, and fits different aspects of being together by revealing underlying patterns and relationships. Integral maps push us to consider all the areas in which we can grow through practice, so we do not unwittingly limit our toolboxes.

In short, an Integral map offers a uniquely powerful and efficient way to organize and practice the many growth techniques invented by humans throughout the ages. The result is *Integral Life Practice*, an innovative strategy for conscious evolution.

## Cross-Training Synergy

In its most general form, Integral Life Practice refers to any set of practices that acknowledges and includes the diverse dimensions of human potential. All possible growth areas arise from a common source and relate to each other in an interconnected and interdependent fashion. Integral Life Practice assumes that growth in one area will beneficially impact other areas. A healthy body, for instance, allows a person to engage other growth areas with more endurance, strength, and vitality. Meditation enhances other practices by developing qualities such as focus, clarity, and mindfulness. Whatever the growth area, each evolutionary step creates ripples that move the whole.

In this way, Integral Life Practice acts as a cross-training synergy that embraces one's whole being. By exercising multiple areas at the same time, an Integral practitioner can significantly speed up his or her overall developmental unfolding. Regardless of one's chosen field of specialization (swimming, counseling, or meditation), cross-training will improve that area faster than if it were exercised alone. Integral Life Practice engenders a healthy whole by training interconnected parts simultaneously.

A change in one area typically facilitates a corresponding change in others—for better or worse. A sickness or pathology in one dimension, for example, could negatively influence the entire organism. Ignoring one area might weaken the others. An unbalanced or non-Integral Life Practice overlooks key aspects of human potential, diminishing its overall transformative effectiveness. Historically, this has been the norm.

## Integral Context

The Integral map offers contemporary practitioners a context that includes all areas of growth. To accomplish this, Integral Life Practice revolves around a series of interchangeable modules. The term “module” refers generally to any accessible component of the human being capable of development. Any set of practices that serve a particular kind of growth can be grouped together and thought of as a module. Each module, in turn, houses a number of specific practices. For example, the flow state

module might include researched practices that facilitate peak experiences such as listening to music, dancing, reading, making love, or mountain climbing. Within each module, the practitioner chooses which specific practices best fit his or her unique character.

Choosing a number of specific practices, however, does not necessarily amount to an Integral Life Practice. Rather, the balance of multiple modules within an Integral context makes a practice regimen “Integral.” Thus, an Integral Life Practice includes not only physical practices, psychodynamic practices, or meditative practices, but all three (and possibly more). The modular nature of Integral Life Practice allows it the flexibility to take a number of forms. One form might be Michael Murphy and George Leonard’s version of Integral Transformative Practice. Another might combine Zen meditation, yoga, volunteer work, and psychotherapy. As defined here, each example qualifies as an Integral Life Practice.

Though vastly encompassing, Integral Life Practice need not be complex. In fact, the Integral Theory behind it is quite simple. It combines the most widespread, cross-cultural, and profound human intuitions. Notice how every speaking community refers to the same basic reality dimensions. Virtually every language uses first-person, second-person, and third-person pronouns to indicate three very real dimensions of being. The “I” dimension includes the personal experiences and intentions occurring within an individual. The “We” dimension (you and I) involves shared meaning and mutual understanding among people. And the “It” dimension includes all material manifestation.

These “Big Three” reality dimensions may appear ridiculously obvious when pointed out because they are the three chief perspectives on any occasion, the three basic contexts of manifest existence, and the three fundamental dimensions of a sentient being. An Integral practitioner consciously strives to include, balance, and harmonize these three dimensions, serving not only him or herself (“I”), but also culture (“We”) and nature (“It”). The four quadrants are just another way to represent the Big Three. Subdividing “It” into singular “It” (exterior-individual) and plural “Its” (exterior-collective), along with “I” (interior-individual) and “We” (interior-collective) makes the four quadrants.

While quadrants denote horizontal dimensions, levels refer to the vertical waves of human evolution. Development unfolds from physical to emotional to mental to spiritual levels. Integral Life Practice recognizes both dimensions and waves, or quadrants and levels, hence the phrase “all-quadrants, all-levels” or AQAL. This approach simply suggests that we consciously touch the many waves of the self, and do so in relationships with others and with the natural world. In short, an Integral Life Practice exercises body, mind, and spirit (the “all levels” part) in self, culture, and nature (the “all quadrants” part).

In addition to quadrants and levels, the AQAL model identifies lines, states, and types as fundamental elements of any comprehensive map of reality. Each of these five elements can function as a module in an Integral Life Practice because they already exist as part of your own being. They cannot be imposed from the outside because they

are already part of your makeup from the inside: *quadrants* (the interior and exterior of the individual and collective), *levels* (e.g., physical, emotional, mental, spiritual), *lines* (e.g., cognitive, interpersonal, moral), *states* (e.g., waking, dreaming, deep sleep), and *types* (e.g., masculine and feminine). When you embrace, balance, and develop these modules, you are simply making friends with aspects of your own Self. Intentionally following the deepest contours of your very own nature is the foundation of any Integral Life Practice.

## Four Essential Modules

Initiating an Integral Life Practice does not have to be an overwhelming or stressful undertaking. No Integral Life Practice strategy advises beginners to train every potential growth area immediately. Instead, start with a few essential components of the self-system. The modules outlined below represent four basic areas that appear to be fundamentally important to the growth of a human self: Body (Physical Module), Emotions (Shadow Module), Mind (Mental Module), and Spirit (Meditative Module). By choosing one or more practices within each module you will cover the most potent bases as you embark on your Integral Life Practice.

### The Kinesthetic or Physical Module

Kinesthetic intelligence refers to the body's wisdom. A person's body awareness manifests in creative movement, agility, coordination, flexibility, strength, and speed. Dancers and athletes with high kinesthetic development masterfully move with balance and grace. Through years of practice, they allow the body's intuition to come forth organically. The exterior correlate of kinesthetic intelligence is a healthy physical body. Practices that play a role in guiding the body to optimum wellness include the following:

- Diet: vitamins, supplements, cleanses, raw foods, low sugar;
- Anabolic Exercise: weightlifting (resistance training), yoga;
- Cardiovascular Exercise: nature hiking, tennis, biking, swimming;
- Bodywork: massage, Rolfing, chiropractic, Alexander technique.

Of course, these are just a few of the many practices that cultivate kinesthetic awareness and a fit body. Operating out of a healthy body facilitates development in all other areas, just as a sick body hinders other areas from realizing their full potential. Consider how a hypothetical Integral Practitioner named Jackie engages the Kinesthetic Module. First, she takes a multivitamin once a day and maintains a nutritious diet. Riding her bike to work gives her a great cardiovascular workout and attending vinyasa power yoga after work two days a week enhances both muscle tone and body awareness. Finally, Jackie visits a massage therapist once a month to free blocked energy and to explore further methods of restoring balance to the body.

### The Psychodynamic or Shadow Module

Simply stated, this module employs psychological techniques to make the unconscious

conscious. The unconscious or shadow refers to those aspects of our self that we disown, forget, bury, or make dark—our opposites. For example, a man who considers himself polite and gentle might carry hidden rudeness and aggression within his shadow. Similarly, a perpetually cheerful and perky woman may discover a great, unacknowledged sadness crying within her unconscious. Psychodynamic practices at this level help us confront our opposites by regaining contact with them and fully experiencing disowned feelings and tendencies. Integrating the shadow has traditionally been accomplished through working with a skilled professional. Schools of psychotherapy such as gestalt, Jungian, humanistic, psychoanalysis, music/dance/art therapy, and many others each have their own techniques. Peak experiences and penetrating insights gained from participation in workshops and seminars often complement and accelerate the momentum attained in psychotherapy sessions. In addition to facilitated work, self-directed psychodynamic practices can also make a huge impact. Literally thousands of these practices exist, only a few of which are listed here:

- Shadow work: emotional release, assuming responsibility, reversing projections;
- Dream work: remembering dreams, dream journal, interpretive approaches;
- Internal dialogue: recognizing inner monologues, journaling, speaking as the shadow.

Without the light of awareness, the shadow lurks in the background and causes confusion, distress, and difficulties. Ignoring the shadow comes at a steep price: projections. We project all those feelings and qualities that we define as “not me” onto other people, so that the characteristics in other people that disturb us most are actually unrecognized aspects of ourselves. Only by taking responsibility for our projections and reversing them can we realize the self-inflicted nature of our dilemma.

Jackie’s shadow work consists of two short practices. In the morning, she remembers and records her dreams in a journal. She then spends a few minutes carrying on a dialogue with the main characters in the dream. If her dream involved a monster, she would speak as the monster using first-person pronouns, and then respond as herself and so on. In the evenings, she reviews the day and chooses the person who upset her most (i.e., boyfriend, family member, co-worker). Then she takes the perspective of that person and participates in another short dialogue using the same technique. These shadow dialogue practices help Jackie re-contact and integrate the disassociated parts of her self.

### The Cognitive or Mental Module

Cognitive intelligence deals with the realm of knowing. It includes intellectual abilities such as analytic reasoning, reading, writing, analyzing, problem solving, information processing, and critical thinking. However, the defining characteristic of mental growth is the ability to take different perspectives. If one cannot cognitively put themselves in another’s shoes and experience the other’s viewpoint, then one cannot access the deepest feelings of compassion and love for the other. For this reason, cognitive

development is necessary, but not sufficient for, a number of other developmental lines such as moral, values, emotional, and interpersonal. The following practices address this issue by widening the mental lens through which we experience the world:

- Vision: affirmation, visualization, forming a personal life philosophy;
- Knowledge: reading, critical reflection, academic investigation;
- Perspective Taking: dialogue, role playing, acting;
- Expressive: writing, web design, creative projects, hobbies, drawing.

These practices involve not only a gathering of additional concepts and ideas, but also a transformation in the way we process, organize, and interpret concepts and ideas. It traces the evolution of *how* we know, not just *what* we know. Human cognition evolves from sensation to perception to impulse to symbols to concepts to concrete reasoning to abstract reasoning to vision-logic and further. The ability to take multiple perspectives—and with it one’s view of reality—expands as cognitive intelligence grows. At the vision-logic level, one gains the capability to grasp and apply the Integral framework. Vision-logic cognition recognizes the multiple dimensions of transformation and how they might all be embraced through an Integral Life Practice strategy. The Cognitive Module is the mental carrying case that correctly orients an Integral Life Practice.

Jackie strengthens her cognitive intelligence by actively studying and applying the AQAL model, principally by reading and critically examining knowledge resources such as those published in this journal. At work, she approaches problems with an Integral lens, uncovering the full problem and creatively implementing comprehensive solutions. In dialogue with coworkers and friends, she articulates her viewpoint while seeking to understand alternative perspectives.

### The Contemplative or Meditative Module

Integral Life Practice gives special attention to this module. Contemplative or meditative practices reveal the transpersonal territory beyond the egoic self. These realms unfold to reveal the extraordinary depth of Kosmic consciousness. Contemplative practices, such as the ones listed below, bring forth a life context of deep awareness that permeates and enriches practices in all other areas:

- Formless Meditation: shikantaza, “Who Am I?” inquiry, vipassana, dzogchen, witnessing;
- Meditation with Form: TM, tonglen, mantras, following the breath;
- Inquiry: diamond approach, jnana yoga, koans;
- Prayer: contemplative, centering, shamanic, devotional;
- Movement meditation: Sufi dervishes, tantra, Osho’s Nantaraj, Tai Chi.

This list, of course, samples only a minute fraction of the contemplative techniques in existence. Research concludes that a meditation practice accelerates the evolution of one’s consciousness. Anything that you can witness cannot be the deepest “you.” You can be aware of body sensations, thoughts, and feelings, so therefore you are not your

body sensations, your thoughts, or your feelings. Meditation practice facilitates the transcendence and inclusion, of the ego or personality, not its destruction. Seasoned meditators still have an ego, but the practice relieves them from an exclusive identification with it. As the smaller identities fall away, more expansive layers of self unfold.

Jackie does Vipassana meditation 25 minutes weekday mornings and extends this to an hour on the weekends. Jackie's meditation practice serves as a context for her Integral Life Practice because it brings a powerful awareness and depth to all her other practices.

## Creating an Integral Life Practice

The four recommended modules—Kinesthetic, Psychodynamic, Cognitive, and Meditative—offer beginning practitioners a firm Integral foundation within a wide freedom of choice. Establishing an Integral Life Practice is as easy as choosing at least one practice from each module and practicing them concurrently. In time, some practitioners may want to add additional modules such as a subtle energy module, relationship module, ethics module, affective module, romantic/sexual module, or action-in-the-world module. A design process can help you get started regardless of how many modules you choose. One strategy for creating a personalized Integral Life Practice can be summed up in five steps.

### Step #1: Scan Current Practices

First, assess what you are already doing. Use the Integral map to scan your current practices and note which modules apply. Keep in mind that many practices, such as yoga, t'ai chi, and aikido, apply to multiple modules. Of course, the basic dimensions and waves exist as the diverse faces of the Kosmos whether you consciously acknowledge them or not. So ask yourself whether you intentionally touch base with the levels of your own being—body to mind to spirit—and whether you pay attention to how each of these exists in yourself, in others, and in nature. Which current practices, if any, fit within the Kinesthetic, Psychodynamic, Cognitive, and Meditative modules? Performed correctly, Integral scanning presents an honest appraisal of your current practice status.

### Step #2: Identify Gaps

Second, locate imbalances in your current practice. Compare what you are already doing with the “all-quadrants, all-levels” model of Integral Life Practice. Where are the gaps in your practice? Which of the four essential modules are missing? For instance, meditators who neglect the lower levels might benefit from playing tennis on a regular basis. Another example might be psychotherapists who ignore higher-level practices such as meditation. Individuals that pay too much attention on the “I” dimension can balance their self practices by sharing more energy with family, friends, and community (the “We” dimension) or by focusing more on the natural world (the “It” dimension).

Others who lose themselves when serving others (culture) or who get overly absorbed in the exterior world (nature) may identify gaps in cultivating inner awareness, self-reliance, and autonomy (self). The basic idea here is to identify those dimensions and waves that you are presently neglecting or overemphasizing.

### Step #3: Evaluate Commitment

Third, reflect on the motivations behind your practice. Integral Life Practice is a long-term commitment. Lasting growth requires extended periods of diligent practice. Promises of a quick fix and instant enlightenment, at best, amount to temporary *state* changes. In contrast, an Integral Life Practice facilitates permanent transformations in one's *level* of consciousness. Only take on an Integral Life Practice that you can honestly and logistically commit to for the long-term.

When evaluating their commitment, many people discover that time limitations place constraints on the number of modules they can feasibly handle. How many modules and practices can you realistically take on? A few modules practiced with full dedication and integrity will be more effective, enjoyable, and rewarding than many practiced half-heartedly.

### Step #4: Choose Practices

Fourth, determine specific growth techniques to add or delete from your Integral Life Practice. In light of your commitment, find particular practices that fill the modular gaps you have already identified. For example, if you happen to neglect the psychodynamic module, then consider psychotherapy or choose a particular practice such as dream journaling. Practitioners who attain mastery tend to choose practices that they intrinsically love doing. Satisfaction from intentional, long-term practice comes from enjoying the process itself, in addition to any benefits that may arise. Yet selecting practices is trickier than it seems. The egoic mind presents a danger when it chooses practices for the holistic organism based on its narrow needs and desires. To avoid this potential trap, the many dimensions and waves of human nature must all participate in cocreating an Integral Life Practice. The unique flavors and temperaments of both practices and people should also be considered. Certain practices work better for some people than others, depending on such aspects as their personality type. Finally, more advanced practitioners may even abandon traditional and scientifically-validated techniques as they follow the organic unfolding of new practices from their own creative intuition. Whatever the case, each person must find the particular practices he or she deems most valuable and worthwhile.

### Step #5: Practice Diligently

Fifth, train with full engagement. Allow your Integral Life Practice to flow into an Integral lifestyle. What were once new practices or special activities become seamless aspects of ordinary life. A supportive community not only accelerates this transition, but also informs the creation of an Integral Life Practice at every step. Earnest group interaction

helps avoid pitfalls, such as ignoring personal shadow areas, egoic choosing, breaking commitments, inflating a sense of progress, and going through the motions. An Integral Life Practice community should ideally have several mentors or teachers due to the unlikelihood that one person could ever master and guide others in *all* areas of human growth. The best support system involves people with similar Integral Life Practices who can share their own experiences and listen to yours, people who can sustain you during breakdowns and invigorate you during plateaus. Practicing together forms the basis of an Integral culture, and human capacities tend to develop most fully within cultures that honor them.

Yet, no matter how many steps are followed, transformation gives no guarantee when or if it will occur. We cannot will or force meaningful change to occur. Mental expectations, rigid goals, or attachment to results can sidetrack the mysterious grace of transformative unfolding. However, an Integral Life Practice created from authentic intentions and practiced with a soft openness can function as a skillful means for inviting growth. George Leonard and Michael Murphy eloquently express the paradoxical nature of living practices:

When wisely pursued, such practices bestow countless blessings. If we do not obsess about their results, they make us vehicles of grace and reveal unexpected treasures. In this, they often seem paradoxical. They require time, for example, but frequently make more time available to us: They can slow time down, and open us to the timeless moment from which we have arisen. They require sacrifice, but they restore us. While demanding the relinquishment of established patterns, they open us to new love, new awareness, new energy; what we lose is replaced by new joy, beauty, and strength. They require effort, but come to be effortless. Demanding commitment, they eventually proceed like second nature. They need a persistent will, but after a while flow unimpeded. Whereas they are typically hard to start, they eventually cannot be stopped.<sup>1</sup>

## The Wetness of Waves

Integral Life Practice is a little bit like surfing; we ride waves of consciousness. Through committed practice, our capacity to master larger and larger waves improves. Yet as we surf from wave to wave, a faint tension of grasping, desiring, and effort lingers in the background. An inner seeking drives our Integral Life Practice. Wherever we are, we tend to gaze longingly over the horizon for the next big wave.

But what do all waves have in common? In what context do they all arise? From the gigantic to the miniscule, all waves share an ever-present wetness. No degree of ability, no amount of effort, no practice can usher waves with greater wetness. A wave never enters into wetness nor does it ever exit wetness. All waves are always already perfectly wet.

An open invitation perpetually welcomes everyone to stop and feel the wetness. Soak as pure Presence. Rest as the simple feeling of Being. Relax as the spaciousness of open Awareness. No boundaries survive the emptiness of the Absolute. Spirit completely saturates the Kosmos, and your present awareness contains this entire Truth.

Integral Life Practice is a way to express this—that which we already are, and not as a means to attain something we lack. No transformative practice can bring you closer to Spirit because you are already dripping wet as Spirit right now. Ever-present awareness is the absolute context for all the relative development fostered by an Integral Life Practice. All change occurs within the changeless, all transformation arises in stillness, all practices take place within perfection. Practicing within such a context means just this: abide as wetness, embrace all waves. Integral Life Practice offers the most comprehensive strategy for *becoming* amidst the radiant embrace of timeless *Being*.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Leonard & Murphy, *The life we are given*, 1995, p. xvi.