



This and several other reviews were contained in the celebrations of Ken's work that we recently posted to KenWilber.com. The editors of the site went through the archives and pulled out dozens of old reviews, containing mostly positive criticism, and put them together as a type of celebration of Ken's work over the past 25 years. For the full collections, please see: **Meta-genius: A Celebration of Ken's Writings—[Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)**

* * *

Introduction taken from “Vom Tier zu den Gottern” (Herder, 1997)

Ken Wilber doesn't lecture at any university, he's not found at congresses, nor does he hold workshops or seminars. He's a charming recluse, he likes pop music, he's an excellent cook and has a roguish sense of humour. His home is situated on the outskirts of a university city in the Rocky Mountains; it contains a vast number of books and offers a tremendous panoramic view. And this broad overview is not limited to the external world. Having originally studied biochemistry, Ken Wilber has since personally acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of humanistic and religious matters. The insights he has committed to paper have made him famous well beyond the USA. Americans call him 'the brain', friends in the field consider him to be brilliant and Jungian Marie-Louise von Franz has described him as a 'modern Thomas of Aquinas' who is able to oversee the sum total of the secular and spiritual knowledge of his era.

In the Middle Ages it might well have been possible to comprehend the knowledge accumulated to date, but is the same kind of overview even remotely possible today? Wilber himself is of the opinion that one would have to be a foolhardy American to embark upon such an undertaking. One would also have to have the intellectual capacity, memory and ability to view everything as a whole that Ken Wilber has. In Wilber's own system of thought this ability to view everything as a whole is called 'vision-logic' (translators have used terms such as 'visionary logic' or 'perceptual logic'). In our postmodern information-communication age, vision-logic is becoming increasingly important. However, the most essential component in this undertaking is Wilber's very earnest search – a search that transcends rational thought and involves a great deal of meditation – for the nondual, and his experience of and anchoring in the nondual.

Wilber wrote his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, in 1972 when he was 23 years old. He is currently working on a Kosmos Trilogy, the first volume of which – *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* - appeared in 1995 (the German version, *Eros, Kosmos, Logos*, was published in 1996). The popularized version, *A Brief History of Everything*, followed in 1996. Wilber has since completed the other two volumes: *The Eye of Spirit – An Integral Vision for a World Slightly Gone Mad* and *The Integration of Science and Religion*. Between Wilber's first and latest offerings there were many others: from 1977 to 1985 he produced a book every year. He also took up the post of editor in chief of *ReVision*, a famous journal that he describes as a cross between *Main Currents*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*.

In the latter half of the eighties there was a long phase during which Wilber was unable to write. In 1983, shortly after their marriage, his wife Treya discovered that she had breast cancer. Over the next few years they fought the illness together. It was a very difficult time, one that confronted Ken Wilber with his limits both physically and mentally. In 1988 the Wilbers travelled to Germany in order for Treya to undergo a treatment that was unavailable in America. Ken Wilber wore out a pair of soles walking the streets of Bonn, not only as a way of countering the stress but also because the human masses of the city and its villas built during the years of rapid industrial expansion appealed to him

considerably. He made a point of meditating in the cathedral every day. Treya Wilber died at the beginning of 1989. Wilber gives an account of these years in a very personal and moving book entitled *Grace and Grit*. This book introduced Wilber and his work to people who might not otherwise have read his books. *Grace and Grit* is to be recommended as an introduction.

Few could have foreseen Wilber's career as a writer, psychologist, philosopher and mystic. His father was an officer in the American air force and was frequently transferred. "I grew up without a home and without roots," he says, and "when things aren't going well, I tend to think that's the reason why." Yet the many moves also taught him to adapt to new people and new situations, to be open to them and to trust. "When things are going well, I think that's the reason why."

Both of Wilber's parents were very intelligent, his mother was a Baptist, his father had no connection with the church. "He's got both feet on the ground and is what one would call a good man." Wilber's upbringing was liberal: "My parents gave me every freedom and never attempted to influence the way I thought."

Of himself Wilber says: "During my early youth I was rebellious and trouble-making enough to be normal and healthy. Later I drank enough beer and became obsessed with enough women also to be normal and healthy." When he was 10 Wilber discovered a book on chemistry. After that his happiest moments were spent in the various home laboratories he would rig up. Otherwise he let off steam in the gym and on the sports field. He was captain of the school football team and was always being awarded some prize or other – a prototypical young American with the world at his feet. At that stage it was a scientific world and his mental youth was "an idyll of precision and accuracy, a fortress of the clear and evident" – that lasted until his first year at college when he happened to come across a copy of Lao Tzu's Tao-te Ching:

The Way that can be told of is not the eternal Way.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.

The Named is but the mother of ten thousand things.

This was an entirely new and totally different world, one that refused to let him go. Over the next few months he read introductions to Buddhism and Taoism and the meaning and outlook of his life as he had known it began to disappear. He paints a picture of having suddenly become aware of something he had known long before: “The old sage (Lao Tzu) touched a cord so deep in me that I suddenly awoke to the certain realization that my old life and my old beliefs no longer meant anything.”

Naturally this was difficult, especially in his relations with friends, family and associates. “They thought that Krishnamurti was a communist and that Bodhidharma was a godless atheist.” His parents would have liked him to become a doctor. Wilber, however, was reading works of Eastern and Western philosophy, theology and, above all, mysticism, like someone possessed. He cut classes to study the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Kabbalah. He decided to pursue degrees in chemistry and biology because the subjects came so easily that he didn’t have to “waste time” studying. He graduated with enough honours in these subjects to be offered a scholarship at graduate school where he continued read, study and take notes on works that were definitely not part of the curriculum. “It was a Grail search,” he writes of these years. In personal conversation he’s very down to earth. “I’m actually very lazy, it’s just that I fell in love with ideas.” As far as Wilber is concerned, the thinking and the experiences of the great philosophers and mystics are anything but “dry theory”. The Germans appeal to him in particular – he has read everything worth reading from Meister Eckehart to Kant to Schelling to Hegel to Habermas. Today he admits: “When I write I actually have the European reader in mind, and particularly the German reader.”

However, this love of ideals was fraught with problems. There were many different authorities purporting to tell him how to become happy about life “but the different authors disagreed with one another as to what was required for my spiritual welfare. If the Freudians are right and *ego strength* is the paradigm of mental health, how can the Buddhists be right in claiming *egolessness* to be the

highest state? If the behaviourists are right, and past historical conditioning is the key to all problems, how can Perls maintain that only the here-and-now is important?" And these contradictions were not limited to the ideas. At this point Wilber was meditating daily, zazen style, while simultaneously undergoing Gestalt therapy, the father of which, Perls, Wilber considers to be a "brilliant pop-Freudian". Wilber learnt a lot from him, but "Freud and Buddha have precious little in common." Finding meaning and coherence became a matter of existential importance.

In order to emerge from this misery Wilber felt he had to find a way to order all that he had read and experienced. He began to develop a rudimentary cartography of consciousness by first making a basic distinction between the personal and the transpersonal. He hit upon the guiding rule: 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. Wilber found Freud's hysterics over religion in *The Future of an Illusion* to be as unreasonable as the transpersonalist authors' sweeping rejection of Freud as they chose to ignore "the unpleasant but essential things that Freud had to say about the sphere in which he specialized, preferring to see men and women as a mixture of sweetness and light – a view which was as lopsided, in a reverse way, as Freud's."

He found the connection between the personal and the transpersonal in the thinking regarding angst. Existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, stated: "Hell is others." On the personal plane angst is part and parcel of the human condition as soon as one is aware of being an individual self separate from others. As it says in the Upanishads: "Wherever there is other there is fear." But the Upanishads and mysticism in general claim that there is a higher reality that transcends the antithesis of self and other, a reality that is either experienced as the union of self and other, or as being beyond the dichotomy of self and other. Anyone who is able to discover this ultimate unity is thereby released from isolation and alienation and thus freed from angst. The system of the mystics included that of the existentialists and brought about a solution at a higher level.

Having reached this point, very much reliant upon himself and certainly a rare bird amongst the sugar beet fields and cattle farms of Nebraska, Wilber wrote his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, in a period of three months. The book is written with all of the fresh and persuasive power of youth and is anything but a bashful first work.

Though he wrote the book very rapidly it took him years to find a publisher. Some felt the book was too scientific, for others it was too mystical, and, on top of that, Wilber was totally unknown. When the book finally appeared it was rapidly recognized to be a very important work, as was the popularized version, *No Boundary*, also written by Wilber (in German, *Wege zum Selbst*). The student movement with its questioning and rejection of the standards adopted by the society it was destined to grow into had led the young generation in search of new ways and forms of life. Krishnamurti, Watts, Daisetz and Shunryu Suzuki and many others had brought the teachings of the Eastern wisdom tradition to America. Much of the time, however, these teachings were received and expounded in a very superficial manner. These were the wild years of the 'New Age'. It was 'in' to be 'high'. Yet now there was someone studying these matters seriously and systematically, formulating concepts that served to create order not only for himself but also for his whole generation and all of those who were party to this new way of thinking.

The fact that Wilber was able to survive the barren period before his book was finally published and also the secret of his great productivity thereafter was very much connected with the lifestyle he consciously chose to adopt. He renounced the university career that was open to him and, as a conscientious student of Zen, he made a point of observing the rule of balance between body, mind and spirit, or to be more precise, the balance between physical labour, study and meditation. He was meditating several hours a day and often took part in sesshins – weeks of particularly intense practice. What he writes about the different levels of consciousness is by no means purely theoretical. He earned his living doing part-time jobs. Like the proverbial American aspirant millionaire he spent years washing dishes and mowing lawns as well as working as a gas station attendant and a grocery clerk. It was certainly not a life of luxury but "I learnt what no university education could have taught

me: humility. Forget the degrees; forget the books and articles and wash dishes. It was an education in the lives of those who were directly and concretely concerned purely with this world.

Treya Wilber once described Wilber's way of writing as follows: "He reads a lot of this and a lot of that, speaks to this person and that and in between he sits around lost in thought – he doesn't give you the impression that there is anything systematic about it. And then comes a day that his whole being says "Book!" He fetches a glass of milk from the refrigerator at five o'clock in the morning, sits down and writes and writes until ten o'clock in the evening, scarcely stopping to eat or drink. That goes on for weeks and months until the rough version of the book is there. Then he just needs to polish it." It seems to be some kind of euphoria, almost like a volcanic explosion.

Of his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, Wilber has remained true to the basic ideas, the ground plan, if you like: man is 'on the way from the animal to the Gods' (Plotinus). Along the way the successive stages of consciousness become clearer and clearer: 'God (consciousness) sleeps in the stone, breathes in the plant, dreams in the animal and wakes in humans' – the 'Great Nest of Being' of the mystical traditions throughout the world [although starting with SES he gave a massive reformulation that both negated and preserved its essentials]. The aim and the ultimate goal of evolution is unity with the highest consciousness. Wilber has attested to the existence of this basic idea in so many different fields and varied and elaborated on this idea in so many different ways, taking building blocks from the older houses and remodelling them again and again, that many readers end up somewhat confused, though Wilber's train of thought is always very clear and generally also very graphic.

Wilber's work can be divided up into at least two different epochs, the long forced break from writing during his wife's illness being the caesura. After this period, he says: "My writing became more mature." It certainly evolved considerably in terms of differentiation and scope, making Wilber a philosopher to be reckoned with, a philosopher whose work cannot be confined to the 'esoteric

section'. Wilber himself was very happy with a review that placed him in a line with Plotinus and Schelling, although now in postmodern and integral forms.

Translated by: Rachel Horner