

On Intellectuals and Other New-Age Nightmares

The entire New Age movement--using that term in its broadest and most general sense--is on terribly ambivalent terms with its own mind. The New Age simply does not know what to do with the intellect, the rational mind, the verbal and conceptual capacity that tends annoyingly to arise in the midst of life.

As one of the new age's designated intellectuals, I'd like to look at this tricky topic, and perhaps offer a view from within: the role of the intellect in spiritual life; the path of jnana yoga (the spiritual path of the intellect); and the joys and terrors of that most uniquely human instrument, the verbal and rational mind.

And I offer this, not as an intellectual or academic discussion, but as a series of personal reflections.

The Horror of the Rorschach

During the two decades that I have been writing books on spiritual topics, I have consistently heard a handful of criticisms that seem to have almost nothing to do with me--they are repeated exclusively by people who have never actually met me--which is quite puzzling, until you realize that these criticisms apparently reflect not so much on me as on our strange relationship to our own intellects. Our own intellects seem to frighten us; and therefore, as an "intellectual," I am a Rorschach for the nightmare that the rational mind induces in the heart of the new-age mood.

I have as many faults as the next person, and there are numerous criticisms that I think are painfully accurate, and I try to take them very seriously. But the criticisms I am discussing here

are, for the most part, so wildly inaccurate, you simply have to start looking elsewhere for their origin. As a Rorschach, I am on the receiving end of a series of stark projections, which tell us much more about the mood of the projectors than the characteristics of the ink blot.

This is exacerbated by the fact that I am not a public person, which further--and intensely--invites projections to rush into this vacuum. This lack of visibility, like the psychoanalyst sitting behind you but never really seen, acts to bring forth the strangest free associations about what I must really be like.

It's true that I am not a very public person, but the reasons in my case are very straightforward. When I wrote my first book, *The Spectrum Consciousness*, I was a tender twenty three, and the attention that book generated catapulted me from obscure biochemistry graduate student to "new age teacher." Offers to lecture and give workshops poured in, and I eagerly took many of them up. It was a heady, wonderful time.

And yet, after a year or so of this minor public fame, a very stark choice began to present itself: It became utterly obvious that, at least in my case, I could continue this public path--and get virtually no new work done at all--or close the public route down, and return to the more solitary, lonely pursuit of the writer. I kept thinking at the time, "I can live off what I did yesterday, or continue to create." That line constantly went through my mind.

And worse, it was obvious that, at least for me, I would not be able to mix the public and the private very easily: the more I did of one, the less I could do of the other. And so I rather abruptly--and totally--stopped any sort of public theater, and concentrated solely on writing. Although I have often chafed under this decision, I have not changed my mind in twenty years.

But immediately I found a strange phenomenon that would follow me intensely all those twenty years. In America, not to seek the limelight is to be very suspect. As Gary Trudeau put it, "Only in America could the failure to promote oneself be widely regarded as arrogance."

Since most people delight in public attention, they have a hard time imagining why you don't. And so into this vacuum they often picture what would have to happen to them in order for them to refuse the limelight, and it's usually something ghastly and truly horrible. For two decades I've heard I have a terminal illness with a few years to live. Most recently I heard "a crippling fear of flying," which I greeted with enormous relief because at least I wasn't dying. Arrogance is certainly another commonly-offered reason as to why I don't appear in public (as in Trudeau's quote). And I often hear variations on "emotional cripple" or "emotionally wounded," as well as two perennial favorites: fear of nature and fear of women (don't ask me why, exactly; except that males generically are supposed to be riddled with these fears, which now come in a convenient economy package: according to ecofeminists, these two fears can now be had for the price of one). Occasionally the reasons are actually very sweet and touching: people will assume I can't afford to travel and so they send me plane fare, or volunteer to house sit, or some such.

To this motley mix of putative motives, I have recently heard a new one: I don't want people to question my system (that is, the ideas presented in my dozen or so books). But, of course, "my system" gets intensive and prolonged questioning from every imaginable quarter, whether I show up or not. I'd have to be more than a bit dim to think that sticking my head in the sand would staunch that avalanche.

But all of these Rorschach motives do indeed reflect on some very genuine and very legitimate issues. The role of the intellect and thus of the intellectual--especially in the spiritual process itself: just what should their roles be?

Good Cop, Bad Cop

As I began to suggest, people in new age or spiritual circles tend to be on very ambivalent and awkward terms with the intellect, and especially with rationality. And I think this is very understandable.

We all realize that spiritual awareness is, in many ways, trans-rational: it discloses a truth and goodness and beauty far beyond anything that the mind in general, and rationality in particular, could even imagine. And most of us who pursue a spiritual path--say, meditation or zazen or yoga--are in fact attempting to go beyond the mind and discover instead the "over-mind," the transcendental, the radiant glory of the very Divine, surpassing anything that can be put into words or concepts or mental ideas, the profound simplicity of what is, before it is named or categorized or intellectually boxed and caged.

We want to go trans-rational, and this is well and good. But in our haste to get outside the confines of the rational, we all too often end up uncritically embracing anything that is non-rational, including many things that are frankly pre-rational, regressive, infantile, narcissistic.

This confusing of pre-rational with trans-rational is called the "pre/trans fallacy," and it works both ways: the orthodox and conventional theorists deny any sort of trans-rational reality at all, so every time a genuinely transcendental and spiritual occasion occurs, they simply claim it is merely the irruption of some infantile, pre-rational, regressive elements. And on the other side, those of us who know that there are real and genuine spiritual realities--trans-rational realities--sometimes in our zeal and excitement end up elevating pre-rational nonsense to trans-rational glory. Reductionists, elevationists: two sides of the same mistake.

And that is exactly why, I believe, we in new-age circles have such an ambivalent relationship to our own intellectual and rational capacities. We are indeed supposed to transcend rationality; but we have to get up to it in the first place! And too much of what we call "beyond rationality" is really quite beneath it.

So we don't quite know what to do with our minds. Love them or hate them, pursue them or reject them, polish them or smash them: this strange and ghastly beast the intellect.

And therefore we don't know quite what to do with our intellectuals. Because, of course, our intellectuals are in a "good cop, bad cop" role. They tend to criticize and clean out the pre-rational and regressive and narcissistic nonsense, but they tend also to deny and prevent the emergence of greater trans-rational truths. They "outlaw" both the lowest and the highest, and allow only the mediocre middle. We can appreciate them cleaning out the basement, but they also prevent a view from the rooftop!

And that, I think, is why it is so important for intellectuals to pursue, first and foremost, a spiritual discipline. A way to set the mind aside, and open to a grand and greater glory: trans-rational to the core, spiritual in depth, radiant in its release from the confines of the mind.

The intellect, of course, can be brought to the spiritual path, and there it is placed on the raging fire of primordial awareness, and there it burns to ashes along with everything else. When the intellect is made servant, it is wonderful friend, shining the brightest of lights on the darkest of realms, bringing warmth and clarity to all it touches. It is no accident that many of very greatest spiritual sages have been jnani yogis: those who used intellect to go beyond intellect. Shankara, Aurobindo, Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Schelling, Nagarjuna, Plato: their minds burned so brightly they sizzled the ego in the process.

Public/Private

I will pursue that topic in a moment, but I don't want to ignore a certain criticism: what about this private versus public role of the intellectual? Many critics, for example, have worried that I am hermetically sealed off from the world, avoiding the limelight. I am not pursuing the limelight, it is true, but I am far from hermetically sealed. As only one example, three upcoming issues of ReVision Journal are being devoted entirely to Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, with over a dozen contributors aggressively going at my work, both pro and con, and then with my responses and interactions. My ideas are open to unrelenting and ferocious exposure, and I hear every single item: on a weekly basis, sometimes hundreds of faxes, phone calls, messages, letters, not to mention a half-dozen people knocking on the front door: I am absolutely bombarded with feedback.

As for public performances, which is what many people mean by "public," I have occasionally dropped the stringency of my "no public" stance. I have given seminars on my material--most recently, on Sex, Ecology, Spirituality during its actual writing (on several occasions to the faculty and students of The Naropa Institute). When I do these, they never have a time limit, people are free to ask whatever they want as long as they want, and interact however they want, no matter how "messy."

It was in just this spirit that, most recently, I agreed to talk to David Guy, who was doing a piece about me for New Age Journal, and as usual, I put no time limit on it. I made it clear that I would talk to him literally as long as he wanted. The last journalist I made that offer to camped at my house and talked to me for over 100 hours (see Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*). Mr. Guy got tired after about 7 hours, so I suppose I lucked out in this case.

But I have always been dead serious about these "no time limit" offers: Instead of talking with, say, twelve journalists for one hour, I'd much prefer to talk with one journalist for twelve hours. The hope is always that he or she would then really begin to understand some of the delicate and difficult issues involved, and really begin to grasp some of the issues in depth, and not just in a whiz-bang hour of superficial "what's-your-favorite-color?" type of talk. And so, it's true, for that reason, you won't often see a journalistic piece on me.

The Walking Dead

Another major complaint I often hear is that I am "bloodless." That is, I myself--being an intellectual--must lack feelings, lack compassion, lack emotions, and so on. I have heard this charge for twenty years, always from people who have never actually met me. I'm sure there is some truth to this, though I'd like to think it's a "grain of..." But I'm also sure these rumors are wildly exaggerated and much bigger than I, and this is what is so interesting: it again is Rorschach time.

I think that, too, is a very important and telling point. It relates directly to our delicate and ambiguous relationship with our own intellects, and therefore with our intellectuals: rationality is better than pre-rational, but worse than trans-rational. Good cop, bad cop, and who will pull you over on the highway of life? And will you then resent it?

Because of this, I think, many people simply cannot believe that intense intellectual accomplishment could possibly be coupled with emotional sensitivity. If you have a strong head, you must have no heart. I think there is a wild and wacky equation hidden in there somewhere: "IQ goes up, emotional sensitivity goes down." (I wonder, does that also mean: if you get in touch with

your feelings, your IQ goes into remission? So that, for example, the more psychotherapy you do, the dumber you become? It's the same wacky equation, don't you think?).

Many critics have decided that in person I am actually a warm and fine fellow, and so they have recently made a much narrower claim, which is that I am a very warm person, but my writing is bloodless. I have no idea how to respond to that. Most people have found the language of, for example, *Sex*, *Ecology*, *Spirituality* to be passionate, intense, emotional, even poetical at points, and yes, also logical. But it is, after all, supposed to be an academic book. So let me try this: if these critics find my writing bloodless, I would like to recommend, as a point of reference, that they simply read any German philosopher whose name begins with an H.

I have written on my personal life in a book called *Grace and Grit*. In that book it was entirely appropriate for me to share deeply personal experiences, in deeply emotional terms. But those types of deep personal feelings are simply not appropriate for academic books: they will get you disqualified immediately in the eyes of the intellectual world--and rightly so. It implies that what is really important to you is not the Kosmos but your feelings about the Kosmos. There is, shall we say, an appropriate place for both.

But I'll tell you what has always worried me about this "bloodless" charge, in any of its forms. Because of our incredibly ambivalent relationship to our intellect and our intellectuals, there is a tendency to think that if something is dispassionate, it must be completely false, in all ways untrue, not to be trusted at all. It's as if we were to approach Albert Einstein: "You say E equals mc^2 ; but you are not in touch with your feelings, Albert; therefore, E simply cannot equal mc^2 ."

This bloodless charge horribly disfigures the face of truth, it ravages the search for meaning, it tears into the heart of the genuine and renders it undone. There is a place for feeling, and a place for dispassionate clarity; can we not honor both?

The Hymn of Spiritual Practice

The field I often write in is known as transpersonal psychology. If you're interested, the very best introduction to this field is *Paths Beyond Ego*, edited by Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan. Roger and Frances, as many of you know, are and have been leaders in this field for quite some time, and their books are highly recommended. (My major claim to fame, of course, was to be best man at their wedding.) Frances has a new book just now coming out from Quest, *Shadows of the Sacred*, which is a rather extraordinary account of her integrating psychotherapy and spirituality in a clinical setting.

Nonetheless, the point of my books is not to get people involved in intellectual head trips. That is exactly what my books are attempting to stop, as those who have read them will readily acknowledge. The problem is, many people--academic or otherwise--are already playing head games: the search for the new paradigm, the search for a new holistic philosophy, the search for a new integrative worldview... and on and on and on.

So I have attempted to engage these people in their own game, and play it very fast and hard, simply to get to this conclusion: at some point we--you and I--must stop this intellectual head tripping, and we must begin actual spiritual practice. You and I must begin contemplation, or yoga, or satsang, or zazen, or vision quest, or any number of other genuine contemplative practices (there are hundreds, I'm only mentioning a few). But we must actually do this as a practice; not talking religion, not chit-chat, but engaged, concerned, passionate, intense practice.

And in that practice, all your books, and all your thoughts, and all your ideas will fail you miserably. You will burn in the fire of your own primordial awareness, and from the ashes of the smoking ruins of the shattered ego, there will spontaneously arise a new destiny in the stream of consciousness itself, and you will be taken, transformed, ravished and transfigured in the glory of the Divine, and you will speak with the tongues of angels and see with the eyes of saints, and glories upon glories will enwrap and uplift your soul, and the lost and found Beloved will whisper in your ear, and the Divine will sparkle so intensely in every sight and sound, the wind will hum the hallowed names of the radiant Divine, while the clouds will crawl across the sky just to call your name, and your very Self will resurrect as the entire Kosmos itself, the haunting sound of one hand clapping in each and every direction, and it all will be undone in that extraordinary hymn. The hymn of spiritual practice.

That has nothing to do with books--reading them or writing them. But, as I was saying, many people are already engaged in merely approaching the Divine in verbal forms, in mental forms, in religious games of chit-chat. In other words, they are not going trans-mental, they are simply stuck in the mental. They are not going trans-verbal, they are simply stuck in the verbal.

And so I attempt to directly challenge those verbal and mental games, and try to beat them on their own terms, and then point people to real practice, genuine spiritual practice. That is the single and unmistakable goal of the twelve books I have authored.

But I am not doing this as if everybody should and must read my books, which many critics seem to imply. There are tons of easier ways to get into spiritual practice than wading through my dozen tomes! I am doing this simply for those people who do this. That is, play intellectual games. I attempt to use the mind to beat the mind, and point to the trans-mental, the over-mental, the radiant and luminous shining in the Emptiness of all that arises.

In India, as I have often pointed out, a distinction is made between a pandit and guru. A pandit is a spiritual practitioner, who also has a flair for the academic or scholarly or intellectual, and so becomes a teacher of the Divine, an articulator, a defender of the dharma, an intellectual samurai. A guru, on the other hand, is one who engages people directly and publicly, and gets intimately involved with the ordeal of transforming their karmas. Neither calling is to be taken lightly.

I am a pandit, not a guru, and I have made that clear from day one. That is the world line I inhabit; that is the worldspace I have incarnated. I realize that in America, this will always be viewed as just a little bit odd, in that absolutely everybody is standing up in public and claiming to be a guru or master of one form or another. This has no allure for me.

To use the mind to beat the mind. My writings therefore always have two parts: a strong criticism of the merely pre-rational, in an attempt to get people up to rationality; and then an equally intense attack on rationality, in an attempt to open people to the trans-rational. And thus, in these guises, I am always playing both good cop and bad cop--and depending where and how we run into each other, you will see me as warm and generous friend or wretched and bloodless enemy.

And so, you see, I believe that, quite apart from me personally, so much of the generic criticism comes directly back to this tricky and ambivalent relationship we have with our own minds, our own rationality, our own intellects--and therefore our own intellectuals. And I think the correct response is, in both cases: great servant, wretched master.

If it is genuinely made into servant, the intellect is a fast and furious path to enlightenment. The mind burns bright, incinerating obstacles with an extraordinary efficiency--bloodless in the

highest sense, it takes no prisoners, because who wants to keep the ego in a cage? Why not simply incinerate it, burning clean as ashes?

The path of the intellect--the path of jnana yoga--is not only a path to enlightenment, it is a path of expressing that enlightenment in every word and gesture. The true intellectual, established in the Heart of Formless awareness, creates an opening or clearing in which the Truth can manifest and have its way with the soul. And the authentic intellectual simply creates that opening, and gets out of the way as fast as possible.

And that is why the way of the jnana yogi is both a path to enlightenment and an expression of an already-accomplished awakening: spiritual cause and spiritual effect joined in each and every word: the path and the goal united in each and every syllable, and in that miraculous space God and the Goddess will bless each word with infinite wonderment, and you will be redeemed as words run cross the page, and your readers, too, will be ushered into the timeless mystery. The place your words come from is the same place the Big Bang came from: straight out of the Heart of Emptiness, straight out of your own primordial awareness, right now and right now and forever right now.

The Radiance of Jnana Yoga

In the genuine path of the jnana yogi, in other words, the intellect is servant, not master; and just there resides the strangest secret to the successful path of jnana yoga. It is not the jnana yogi but the average person who is dominated by the intellect. It is in fact the vast majority of people for whom the intellect is master.

Most people are typically dominated by their thoughts, their images, their half-unconscious ideas and persuasions: precisely the state in which the intellect cannot get out of the way; precisely

the state in which the intellect is unconscious master, not conscious servant; and thus precisely the state in which the intellect could never be a tool of Spirit.

I know, because I have also seen what the intellect can do when it takes control of awareness. When the self-contraction coils, and the ego gets the upper hand, the intellect spends its time not being rational but merely spinning rationalizations. I've had more than my fair share of those, and I have too long and too often looked directly into the fierce red eyes of that unyielding beast.

But the intellect embarrasses easily, precisely because it is self-aware, and thus if it is brought constantly back to the path, its inherent wisdom generously unfolds in the freedom of the great Unborn.

I must say, nonetheless, that I do not particularly think of myself as exclusively a jnana yogi; I've spent too many years--two decades actually--sitting in a meditation hall to think of myself as an intellectual yogi. But it has been my good fortune to find that when the intellect is polished until it becomes radiant and shining, it is a staunch defender of a Truth and Beauty that reaches quite far beyond its own capacities, and in that reach it serves its Master more than faithfully.

As A. G. Sertillanges put it seventy years ago: "Do you want to do intellectual work? Begin by creating within you a zone of silence, a habit of recollection, a will to renunciation and detachment which puts you entirely at the disposal of the work; acquire that state of soul unburdened by desire and self-will which is the state of grace of the intellectual worker. Without that you will do nothing, at least nothing worth while."

And thus, when all is said and done, and we use our intellects in just that fashion, and we make friends with our own minds, we might likewise look upon our intellectuals as faithful

servants of just that higher cause. Depending, of course, if our intellectuals themselves realize just what an important--and limited--role they have to play.