

EVOLVING THE SANGHA: Transforming Spiritual Community

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Summary

Grappling with the difficult, messy, and raw challenges of genuine embodiment, this article encourages a deep embrace of lived, human experience—intimacy, creativity, openness, authenticity, and healing are essential for development in both the human and spiritual realms. Shayla Wright invites her readers to open their first chakras, ground themselves in earthly experience, and make direct contact with life, just as it is. Individuals are called to embrace personal presence, as fixating on impersonal or transpersonal presence may not leave room for the joy, mystery, and challenges of human intimacy. This practice can help transform the spiritual community, when members of a sangha participate and embrace everyday issues and human relationships, supporting one another in growth and healing.

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She has spent a lifetime studying and teaching inquiry, meditation, and the transformation of consciousness with people all over the world. She was a senior teacher in her spiritual community in the Himalayas, and, was engaged for five years as a non-dual coach, facilitator and trainer with Peter Fenner and the Radiant Mind course. However impressive these qualifications appear, do not be fooled by them! Almost everything she has learned, she had to unlearn. She had to say goodbye to all of her teachers, and find her own way in the unfathomable wildness of life. She is grateful to all of them, and to all of the catastrophes and triumphs, and completely ordinary days that have brought her to where she is now. Which is nowhere—just the indivisible openness of presence.

Her current focus is on supporting the full embodiment of integrity, presence, and wide-awake love in the midst of human life. She offers coaching, courses, and retreats internationally, through Skype, online, and in person.

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I'm sitting in a large room, listening to a well-known non-dual spiritual teacher offer his wisdom to a group of more than one hundred people. The teachings are profound, and I have immense respect for this man and the depth to which he actually lives what he offers. After he speaks, he invites people to ask him questions. His personal interactions with his students are also deep, incisive, and full of compassion.

Despite all this wisdom and love, in the midst of the deep and radiant peace that fills the room, I notice that I have something else going on inside me. It's a living question, an energetic inquiry, that feels to me, as real inquiry often does, disruptive and disturbing. I have learned to respect this kind of inquiry, when it arises in me. I know that I have ignored it in the past, to my own peril.

What I sense intuitively and instinctively, is that this teacher-student structure, this way of working with people, of supporting their awakening and evolution, is part of an old, crystallized paradigm. I feel a passivity in the room. I sense people hiding out. They seem to be present, available, and deeply engaged. But there are edges in their own being they are moving away from, and a deep level of participation they are not engaging in. In a group this size, with a recognized master at the front of the room, I know how easy it is to sink into a place where I am content to absorb what is being offered to me, and hope that somehow it will flow right into my everyday life.

In my long years of experience as student, teacher, coach, mentor, and mentee, I have found that this is not what usually happens. We can sit and listen to the wise ones speak, we can meditate for years on end, we can do our yoga or chi-gung and the rest of our practices, we can study and contemplate the sacred texts, and yet never find a way to really ground this awakening and deep maturity into our own human life. Spiritual teachers and practitioners often refer to this as the 'issue of embodiment.' Ho hum. We all know this is a problem, we all know that we continue to struggle with the raw and messy challenges of genuine embodiment, evolution, and transformation. Sometimes it feels like the big elephant in the middle of the room, that we are circling around, but not yet daring to face.

What if something different is being called for, something radically outside of what we think of as a sangha or spiritual community? What if we need a depth of clarity, courage, honesty, and compassion that has not been available to us up until now? What if we need to go way down, to descend just as far as we've been able to ascend? What if, as Thomas Huebl puts it, "in our deepest humanity lies our highest possibility"(verbal communication)?

I have been seeing, in my own work and in the work of other teachers and facilitators, that spiritual development and awakening requires a certain ground, a foundation. In our disembodied culture, most of us have not yet developed the foundation we need. We have not yet fully landed in our bodies, and specifically, in our first chakra. We have not yet learned how to communicate with real openness and authenticity. We don't know how to

sustain long-term intimacy in our lives. We don't know how to manifest our creativity, to take our visions and put them into the ground of manifestation. These are not purely spiritual disciplines or practices—they are an essential part of what it means to be fully human. And yet they are not separate from our spiritual path. So if we cannot heal and develop in these places, our spiritual development, our vertical pathway, gets stuck too.

These crucial places in our human development often get overlooked in the sangha. Who is going to stand up and say, in front of a hundred people, “You know, my marriage has gone kind of dead. We never make love any more. I've been to counsellors and therapists, and I don't know what to do about this?”

Once in a while, someone will find the guts to expose the very real and raw things he or she is actually struggling with. Like the fact that after all of these years, I still don't really know how to express myself, how to speak about what really matters to me, how to ask for what I want, and how to say 'no' when I need to. I don't reveal that I am walking around with chunks of resentment in my heart, putting up with all sorts of things in my life that I don't really want, because I have no clue how to create another kind of life for myself.

When someone does bring something like this into the field, the teacher will often say, “I'm not a therapist or a life coach. Please get yourself some help.” Although a spiritual teacher has every right to say this to a student, the spiritual and the human domains are split apart, once again. That person might decide, “I just need to meditate some more.” Because working with issues around expression, communication, intimacy, work, money, and sexuality is a messy business. We'll avoid it for as long as we possibly can. We'll soar back up to the upper chakras, where everything is so much easier.

Learning to work with these issues is not about opening the energy of your third eye and your crown chakra and connecting with the realm of infinite love and light. It's about getting well and truly grounded, coming down to earth, and being able to make direct contact with life, just as it is. When I open the energy of my first chakra, I am in communion with the energy of earth. Earth asks me to respect and honour the world of structure and limitation. Spiritual people often have a very hard time with this. They long for the boundless realm of freedom, the limitless world of light and infinite space. But that light needs a home, a container in which to manifest itself. That container is our human psyche, grounded in the body.

I cannot sustain a real connection with transpersonal presence, unless I am grounded in a personal presence first. Personal presence is my embodied sense of self, my capacity to be in direct contact with my own experience in each moment. If I have not yet landed in my body, if my lower chakras are not open, I cannot have that kind of contact with the fullness and depth of my own experience. As David Whyte (2012) says,

Start close in, don't take the second step or the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don't want to take.

There is also a field of interpersonal presence, the shared space of 'we' that exists between us. Every time human beings get together, they co-create a 'we space.' And not all we spaces are created equal. The shared space at the Super Bowl is radically different than the one that is created in a meditation room. When a small group of people comes together with full presence, clarity of intention, and a willingness to transform and evolve together, the field that is created has immense potential. In this shared space, we can flow between a personal and intimate connection, and deep contact with the transpersonal field. We discover that the energy closes down when there is strong preference for one or the other. In the name of spiritual awakening, I can avoid intimacy with who you are as a human being. This fixation on the impersonal does not leave room for the joy, the mystery, and the challenges of human intimacy.

I have been receiving glimpses of a whole new kind of sangha or spiritual community, where the teacher is not sitting up at the front of the room, delivering a warm bath of transcendent intelligence. In this new possibility, the responsibility for evolving is thrown back into the whole field, the collective we-space. It lands in your lap, in mine, in our lap! Instead of sitting and listening to the teacher, or practicing solitary disciplines like meditation, I step fully into the power, intelligence, and aliveness of the intersubjective field. Most of what we are struggling with is happening in the field of relationship, including our tendencies to hide, to isolate and withdraw. So the deep healing and radical evolution must happen in this field too.

New levels of development and evolution occur when I am able to work intensively, over time, in small groups. I bring whatever I am to these people sitting here with me, learning to show up and engage in a way that is open, real, vulnerable, and loving. Sitting with a group of three or four or six people, and grappling with a question, or an issue that has emerged, is a very different experience from sitting in a large group, listening to a teacher. In a small group there is nowhere to hide, and at the same time it is much easier to be vulnerable and transparent. I am not there to give advice, to fix anything, to bring what I already know. I am there to be real, to bring myself fully into the moment, to share directly, from my own experience, in a way that is without hidden agenda or manipulation.

How do I know how to be this way? I don't. This is not an egoic way of being. We have never been trained to create this kind of connection with one other. It feels risky, edgy, and sometimes quite threatening. But this is a space in which I have full permission to practice, to learn, to hold my 'conscious incompetence' with true compassion. And to be held by others in this way. As I stumble along, as I flounder around in this unknown space, I begin to notice that surprising things are being revealed. We seem to be in touch with an intelligence that is much bigger than what we normally have access to. Being in this way together is opening up a field of wisdom that doesn't belong to any of us, and yet here it is. We can feel it, sense it, hear it, without knowing how it appeared. And all of a sudden, this intelligence, this love, no longer resides in the person of the teacher. It has become non-local, yet visceral, in a way that I can participate in, again and again.

When Martin Buber (1958) wrote that "all true life is meeting," I think he was pointing to

this possibility, a meeting that transforms and awakens us on the spot, because we are required to let go of so much of what we have learned. We are being asked to listen to something new, something that flows underneath the usual content of our minds.

As we work with each other in this way, we see more, we feel more, and we know less and less. We see the places where people are stuck and where they are truly magnificent. And we learn how to mirror this to each other, so that we have the experience of being deeply seen. To be seen in this way is to be changed, transformed. This simply cannot happen in a more traditional setting. One teacher cannot give that experience to everyone in a large group.

Revealing ourselves, offering ourselves, risking ourselves in small groups, over and over again, builds courage, clarity, and compassion in us. We develop these qualities as we dare to engage in this way, stepping out beyond our comfort zones, breathing in the feedback we receive, opening to a collective intelligence and a much higher energy than we are used to living in on our own. This is not easy work. We are deeply conditioned to hide, to withdraw, to put on a good face, to look for approval instead of real love. To evolve the sangha is to create a new culture, to say good-bye to thousands of years of conditioning.

Honesty is reached through the doorway of grief and loss. Where we cannot go in our mind, our memory, or our body is where we cannot be straight with another, with the world, or with our self. The fear of loss, in one form or another, is the motivator behind all conscious and unconscious dishonesties: all of us are afraid of loss, in all its forms, all of us, at times, are haunted or overwhelmed by the possibility of a disappearance, and all of us therefore, are one short step away from dishonesty. Every human being dwells intimately close to a door of revelation they are afraid to pass through. Honesty lies in understanding our close and necessary relationship with not wanting to hear the truth. The ability to speak the truth is as much the ability to describe what it is like to stand in trepidation at this door, as it is to actually go through it and become that beautifully honest spiritual warrior, equal to all circumstances, we would like to become. Honesty is... a robust incarnation into the unknown unfolding vulnerability of existence, where we acknowledge how powerless we feel, how little we actually know, how afraid we are of not knowing and how astonished we are by the generous measure of loss that is conferred upon even the most average life. (Whyte, 2013)

As we open to the nature of this transparency, this real contact with ourselves and with others, we are able to see which capacities in us are developed and where we need to work, without getting caught up in another self-improvement project. We can feel into the infinite space of possibility and at the very same time, ground ourselves into the earth and work with our limitations. Learning to listen from an unknown place in our being, to respond from our immediate experience instead of from an image in the mind, takes practice. When we are grounded, we can whole-heartedly engage in this kind of practice.

In order to manifest, we have to be able to focus on what we want, to be specific about it; and we have to stick with it long enough for it to occur. To become proficient, we have to practice it over and over again, limiting ourselves to that specific activity until we master it. When we cooperate with limitations, our energy begins to collect and build up, and naturally expands to other levels. (Judith, 2004)

It's amazingly difficult for our egoic self to work in this way. It wants to fight against the limitations, instead of working with them. We find it very painful to stay with the experience of our 'conscious incompetence.' Working in the small groups creates a field where we can learn to do this, together. In this space of deep presence and intimacy, we are face to face with our own and each other's limitations, all day long. Our sense of isolation and aloneness starts to melt away. We realize that we don't have to keep hiding and struggling along by ourselves. We open to a whole world of support that had always been there—we just couldn't really feel it before this. We were trapped inside our own small bubble, our little cocoon. In this collective space, we can open to a lifelong undertaking, a flow of evolution that has no end.

When I learn to stay present with the people in my group, to stay connected, I discover that even when things are difficult and disturbing, I don't have to withdraw. The group is a microcosm, showing me vividly how much I am actually able to participate in life. This is what maturing is, what it is to fully land in my human incarnation. I am no longer playing with life the way a child does:

If this is what life is, I'm not going to play the game. I'm going to create my own little bubble, and my own rules. I am not going to apprentice myself to the difficult and fierce revelations of existence. (Whyte, 2010)

As soon as I am willing to apprentice myself to the difficult and fierce revelations of existence, my whole relationship to life transforms. This is how we can evolve together as we work in the small groups, as we wrestle with ourselves and with each other and the challenges that arise in the space we share together.

We do not always move forward because of the plans we make or the effort we expend. The conversation itself more often does the true work of transformation. (Whyte, 2010)

Recently a woman I have known for many years, who had been working in this way, offered something she was struggling with to our larger group of over a hundred people. She spoke to the teacher, expressing the very heart and soul of a lifelong difficulty, with openness, courage, and humility. As she spoke up in this way, I could feel that this was an offering, quite literally, to her greater self, to her infinite potential. Without making any excuses, or protecting herself in any way, she simply expressed her deep need for help in moving past this wall. I could feel, in the moments of her speaking, that once we have offered something in this way, we are already on our way. There is no going back.

We've made an open declaration to life, and there is a real response to this, from the stream of life itself. Our courage and our deepest longing do not fall into a void. To let ourselves be seen in this way is a gift to the whole matrix of being.

I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise. (Markova, 2013)

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