

# A Perspective on Kesler's Integral Polarity Practice

Tom Murray<sup>1</sup> with Terri O'Fallon<sup>2</sup>

On the journey of many places, many voices  
A moment of recognition  
Opposites experienced are not  
Still point of breath  
A flower opens  
A cloud drifts to reveal the sun  
A drop falls, merging with the pool  
Witnessing that small opening of stillness  
Then looking into, into, into-----entering;  
The place of all stillness  
Then from all stillness something looks  
Back upon and as the witness.

On a sunny spring day in 2010 in the upstairs studio of the Center for New Knowledge in Northampton, Massachusetts, twenty of us were taken on a journey to glimpse rarely experienced lands of paradox and polarity, fullness and freedom. The territory had been mapped out by John Kesler, who was guiding us through voice dialog activities as part of an introductory workshop for his Integral Polarity Practice (IPP). I later wrote the above poem reflecting on my experience. I am always moved to be in the presence of a group that comes together with an intention of going deeply within. IPP (like some Bohmian dialogs I have attended) set up a vibrant collective field on that day, at least to my experience, and the sense of the 'we" was thick, deep, wide, and buzzing.

John began by using the breath as an experiential metaphor for bodily connecting us to that place between the poles of expansion and contraction; a still-point of perfect relaxation that is available within every breath. Something wonderful occurs in the mind/body when the poles of a polarity are seen and experienced to inter-contain each other as manifestations of a single prior essence. From this foundation John lead the group through a sequence of contemplative reflections on polarities that broadened to include transcendent clarity and sublime confusion; transcendent sorrow and impersonal joy. The room was alive with these energies, which were not brought to or created for us, but discovered by us, thanks to John's gentle yet passionate guidance. A few tears of rapture were seen to run down cheeks and we parted with smiles and hugs, and carried home whatever stays with one from glimpses of the sublime.

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<sup>2</sup> Terri O'Fallon is a Principal at Pacific Integral ([www.pacificintegral.com](http://www.pacificintegral.com)). Terri provided important feedback and suggestions for this article, and offered the poem at the end. Terri has been working with Kesler and IPP for five years. As, mentioned in the article, Tom is relatively new to IPP.

I met John Kesler less than a year ago when I had the opportunity to attend two of his Integral Polarity Practice workshops, one sponsored by the Seattle Integral community and one at Next Step Integral's Integral Education Seminar. John is one of the few people certified by Genpo Roshi to facilitate large groups in the Big Mind process, which is familiar to many in the integral community. His IPP broadens Big Mind voice dialog work to include aspects of Cook-Greuter's developmental sequence of action logics and polarity frameworks from Tantric and esoteric Mormon traditions.

I was struck by the elegance and depth of Kesler's IPP "awareness and meditation practice" and became an immediate fan. I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to dialog and work with John in several individual and small group phone sessions over the last year, and I helped to organize John coming to Massachusetts (he lives in Utah) to lead a series of introductory workshops in April. Though I am very much a beginner in IPP, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce readers to it from my own perspective. As I feel rather insufficient to the task of explaining this profound body of work, I will say a bit about "why me?"

Like others attracted to the integral community, I have deep interests in contemplative awareness practices and theories of human development and the evolution of consciousness. In addition, through my interest in epistemology and the psychology of knowing, I am fascinated by polarities (and paradoxes). When I saw that John's work combined all of these I was hooked. John impresses me as a deeply humble person whose life is filled with many types of service and community-based work (it seem as though in every conversation I have with him I find out about yet another branch of his volunteer service work or professional community work that astounds me).<sup>3</sup> IPP, its teaching, development, and dissemination, is one of many projects that John juggles. Thus, due to time constraints and having a personality that is not oriented toward self-promotion, John's work remains more obscure than its quality and depth merit, in my opinion. I express my excitement for the work and my gratitude to John for the development of IPP by sharing what I know of it below. More information is on John's web site at [www.johnkesler.com](http://www.johnkesler.com).

I will start by describing elements of Big Mind that are present in IPP. John is one of the very few people to have been certified by Genpo Roshi to lead the Big Mind process in groups outside of Zen monestary settings (Dianne Hamilton and John were the first to be so certified). Genpo Roshi developed Big Mind by combining elements of traditional Zen practice with insights from Jungian psychotherapy, in particular the Voice Dialog process developed by Hal and Sidra Stone.<sup>4</sup> In voice dialog the facilitator helps the individual or group engage with inner archetypal voices or sub-personalities, such as the protector, fixer, rebel, nurturer, or vulnerable child. Genpo modified voice dialog methods to use them with large groups and to address aspects of the ego that typically resist deep contemplation, reflection, and ego transcendence. For example, the inner Controller or Skeptic can be addressed, appreciated for its role and value to the Self, and asked if it would be willing to relinquish some control and trust the (workshop) process.

<sup>3</sup> John's primary profession is as an attorney. Among other projects, he works with educational, civic, and health care institutions and systems locally in Salt Lake City, and also internationally. His is an ordained Mormon Bishop, and finds inspiration in the esoteric and contemplative aspects of Mormonism and other spiritual orientations, including Buddhism and Tantra.

<sup>4</sup> For more about the Stone's Voice Dialog, see [www.delos-inc.com](http://www.delos-inc.com). For more about Big Mind see [www.bigmind.org](http://www.bigmind.org).

In Big Mind and IPP workshops the facilitator moves through a sequence of such "voices," beginning each by saying that we will now speak to or invite the voice of, for example, The Skeptic, and then asking the group "Who am I speaking to?" Participants answer (more or less in unison) "The Skeptic" or "the voice of the Skeptic."<sup>5</sup> The facilitator continues by prompting individuals in the group to publicly reflect on this aspect of the self with questions like: "What is the role [or function] of the Skeptic in your life?" "Does the Self listen to [or appreciate or honor] the Skeptic?" "How much do you [the voice of the Skeptic] communicate with [understand, relate to] the voice of Submission [or Trust, or some other archetype]?"<sup>6</sup> In a session I might report that the Skeptic seems to be in the way of my (the Self's) goals. Another might notice that the Skeptic plays a crucial role in the Self avoiding errors of naiveté. In that moment—aha!—my own understanding of the role of the Skeptic expands into new insights about it and myself. As each person adds their perspective on a Voice, the full breadth and depth and complexity of the role of that Voice comes alive in the room and its presence deepens palpably as if it was something invoked there in our midst and speaking collectively through us (I say "as if" to be post-metaphysically agnostic as to whether such is actually happening<sup>7</sup>).

The process facilitates a deep exploration into both the impersonal and collective nature of human aspects such as Desire, Agency, Leadership, Peace, and Curiosity (these are taken from the IPP method), but also facilitates the inner exploration of one's relationship to these elements, as they live as strengths, weaknesses, shadows, gifts, and unrealized potentials within. In addition it can efficiently create an expansive sense of "group mind/consciousness" that, in addition to accelerating the process, contradicts the isolated individualistic nature of many spiritual practices. The practice is an excellent example of a "liberating structure." Kesler offers guidance based in his own realization attainments, but primarily the practice sets up a structure that allows each individual to voice their own wisdom and insight, and expand into and through the group's collective wisdom and insight. It supports participants in identifying their unique gifts, challenges, and shadows (including what Kegan & Lahey would call "immunities to change"). It strikes a pitch-perfect integral harmony between the modernist innovations of democratic, autonomous, individualistic, and pluralistic forms of meaning-generation and growth, and the more traditional hierarchical forms of meaning-generation and growth (wisdom and guidance from sages, gurus, priests, and other honored teachers) that are seen in the wisdom traditions, offering benefits that post-modernity has made it difficult to integrate (this balance or harmony is as much from Kesler's deeply humble style as the IPP practice). (See the article in submission to JITP by Zachary Stein titled "On Spiritual Teachers and Teachings" for further

<sup>5</sup> Kesler frames voices in terms of impersonal or transcendent "functions and energies" as opposed to sub-identities of the self. For example, he will ask to speak to "The [voice of] Control" rather than "the Controller." This further helps the participant dis-identify with sub-personalities as inflexible and non-integrated (and immature) aspects of the Self.

<sup>6</sup> The group process can seem a bit artificial to the—well, to the Skeptic—but if one can suspend judgment and open one's trust and imagination the process can be quite revealing and energizing.

<sup>7</sup> My goal is to describe the surface features of these processes, and not to express claims about, or imply anything about how Kesler or Genpo Roshi describe, the deeper processes and realities that the practices work with. Also, the example of voices and activities given here are meant to give the reader a general feeling for the work, and are not meant to represent the exact sequencing, voices, or instructions given by any of the leaders mentioned. Leading a Big Mind or IPP session involves non-formulaic on-the-spot decision making that requires deep expertise.

explorations of the theme of the "dynamics of authority in educational contexts where teachers and students engage with religious or spiritual subject matter.")

Genpo discovered that through the Big Mind process, a skillfully facilitated sequencing of voices, participants can experience a taste of transcendent states such as Big Mind, Big Heart, True Self, and Great Joy, that took much longer to access with traditional contemplative practices (and in particular traditional Zen practices).<sup>8</sup> Whereas voice dialog was typically used to access the sorts of early childhood and primitive archetypal aspects of the self that psychotherapists treat as shadow elements needing to be healed or integrated, Big Mind includes giving voice to transcendent and evolutionary potentials that we can grow and evolve *into* (as opposed to out of or beyond), and facilitating access to transcendent ("non-dual") states. Genpo's key insight was that, because of the more developed and prominent role of the ego in the Western vs. Eastern mind, in leading the Western mind down the spiritual path to awakening it is better to engage the ego and its core elements directly, to work with ego rather than ignoring, suppressing, or forcefully eliminating its presence. (For more on Big Mind see [www.bigmind.org](http://www.bigmind.org) and the Wikipedia entry on it.)

John Kesler's Integral Polarity Practice adds innovations to the Big Mind process that make it more "integrally informed."<sup>9</sup> First, he developed a sequence of voices (or energies/consciousnesses) that follow the ego developmental structures fleshed out by Lovinger and Cook-Greuter (it also has easy correlations with Beck and Cohen's Spiral Dynamics and other developmental models mentioned in Wilber's work). Whereas psychotherapeutic voice dialog aimed to integrate or heal shadow elements, and Big Mind uses a sequence of voices with the primary goal of opening up to transcendent states, each "rung" in the sequence of elements of IPP represents an aspect of human development that can be explored, deepened, and integrated, and yet also leads to higher states and stages of human development.

The second innovation of IPP concerns polarities. At each developmental level, one works not with a single essence but with a set of polarities, such as expansion/contraction, desire/aversion, leading/following, achieving/digressing, or meaning/paradox. These polarities, in order of increasing development, are five (not all adjacent) representatives of the 12 levels within John's "evolutionary" (or ascending) sequence. The evolutionary sequence includes two IPP levels for each of Cook-Greuter's six higher action logic stages. In working with polarities one explores the pole's two extremes, one's relationship to each pole, the interaction and energetic connection between the poles, the "still-point" that represents the resolution or integration of the poles, and the dynamic holistic system transcending and including all these elements. Due to the richness of the system, in an hour session one might only explore two or three of the 12 levels. Importantly, the experience of the still-point or integrated manifestation of each polarity can be a portal into non-dual or transcendent states or levels. Thus, though it may take many sessions to work with

<sup>8</sup> Note that the practice is said to support getting a *taste* of such experiences with unusual efficiency, but does not purport to lead directly to the more stable states and stages that prolonged contemplative practice can yield.

<sup>9</sup> Kesler does not see his system as in any way competing with Genpo Roshi's Big Mind work. It is a related practice with overlapping but non-identical goals and methods. Kesler was one of the founding members of the Integral Spiritual Center.

and through all 12 of the evolutionary IPP levels, in each session Kesler leads participants through what he and Wilber's integral theory call gross, subtle, causal, and non-dual elements.

IPP also has an "involutionary" (or descending) sequence that starts with Big Mind and explores how the ground of being (Big Mind) works its way into causal, subtle, and gross levels of experience and reality. The theme of gross/subtle/causal(/witness)/non-dual repeats itself fractal-like at multiple levels and in multiple directions within IPP.<sup>10</sup> For example, the entire system of levels is divided into gross (physical), subtle (relational), and causal/non-dual (involutionary) segments; within each of these three segments is a gross/subtle/causal progression of levels; and within each level one explores gross, subtle, causal, witness, and non-dual states that emerge from (or exist prior to) the polarity. I quote here from Kesler's web site:

...distinctive in this practice is the discovery of the same five themes which pervade every aspect and dimension of life experience. The five themes are physical / gross, relational / subtle, aware / causal, the ground out of which the three themes emerge, and their integrated expression. Through IPP life become an aesthetic experience of the integration, interpenetration and flow of the themes...[IPP] engages the person on multiple levels, triggering differentiation through more discriminating awareness and moving toward integration and transformation, with the impact over time of increasing awareness and capacity in multiple dimensions.

The entire system, though elegant and fascinating, is complex and intricate, especially as compared with the Big Mind system, which one can have a fairly full experience of in a single workshop (full in terms of seeing all of its components; while of course layer upon layer of depth awaits the sustained practitioner of any contemplative practice). In contrast, in a day-long workshop with Kesler one taste's just the tip of the iceberg. Each level contains not only a developmentally-anchored polarity and two still-points, but a "doing virtue," a "becoming (or being) virtue," and set of pathologies (like "hindrances").<sup>11</sup> For example, the Seeking level (level 2) has poles Desire (with its pathology Addiction) and Aversion (with its pathology Repulsion); a positive or fullness still-point of Satisfaction; a negative or emptiness still-point of No Seeking; a becoming virtue of Gratitude; a doing virtue of Generosity; and a "gift" of Sacred Motivation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The terms subtle, causal, and non-dual have a range of meanings both within and outside the integral community. My own experience with IPP and other contemplative practices has given me a taste of what these terms could be pointing towards, but my understanding and experience of them is evolving and not stable. In this article I am simply reporting using the terms as used by Kesler (and, I would say, used too casually in the integral community) and will bypass questions of what the terms might actually point to.

<sup>11</sup> The system seems to have some interesting similarities to traditional systems such as the Kabala, the Buddhist system of virtues and hindrances, the Vedic chakra system, etc. (which, as others have shown, in themselves have fascinating correspondences). This is no doubt due to John's integrating a familiarity of the mystical aspects of a number of traditions.

<sup>12</sup> Kesler has been refining IPP for about 10 years, but considers the entire system still under development. He distributes copyrighted handouts at his workshop, but has not published the entire system in the public domain yet. This is one reason I have not given a chart of the entire system. One can imagine that, in addition to its evolving nature, Kesler has kept the material out of the public domain to minimize the likelihood that people would try to use or teach it without the requisite level of skill and legitimacy.

IPP is distinctive in the way that it integrates a systematic exploration of state experiences within a developmental/evolutionary model; and does so in a way that gives life to both interior and collective forms of wisdom; and with an awareness of the role of shadow in personal transformation. Contained within its many aspects (polarities, virtues, still-points, etc.; through many involutionary and evolutionary levels) it covers territory pointed to by many psychological, archetypal, and spiritual typologies. Its range extends from the earliest to the latest stages and the full range of gross subtle causal, non-dual states (upper left quadrant), energies (Wilber's upper right quadrant), collective responses and meaning making (lower left quadrant) with a voice dialog structure (lower right). Thus it is unique in how it fully embodies Wilber's AQAL meta-model, with its quadrants, states, stages, lines, and types, and works across the elements of the Wilber-Combs Lattice (a "cross product" of the states and stages of the AQAL model). It does so in a way that shows the interpenetration of all of these aspects, and is thus an ideal practice for the study and expansion of the AQAL model at it is and could be.<sup>13</sup>

This essay has focused on IPP as a lead process activity that can engender certain states and experiences that, over time, are intended to lead to horizontal and vertical growth along several developmental lines (including what might be called ego development, construct aware cognitive development, emotional/social development, and spiritual development). But, for Kesler and for many practitioners of IPP, these experiences are a support mechanism for a holistic life *practice* and *action* orientation. Kesler has written much about (and initiated numerous projects in) integral approaches to civic engagement and service work. IPP, as a sustained practice within an informal sangha of practitioners, orients ones values, visions, and actions, substantial and mundane, toward the highest Kosmic and ethical resonance that one can source within oneself; sensing into what Kesler calls "the ever present sacred ecstasy and ordinariness of life."

The steel web of mind's hypnosis  
 Wears thin and Tears-from  
 Divine's "I's" dissolve into  
 One  
 Showering its essence  
 Into Forms--each paradox and  
 Soul, each finger and sound  
 Distinctions with no division  
 Frogs with no plops  
 by Terri O'Fallon

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<sup>13</sup> For example, there is still much to be figured out about the relationship of states to stages, and the relationship of types to states and stages in the context of lived experience; also articles by Bonnie Roy on her Process Theory draw on experiences that interpenetrate the quadrants, zones, and lines of AQAL. As clearly stated in Wilber's Three Strands argument and his integral post-metaphysics, these issues can not be worked out through intellectualization alone—we must dive into and dialog about experiences.