

John Rowan

PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

*in the light of Ken Wilber's **The Atman Project***

One day in April 1981 I was walking with Malcolm Lazarus across the Herefordshire hills and talking about how the AHP might relate to the work of the Wrekin Trust, when he dropped a remark which whizzed and reverberated round my mind for days afterwards. He said - "Psychology is one thing, spirituality is another."

This contradicted everything I had been thinking, saying and writing for ten years or more. My general understanding had been that humanistic psychology has a spiritual component to it, and that everything that was real about spirituality could be incorporated somehow into it. I had been convinced that Jung's categories of sensing, feeling, thinking and intuiting were all within psychology, and that intuiting dealt with the spiritual bit. I had assumed that transpersonal psychology was a sort of spiritual upper end of humanistic psychology, and that the Higher Self was ultimately to be identified with the Real Self, and was natural rather than supernatural, human rather than divine.

These ideas which I held - and which I believe are still held by many people in and around the AHP - were held in place by a strong mistrust of organized religion. Christianity and Judaism seemed to me cruel and aggressive dualistic systems which had led to more wars and more suffering than any other single human force. Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Tantra seemed more acceptable, largely because it had seemed to me that whatever was true in them could somehow be incorporated into humanistic psychology. I could see similarities between the kind of breakthroughs I had seen in therapy and the experiences of enlightenment that Zen Buddhism talked about: indeed, did not Fritz Perls actually talk about such things as a "mini Satori"; and did not humanistic practitioners run "enlightenment intensives"; and did not **est** use a kind of roller-coaster of techniques derived from humanistic psychology to produce something which sounded very much like some kind of enlightenment?

AFTER SELF-ACTUALIZATION, WHAT NEXT?

These thoughts may seem rather abstract or intellectual to you, but they were deeply disturbing to me. I had already been worrying about another and more personal question, which presented itself to me in the form - **What comes next?** I had been working on myself for ten years or so, sometimes very intensely, using an enormous variety of techniques and several different drugs. I had achieved nearly all the things which humanistic psychology promised: I had got in touch with my Real Self, I had dealt with my mother and father, I had seen through my Shadow, I had contacted my Higher Self, I had healed the splits between my intellect and my emotions, my mind and my body, my masculine and my feminine, my left and my right and my various subpersonalities - I was in fact a fully functioning person, in much the sense that Carl Rogers describes; or a self-actualizing person, in the sense that Maslow describes. But I was now getting a strong feeling of dissatisfaction, which expressed itself as a sort of gnawing sense of "next-step-ness". It seemed that there was something else I had to do. And it was something to do with spirituality.

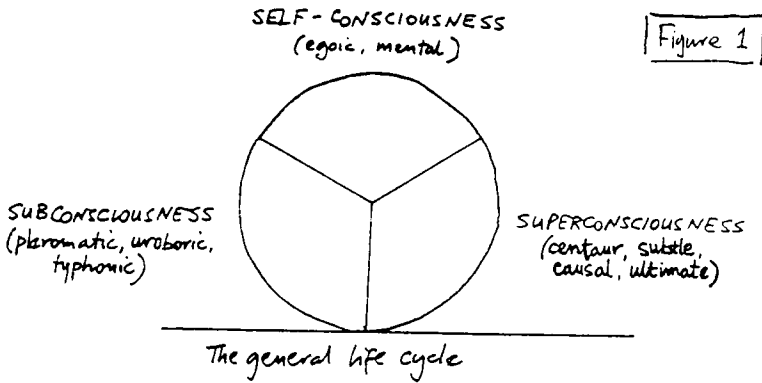
So when Malcolm dropped his remark about the spiritual realm being a **whole different realm** from the psychological realm, it hit a sensitive nerve. I started to talk to everyone I met about this. I read books. I actually led a weekend group on Transpersonal Psychology, because I often find that I learn more by trying to teach something than I do in any other way. I produced a booklist of things I had read. But none of this brought me the answer I was looking for. I was still stuck with the questions - Where am I now? Where do I go next? Am I there already, or is there still a long way to go? It was a painful time. My sense of incompleteness would not go away, and I was hurting.

KEN WILBER'S MAP

After a couple of months of this, during which time I was beginning to drive everyone crazy with my repeats of the same questions, I was at a committee meeting at Alix Pirani's house, and noticed a book called **No Boundary**, by a guy I'd never heard of, called Ken Wilber. Alix said - "I think you'd like it. He writes a bit

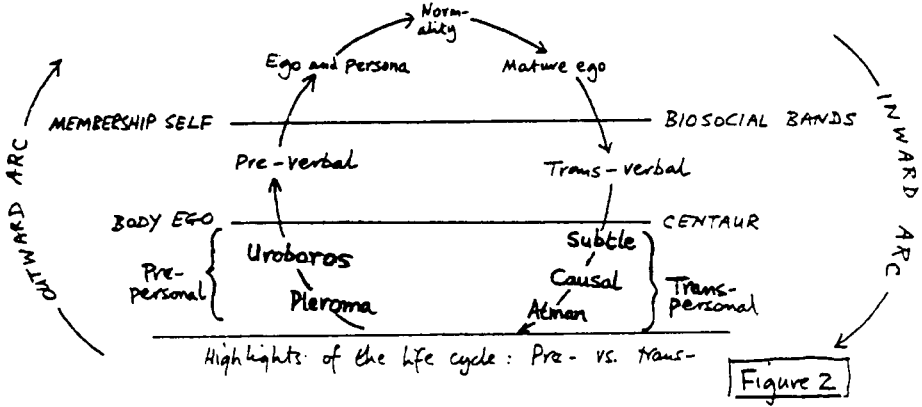
like you do. He's saying some relevant things." I still haven't read that book, but it led me to another two books of his, which I have now read - **The Spectrum of Consciousness** and **The Atman Project**. It was in the latter that I found my answer.

What Wilber says is that there is just one path that we are all on. It is a spiritual path. Different branches of psychology, different spiritual disciplines, deal with just one bit of the path, and usually do scant justice to other equally important bits of the path. The path leads from subconsciousness through self-consciousness to super-consciousness, as Figure 1 shows.



Subconsciousness is studied by psychodynamic psychologists, such as the Jungians, the primal integration people, the object relations people and the Freudians, etc. Self-consciousness is studied by orthodox psychology, sociology, etc. Humanistic psychology marks the beginning of the superconscious realm: it is particularly good at breaking the biosocial bands which restrict us to functioning on a mental-ego level, in terms of formal logic and roles and the storybook version of science. It is particularly good at healing the splits which express themselves as a sort of "horse and rider" version of the human person - with the help of humanistic psychology we can be the fully integrated centaur, where horse and rider have become one. The Real Self - what Wilber calls the existential self - has taken over from the mental ego, the self-image, the persons. We are now authentic.

But it is just at this point that an even bigger breakthrough has to take place. The next step on the path is to move from the gross realm into the subtle realm, or in Eastern terms from the Nirmanakaya to the Sambhogakaya. This means focussing on the Higher Self and letting go of the Real Self. After this there are other breakthroughs which are more difficult again, as Figure 2 shows.



THE ATMAN PROJECT

The reason why I find Wilber's map so convincing is that he shows how at each stage of development, whether within the subconscious, the self-conscious or the superconscious realms, the exact same process applies. It is time to look at this in his own words. This is from a chapter in the middle of the book:

We have seen that psychological development in humans has the same goal as natural evolution: the production of ever-higher unities. And since the ultimate Unity is Buddha, God or Atman (to use those terms in their broadest sense as "ultimate reality"), it follows that psychological growth aims at Atman . . .

*From the outset, the soul intuitively this Atman-nature, and seeks, from the start, to **actualize** it as a reality and not just as an enfolded potential. That drive to actualize Atman*

is part of the Atman-project. But it is only *part*, because - even though each stage of psychological growth is a step closer to God - each stage is **still** only a stage. That is, each stage towards God is still not itself God. Each stage is a search for God under conditions which fall short of God. The soul must seek Unity through the constraints of the present stage, which is not yet Unity. And **that** is the other side of the Atman-project: each individual wants only Atman, but wants it under conditions which prevent it . . . The point is that each stage or level seeks absolute Unity, but in ways or under constraints which necessarily prevent it and allow only compromises: substitute unities and substitute gratifications. The more primitive the level, the more primitive the substitute unity. Each successive stage achieves a higher-order unity, and this continues until there is **only** Unity. The Atman-project continues until there is only Atman. There is the dynamic, and there the goal, of evolution and development . . .

Yet, notice immediately that men and women are faced with a truly fundamental dilemma: above all else, each person wants true transcendence, Atman-consciousness, and the Whole; but, above all else, each person fears the loss of the separate self, the "death" of the isolated ego or subject. All a person wants is Wholeness, but all he does is fear and resist it (since that would entail the death of his separate self). Atman-telos vs. Atman-restraint . . . And that is why human desire is insatiable, why all joys yearn for infinity - all a person wants is Atman; all he finds are symbolic substitutes for it. This attempt to regain Atman consciousness in ways or under conditions that prevent it and force symbolic substitutes - this is the Atman-project.

It can be seen from this series of quotes that Wilber is painting an enormous canvas - this is a grand and all-encompassing theory. And it scares the hell out of me.

Ten years ago I was saying, with a smile, "Everyone is neurotic". Three or four years ago I learned to say "Everyone is psychotic". That was more scary, but it seemed to do justice to the preverbal realm, and I learned to accept it. Now it seems that if I want

to do justice to the transpersonal realm I have got to learn to say "Everyone is saints and swamis" - and that sounds much more fearful and problematic. How can I live up to the demands of knowing that I have my own Atman project? What does being spiritual mean? Because this is such a challenging thing. As someone said - It's not enough to know about holiness or to be an expert on holiness - the point is to be holy. And that idea scares the shit out of me. I had given lectures on "the repression of the subline" and "the Jonah complex" (all about the avoidance of the demands of the spiritual life) - but this was the first time I had felt these things for myself and in myself. At times I felt like running away from the whole thing. But that was really impossible for me; I was in too deep already. What Ken Wilber said just made so much sense in terms of my own experience so far. And he was so precise about how the process takes place:

*As evolution proceeds, however, each level in turn is differentiated **from** the self, or "peeled off" so to speak. The self, that is, eventually **dis-identifies** with its present structure so as to **identify** with the next higher-order emergent structure. More precisely (and this is a very important technical point), we say that the self detaches itself from its **exclusive** identification with the lower structure. It doesn't throw that structure away, it simply no longer exclusively identifies with it. The point is that because the self is differentiated from the lower structure, it **transcends** that structure (without obliterating it in any way), and can thus **operate** on that lower structure using the tools of the newly emergent structure . .*

Thus, at each point in psychological growth, we find: 1) a higher-order structure emerges in consciousness (with the help of symbolic forms); 2) the self identifies its being with that higher structure; 3) the next-higher-order structure eventually emerges; 4) the self disidentifies with the lower structure and shifts its essential identity to the higher structure; 5) consciousness thereby transcends the lower structure; 6) and becomes capable of operating on that lower structure from the higher-order level; 7) such that all preceding levels can then be integrated in consciousness, and ultimately as Consciousness . . .

It seemed, in other words, as if the process I had known and experienced as personal growth was exactly the same process I was now able to see as spiritual growth. All I had to do was to carry on carrying on, and the process would unfold of itself. But the stakes were now higher.

Each of these points is, in effect, a definition of **transcendance**. Yet each is also a definition of a stage of **development**. It follows that the two are essentially identical, and evolution, as has been said, is actually "self-realization through self-transcendence."

To move from the mental-ego level to the existential level is painful, because our mainstream culture fosters and emphasises the mental ego so much. But there is also a lot of support already there in the culture for personal change. The literary culture, whether overtly bohemian or relatively respectable, has always had a warm spot for people who gave up their roles and their masks to discover what they really wanted. And in the sixties this acceptance was vastly increased and energised by all the "alternative society" and "counter culture" slogans and enterprises which flourished. The idea of discovering one's real self was common even in the mass media. To do so was hard - it often involved deep therapy - but there was some social support and some widespread understanding of what it meant.

But to move from the existential level to the subtle level is even more painful. It involves giving up - or at least putting into question - the real self we have spent so much time and trouble contacting, getting to know and learning to use. It means focussing on the subtle self instead. And this is not nearly so clear or easy to understand. Wilber says it is almost always seen at first as something external to us which we can only admire from afar - it may take the form of a guru, a guardian angel, a **yidam**, an **ishtadeva**, a spirit guide, an internal Source, a transpersonal self, a saint, a limited goddess or god, a high Archetype or what have you. And eventually, by getting to know this entity better, getting closer to it, contemplating it, praying to it, meditating on it and so forth, we eventually get the insight that it was all the time a projection - it was really us all the time, only it was too scary to admit it at first.

This is not the end of the road. It means a big change in consciousness, where a good deal of what we had learned about the integration of mind and body, about the importance of the past, about the autonomy of the self, and so on, all has to be questioned, re-thought, or destroyed. As Wilber puts it, at **every** stage there is some kind of incest and some kind of threat of castration. (As he points out, the latter is not a sexist term.) At the existential or centaur level:

This drive to self-actualization, consciously engaged, is simply the new form of incest: no longer body-incest of sex and hedonism, no longer ego-incest of linear goals and drives and conceptual wishes, but the centaur-incest of desiring one's own self-actualization beyond conventional modes of being (beyond the biosocial bands) . . . There is now the possibility of new and higher Eros (self-actualization), but it necessarily brings in its wake the terror of new and subtler Thanatos - the castration of the total bodymind. I have found a total self, only to face total death . . .

*Beyond that, there is only one way to transcend the death-seizure of the centaur, and that is to transcend the centaur itself: to differentiate from it, dis-identify with it. And that means one has to die to centauric incest. Odd as it initially sounds, one has to go **beyond** "meaning in my life" (because one is starting to go beyond "my"); one has to give up intentionality and "self-actualization" (because one has to give up "self"); one has to let go of self-autonomy (because "not I, but Christ" will soon motivate consciousness). The centaur is indeed the new and higher self of this stage -but it is still a substitute self, still a mixture of truth and illusion, still imagining itself to be Atman and still under sway of the Atman-project.*

So beyond the centaur self is the subtle self, and beyond the subtle self is the causal self. Wilber says that the way this first comes into consciousness is as the final God - the radiant God behind the whole universe. God is the ground or essence of all

the lesser manifestations we have come across in the subtle realm and earlier. We focus on this perfect image, try to get closer to it, walk with it, answer its questions of our life, try to live up to its intense demands, pray to it, meditate on it . . . and in the end, after another great and painful breakthrough in consciousness, we have to identify with it and own up to it. It, too, was just another projection. And that goes for Heaven and Hell too.

Wilber says very little really about the causal stage. He refers to Suzuki's book on the Lankavatara Sutra, Deutsche's book on Advaita Vedanta, H. Smith's book **Forgotten Truth** and Schaya's book on the Kabbalah. Clearly there are enormous problems raised here for the followers of any revealed religion. We are now deeply into the area of mysticism.

But we have further to go. If we see God as the ultimate radiant Person, the next stage is to see only the radiance. At this stage we let go of **all** forms, and focus (if we can use that word any more) on the formless Radiance itself.

Note the overall progression of the higher unity structures: In the subtle realm, the self dissolves into archetypal Deity (as istadeva, yidam, dhyani-buddha, etc.). In the low-causal, that Deity-Self in turn disappears into final-God, which is its Source and Essence. Here, in the high-causal, the final-God Self is reduced likewise to its own prior Ground: it dissolves into Formlessness. Each step is an increase in consciousness and an intensification of Awareness until all forms return to perfect and radical release in Formlessness . . .

This overall process is so consistently and similarly described by all the traditions that reach this high realm that we can now be quite certain of its general features. They are unmistakable.

Getting to this stage is of course much more painful than any of the previous stages - the stakes are so much higher. To give up the mental ego is hard: the incest is so tempting, the castration

so frightening. To give up the real self is harder; to give up the higher self harder still. But to give up God, having become close to That, and having ultimately identified with That - how much harder must that be? But because of the changes in consciousness which have taken place along the way, we are ready to do it when the time comes, or so Wilber says.

But even the Formless Radiance is not the end of the road. Behind that, says Wilber, is the Formless Void, what Buddha called **sunyata**, what the Hindus call Brahman, what Jalaluddin Rumi calls the One -

This is not itself a state apart from other states; it is not an altered state; it is not a special state - it is rather the suchness of all states, the water that forms itself in each and every wave of experience, as all experience.

It is this which is the ultimate truth of the Atman, and therefore the end of the journey.

Except that even here there is a final task to perform. Just as at every other state we had to learn to give up what we most desired - to transcend incest and castration - so here too it is the same:

If the individual can surrender causal incest - his exclusive love affair with the Void - then the ultimate state is resurrected as the only Real, final in all directions, where Form and Formless are each other.

Spiritual progress is about losing one thing after another, but in the end the only thing left to lose is losing itself. And at this point we get filled up with what we really wanted all along.

INVOLUTION

It is here that Wilber shows his final brilliance. He says that this is the hardest and scariest place of all to be, because here there are no illusions. Here there is nothing to hang on to. So let us assume that we are there already. Let us assume that instead of being the end of the process, this is the starting point. Here we are at the Ultimate - what next?

He says that's too scary, so we look for some Radiance to hang on to, but that's not safe, so we look for God to hang on to, but that's too scary, so we look for superhuman beings to hang on to, but some of them are pretty frightening, so we look for a Real Self to hang on to, but that's a bit insubstantial, so we look for a good solid mental ego to hang on to, but that's a bit isolated, so we look for a membership self to hang on to, but that's a bit diffuse, so we look for a Mother to hang on to, but that's much too scary, so we look for an Uroboric Other to hang on to, but that's still scary, so we sink into the Pleroma, and there we are safe - except that that's the place where we find ourselves in a womb on the way to being born all over again.

Looking for Wholeness in ways that prevent it, the individual is driven to create ever tighter and narrower and more restricted modes of identity.

This is what happens, says Wilber, after death. The process of involution reverses the whole process of evolution which we have been looking at up to this point. And the steps and stages are all forgotten. What this means is that:

*Thus, enfolded and enwrapped in the ground-unconscious of the newborn lie all the higher states of being. They were put there by involution, and they exist there as **undifferentiated potential**. Development or evolution is simply the unfolding of these enfolded structures, beginning with the lowest and proceeding to the highest: body to mind to subtle to causal.*

CONCLUSION

There is a lot more in this book than I have been able to tell of in this essay. There is a chapter on the unconscious, where he distinguishes between five different types of unconscious mind which now need to be taken into account. There is a whole series of charts, relating his levels to the accounts of other researchers - twenty-eight of them. There is an excellent chapter on schizophrenia and mysticism.

But the main feat of this book, for me, is the way it puts psychology and spirituality on to the same map. It seems to me now crystal clear why psychology is so limited; exactly how humanistic psychology links the psycho-logical and the spiritual; why the transpersonal is such a logical next step, and yet such a confusing and difficult one; and how precisely we can be spiritually enlightened and yet still have a long way to go.

It's also clearer to me now why religion is such a mess. It's because people who are at the higher levels of spiritual growth are genuinely impressive to people at levels below that. They shine, they do extraordinary things sometimes, they tell the truth, they see with pitiless clarity. They are rare and special, so when they say or do things, people try to follow them and copy them. They have enormous and compassionate hearts, love seems to radiate from them. But while the things they say and do are right for them, and maybe a few others like them, they can't be understood by people at lower levels - they get translated and distorted by such people into terms they can grasp. At a certain level of consciousness, for example, it just feels totally wrong to take any kind of life. But the mental ego takes this and turns it into a rule - if you want to follow this Teacher, you have to abstain from all killing. That turns something valid into something invalid.

But that's me, not Ken Wilber; so I think it's best to end this essay right here, before I start trying to write Volume Two. Let me just end with one more quote from the book:

*The point is that **separation anxiety** is really **differentiation anxiety** - which is really the anxiety of **transcendence**. Separation anxiety occurs at **every stage of development**, because differentiation and transcendence occurs at every stage of development - as we saw in Chapter 10. And this separation anxiety continues until the **death** of that stage is accepted, whereupon the self can then differentiate itself from that stage and thus transcend that stage. Separation anxiety on any level is the inability to accept the death at that level, and if that inability persists, then development **stops** at just that stage.*