



27.11.25

Updated statement about ISTA ("International School of Temple Arts")

About two years ago, we published a statement about ISTA, an international workshop organization that also operates in Israel. In that post, we presented a number of concerns regarding the organization's activities and called on the general public to be vigilant. A link to that statement is in the comments.

Recently, an attorney approached us on behalf of ISTA with a demand to issue an "updated statement", claiming that following organizational changes carried out by ISTA (described in the attorney's letter in very general terms), the content of that statement is now "not relevant and not up to date with what goes on at ISTA these days".

In its communication, ISTA requested, among other things, to schedule a meeting with the Center's representatives in order to conduct a dialogue. After we agreed to this, while clarifying that we would publish an updated statement afterwards, ISTA cancelled the meeting and demanded that we remove our previous publication (and another publication) "within 48 hours", and that if we did not do so, a lawsuit would be filed against the Center.

We very much regret this conduct and the missed opportunity to hold a dialogue (which might also have contributed to a substantive response to the claims, as set out below).

We wish to emphasize several matters:

1. Anyone who thinks that threats of lawsuits will cause the Center to betray its public role is gravely mistaken. Threats of lawsuits do not and will not influence the Center's core positions. If anything, they only strengthen our determination to carry out our public duty and not surrender to legal aggression.
2. If the Center believes that it is appropriate to publish something, it does so without any need for threats of lawsuits, and if it believes that a publication is not called for, even ten threats of lawsuits will not make it publish anything.
3. The position statement was published in December 2023. In first approaching us, ISTA did not claim that it had not been legitimate at the time, but rather that it was no longer justified today because of organizational changes that it claims to have implemented since then. Accordingly, the discussion concerns the changes that ISTA claims have occurred since then.

Since ISTA approached us and demanded that we address its case, we believe it is appropriate to bring its position and the Center's response to the attention of the broader public, so that the public can form its own opinion.

We invite you to read ISTA's letter to the Center, to learn about the changes that it claims to have made in the organization, and to form your own direct impression of its

claim that these changes justify an “update” in the position towards it (links in the comments).

In brief: The Center believes that although it does indeed appear that changes have been made in the organization, substantial question marks remain.

Below are the main arguments included in ISTA’s letter regarding changes that it claims to have made (marked with ), and after each claim the Center’s response (marked with ):

 “In the last two years, the organization has listened to criticism, and has instituted many changes as a result, including increased oversight of facilitators and limiting their power, improving incident reporting forms, and appointing a person whose role is to provide assistance to participants who need support”.

 At the time of this writing, the Center has not received details regarding the mechanism of oversight and limitation of the facilitators’ power (we asked to receive such details, and also hoped that the meeting that ISTA cancelled would make it possible to receive them). Since the organization operates, in its definition, as a “decentralized organism”, there is substantial doubt as to whether such a body is capable of implementing adequate oversight, and therefore this matter in particular requires thorough elaboration.

Below is a quote from the investigative article in *New York Magazine* published in February 2025:

[...] the energy and resources the group has spent on its supposed transformation have been dedicated almost entirely to the accused abusers, providing them with extensive support, including therapy and expensive coaches — among them, a “men’s life and leadership” trainer. The survivors, meanwhile, have been offered only conversation with their abusers.

 “All the facilitators mentioned in the various articles attached to the statement are no longer part of ISTA, and have not been leading ISTA seminars for a while now”.

 This claim is unclear. As far as we know, Ms. Michal Maayan Don, for example, who is mentioned by name in an investigative article by *New York Magazine*, still serves as a teacher in seminars and has even become the senior figure in ISTA in Israel. In addition to her, there are other names that have been mentioned publicly and in various articles which still appear on the organization’s website.

 “It is forbidden for ISTA facilitators to have sexual relations with seminar participants. This prohibition is explicitly presented to seminar participants”.

 The “prohibition on having sexual relations” between facilitators and participants during the workshops, which is presented as absolute and categorical (while the very need to establish it in the first place is very telling in and of itself), is presented on ISTA’s official website as a temporary provisional measure.

Quote from the organization’s official website:

Currently, ISTA is in an experimental phase where its protocol is that there will be no sexual interaction at all between facilitators and participants.

The fact that ISTA is still “considering” whether it is appropriate to impose a permanent and absolute prohibition on sexual relations between a facilitator, who holds authority and influence, and a participant during a workshop, gives rise to real concern about the degree to which criticism and the problematic nature of this action have been internalized.

In addition, the wording leaves ambiguity regarding assistants, who also hold a hierarchical status above that of the participants. It is unclear whether they, too, are included in this (temporary) prohibition.

● “In the first days of the seminar, the participants practice exercises (several times) whose purpose is to help them be in touch with their inner authority. While doing so, they practice setting boundaries with others.”

◊ To our knowledge, this is not new. Such exercises were also conducted in the past and, as we know, did not succeed in eliminating the harmful acts that occurred and which were detailed in testimonials and investigative journalism. When the testimonials are examined, what this “inner authority” is exactly, and when and how it is expressed, remains unclear.

● “During the seminar, the facilitators emphasize that there is no obligation to participate several times before each activity, and they are required to attentively see that a participant taking part in an activity does so of their own free will while being attentive to their personal healthy boundaries.”

◊ The wording of this clause looks like an attempt to place responsibility on the participants themselves, needing to “pay attention” that they are not participating in an activity that may harm them, instead of refraining from creating a space and dynamics that allow such harms.

Moreover, the expression “no obligation to participate” is meaningless, since there was never any “formal obligation” to participate. The psychological pressure, the “encouragement”, the soft and heavy pressures, these lead to participation that may later prove destructive.

In the overwhelming majority of the groups with which the Center deals, participation in harmful or potentially harmful activities is of course “voluntary”.

● “The psychologist Dr. Penelope Goldmuntz was appointed in order to assist in the professional screening of candidates who wish to participate in the seminars”.

◊ While we welcome the addition of a screening factor for participation in seminars, it should be noted that Dr. Goldmuntz is an active and committed member of the organization. It is quite possible that a “screening mechanism” operated by an external professional was in need, and having it operated by an external professional would no doubt have contributed to confidence in that mechanism.

Moreover, no details were provided on the nature of this screening and how it is actually carried out. Who is screened? In what format? Does the doctor conduct a screening conversation with every candidate, for every activity, in all languages and in every location? And what tools does she have at her disposal, based on written submissions, to approve or reject an application to participate?

● “Between breakfast and the beginning of the activity, participants are given a break for 45 minutes, a two-hour lunch break, and an hour and a half evening break. Officially,

the seminar begins each day with breakfast at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 11:00 p.m. at the latest, so workshop participants get more than enough hours of sleep".

◇ First, the distinction between the official schedule and the schedule not occurring "officially" raises questions. Highly significant activities take place within the unofficial schedule, which to the best of our understanding is characterized by a lack of strict guidance, particularly the "temples", in which the participants are supposed to implement what they have learned (and which, according to testimonials, sometimes take place until late at night and even the early morning).

In addition, we note that according to testimonials, there is indeed a situation of sleep deprivation in practice. It should also be noted that according to the consent document, participants are supposed to arrive for the start of morning activities, including those who chose to participate in the "unofficial" activities until late hours.

● "The Level 2 workshop no longer takes place".

◇ At the time ISTA's request was forwarded to us, a "Level 2" workshop was being held in France, according to the organization's website.

In addition, it appears from various publications that the organization has launched a new workshop intended to take place between "Level 1" and "Level 2" called "Living Level 1," the contents of which are unknown.

● ISTA's letter enclosed, as an appendix, versions of registration forms (these can also be viewed via the link in the comments), and it explained that "the registration form explicitly states to participants that the program includes optional nudity and content dealing with sexuality."

◇ The vague wording of the form was and remains potentially harmful to participants. The statement "content dealing with sexuality" is not sufficient to prepare the participant for activities such as group masturbation, anal massage, random assignment for intimate activity, and nudity on the first day.

The testimonials of harm that reached us dealt in part with the element of surprise regarding the various activities, and the registration form does not provide the adequate disclosure and sufficiently detailed descriptions required given the nature of these matters to resolve this difficulty.

● "Additionally, the registration form states that nudity and any content or experience that will be offered are optional".

◇ This statement worryingly ignores the psychological, financial and social pressure exerted on participants in the seminar, directly and indirectly, in the dynamics created by the seminar, the power exerted by the group, the facilitator's encouragement of participants to participate, the "support" by assistants to be part of the group, and so on.

In light of all this, the statement regarding "optionality" is of little weight in our view, especially since, as noted, there is no required level of detail in the information provided before the seminar as to what exactly those activities will be. Thus, the participant cannot examine whether they are interested in those "optional" activities in advance, removed from the pressures present during the seminar.

● "The registration form explicitly states that participants will not be asked to take part in sexual interaction with others".

◇ It has already been published, and has not been denied by the organization, that some of the seminar's activities include massage of intimate body parts and even the penetration of fingers into participants' sexual orifices.

This is sexual interaction by any definition, and the very existence of such an activity in the seminar is an invitation to participants to be in sexual interaction with others.

Moreover, given that there is no doubt that the essence of the seminar is sexuality and engagement with sexuality, it is somewhat strange to claim that participants will not be "asked" to be in sexual interaction with others. In our opinion, any terminological differences if such exist, between "will be asked", "will be invited" or "will be offered" are of no real significance.

● "As part of that re-organization, the organization worked with a volunteer organization called 3SC, with whom they met for more than 30 hours. Following a significant process, the cooperation produced a joint statement that is published on ISTA's official website, which details the actions taken by the organization".

◇ On that volunteer group's website, there is a current statement dated June 9th 2025, entitled "A Disappointing End", and a link to it will be provided in the comments. The statement begins with the words:

Ultimately, ISTA claims that this mediation process and accountability systems are so successful that they are now 'experts on power.' Sadly, this confirms that our efforts at reform failed

That statement concludes with

No single individual or group of organizations, activists or journalists created the situation you find yourselves in right now. You are responsible...by your actions and inaction. You are not a victim.

Thus, the very volunteer group ISTA sought to rely on in fact contradicts ISTA's own claim.

We reiterate what the Center stated in its 2023 position statement. The Center does not have a general stance on workshops or spiritual studies that involve sexual activity of any kind. The Center's interest is in harmful practices, and not in spiritual-ideological perceptions themselves.

Every person has the freedom of choice, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and worship, and the freedom to choose personal and spiritual development routes. It goes without saying that the Center recognizes every person's right to self-realization and the like.

The Center never deals with the spiritual or philosophical doctrine of groups, but rather with the practices that take place in them. However, the sexual framework in particular calls for elevated caution.

The Center reiterates its call to anyone choosing or considering taking part in an activity or workshop of this kind, including those of ISTA, to inquire, to read the abundant materials available online (from both "sides") and to form their own informed opinion.

We invite you to browse through ISTA's letter, the additional linked documents in the comments, and the many materials that exist online – both those critical of ISTA and those supportive of it – and to form your own opinion.