

KEN WILBER

An Introduction

Ken Wilber is a 34-year-old American whose first passion was science. While still at school, he says - "I fashioned a self that was built on logic, structured by physics and moved by chemistry". He did extremely well at school, and also at college, where he read biochemistry and biophysics.

But in his first year of study at Duke University, he happened upon the Tao-Te-Ching. "It was as if I were being exposed, for the very first time, to an entirely new and drastically different world - a world beyond the sensical, a world outside of science, and therefore a world quite beyond myself". His whole world started to change. "Intellectually I began an obsessive venture in reading, devouring books on Eastern philosophy at a terrifying rate". Nevertheless he managed to graduate with enough honours to be offered a scholarship at the University of Nebraska.

The next two years were spent, almost literally, in solitary reading and research, eight to ten hours a day. Gradually something seemed to emerge and shape itself - a sense of personal meaning in life, and a synthetic world view. "Both of these results, the moral resolution of meaning and the intellectual resolution of **synthesis**, were necessary for my own personal pilgrimage; they were no mere side issues or intellectual curiosities. I was not doing this for a college degree, a career, tenure or even a pat on the head. I was doing it because I felt I must; for me it was a Grail search". The eventual outcome of this search was his first book - **The spectrum of consciousness**.

As well as this intellectual activity, Wilber started meditation; this became extremely important in his life, and he still continues with it. It is that form of Zen meditation known as **zazen**, which it is sometimes said is not meditation at all, for it has no object. It was through this that he came to understand in a more experiential way that consciousness could be divided into two great realms: the personal and the transpersonal. And he came up with his own rule of thumb:

Accept as possibly true anything a person-based theory says about the personal sphere, and a transpersonal-based theory says about the transpersonal sphere, but be very careful when they cross over.

Of course this division into two was over-simple. And in Wilber's next major book **The Atman Project** he did the full job of outlining the whole range of different positions in personal and spiritual development. There were seventeen in all, several of them quite major. Sometimes he talks about three major divisions, sometimes five and sometimes eight, but they are all based on the original seventeen - simply grouped in different ways. And Wilber says that this is not his own personal invention, but the traditional and very old conception of the Great Chain of Being which has been described by many mystics and sages down the ages. All he has done is to put them all together into one coherent framework, which also includes the latest findings of depth psychology.

Wilber left the university with a master's degree instead of a doctorate, because he wanted to spend all his time in further study and meditation. But he was drawn to the Zen idea that ordinary work is important and not to be despised; so he deliberately took part-time jobs in manual labour: as a petrol pump attendant, a dish washer, a grocery assistant. It was at this time that he wrote **No Boundary**, which he describes as a popular version of his first book.

Then he met Jack Crittenden, who inveigled, dragged, pushed and tricked him into editing the new journal **ReVision**. It was in this journal that the first drafts of **The Atman Project** began to be published. The journal has since become a shining light, publishing exciting material from people like Bohm, Pribram, Ferguson, Capra, Dychtwald, Keen, Krippner, Bentov, etc.

He also became interested in anthropology, and while **The Atman Project** was concerned with personal and transpersonal development, he now started writing a book concerned with social development. Virtually all the writers in the tradition he had entered had postulated some kind of golden age in the past, and regarded our present civilization as a fall from that. But after struggling for some time with this notion, he suddenly saw how the whole story could be made more consistent and coherent by reversing it completely. So in his new book **Up from Eden** he made a careful distinction between the kind of magic which is pre-science and that which is post-science. The early types of magic simply were aiming at scientific control, and for a lot of the time failing to do so. But the post-science interest in "magical" ideas such as intuition, clairvoyance, the aura, spiritual healing, etc., go beyond science and can be just as rigorous in their way. "If evolution had managed to move from subconsciousness to self-consciousness, there was no reason it couldn't continue from self-consciousness to superconsciousness".

At this time Wilber was going further in his meditation, and crossing the transpersonal bands into the subtle stage.

The struggle with . . . the very stream of thought itself was as arduous a task as I would ever handle . . . This was a very real and very intense period for me; it was my first direct and unequivocal experience of the actual sacredness of the world . . . (I cried) for hours it seemed. Tears of gratitude, of compassion, of unworthiness and, finally, of infinite wonder.

Here he found the work of Kirpal Singh extremely useful. (I have looked all over for books by Kirpal Singh, but have so far not found one). His experiences in earlier therapy and growth groups came in useful too:

*Because I was already quite familiar (in theory and in fact) with the experiences that can be produced by **subconscious** impulses, all the "magical" and "hallucinatory" images described by Freud et al, I was not led into the fallacy of confusing super-conscious experiences with subconscious revivals.*

But after having these archetypal experiences for a while, he became critical of them. After all, they were still **experiences**, and therefore things to be savoured and enjoyed and held on to - they were still traps and fetters to further development. And then in a Zen retreat he took a further step, into a different state:

*At that point, the whole stance of the witness absolutely disappeared. There was no subject anywhere in the universe . . . not a loss of faculties . . . it was no blank trance but perfect clarity; not depersonalized but transpersonalized . . . There was nobody there to comprehend it until I fell **out** of it. (I guess about three hours later).*

On this view meditation is not a relaxation response or a sensory deprivation or a self-regulation strategy, but the unfolding of successively higher or deeper structures of consciousness. And this is the view of the **great teachers of meditation**, who often have much more elaborate lists of stages in the process.

All this went into **The Atman Project**, which now became not only an intellectual but a spiritual achievement. But the clearest statement of the Pre/Trans Fallacy (the fallacy of confusing what is prepersonal with what is transpersonal) is to be found in a later book called **Eye to eye**, which also contains some other remarkable articles.

All the quotes from Wilber contained in this brief introduction come from his paper **Odyssey: A personal inquiry into humanistic and transpersonal psychology** which appeared in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology for Winter 1982.

John Rowan

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* **ReVision** the journal costs \$25 per year from P.O. Box 316, Cambridge, Mass. 02138, U.S.A.
