

## Discourse ten: Stages of Consciousness

In this discourse, we return to the title topic of this book. What is consciousness? What is Spirit? How does the evolution of consciousness relate to the experience of Spirit? Is Spirit a stage in the evolution of consciousness? Does the experience of Spirit also have stages? And if there are no stages of Spirit, what do we mean by the journey from Spirit awakening to Spirit maturity? These are pressing questions in the philosophy of religion. These are pressing questions in the lives of Spirit-awake people who wish to become mature Spirit persons and perhaps Spirit guides to others.

Let us begin with what scientists and philosophers today usually mean by “stages” in the evolution of consciousness on this planet. We can easily notice that there is a progression of difference between these items: a rock, a bacteria, a worm, a cat, and a human being. Each of the beings in this series is more conscious than the preceding ones. Between a rock and cat there are many stages of consciousness. We can easily recognize some of the major upgrades in consciousness such as the leap between single celled beings and multi-celled beings. Mammalian life has had to pass through many stages of consciousness from its earliest vertebrate origins. Humanity, as a stage of consciousness, began when some upright-walking mammalian primates became conscious of being conscious. This leap took place with the aid of our symbol-using mental intelligence which enables us to use language, produce art, and design religion. Symbol-using preceded the advent of the consciousness of consciousness, but symbol-using flourished as a means of expressing consciousness of consciousness. Sophisticated symbol-using and the consciousness of consciousness emerged together.

Consciousness of consciousness is clearly a stage in the evolution of consciousness on this planet. But this remarkable stage in the evolution of consciousness is not Spirit as I have defined that word in the discourses of this book. Spirit is not the consciousness of consciousness. Nor is Spirit the consciousness of the consciousness of consciousness which is just more consciousness of consciousness. Spirit, as I have defined that term in the first nine discourses, begins to blow through our lives when we become conscious that all things pass away including every stage of consciousness, the consciousness of consciousness, and the consciousness of the consciousness of consciousness. Spirit is not a stage of consciousness. Spirit is the relationship with the Infinite which relationship begins blowing through our lives when we become aware that we are finite--that we are finite in all our biological functions and finite in all of our stages of consciousness.

We might say that Spirit is our immortality, but this immortality is not the immortality we, in our egoistic self absorption, may have been seeking. Each of us at one time or another may have clung to the hope that one of more of our valued states of consciousness might last forever. Only when that hope is given up does Spirit blow through and power our lives.

But the notion that Spirit is just one item in a longer list is very old. Plotinus, the Egypto-Roman philosopher who lived from 205 to 270 C.E., pictured these (and other) differences in consciousness as ascending levels of the ONE BEING.

spirit  
soul  
mind  
body  
matter

Plotinus did not conceive of these as sequential emergents but as unfoldments of the ONE BEING. This unfoldment can be pictured as having a direction: “UP.” Each level is “higher” in the sense that each additional level is more fully expressive of that ONE BEING.

In the wake of modern biology and physics, these commonly noticed “gradations of consciousness” have been viewed sequentially--that is, as increases in complexity that “emerge” out of the earlier more simple “stages.” Today, we begin our story with the Big Bang flaring forth which yields the most elemental particles/dynamics of energy and matter. Then atoms come together; then molecules. Much later we see the first forms of life emerging from complex molecular structures. And much later still we see the unique consciousness of the human form of life emerge.

Contemporary philosophers like Ken Wilber and others have attempted to delineate carefully what is meant by “matter,” “body,” “mind,” “soul,” and “spirit” and to discern the various sub-stages of these emergent realities. In the next discourse I want to critique some of Wilber’s basic overviews as a way of clarifying further what I mean when I say that Spirit is not a stage of consciousness. I also want to clarify why there are no stages of Spirit, as I am defining “Spirit.” But first I want to share my understanding of the evolution of consciousness.

Some of us have become conversant with the three emergent stages named by Teilhard de Chardin: the **physiosphere**, the **biosphere**, and the **noosphere** (“noosphere” meaning the realm of human mind or consciousness). Using these three terms, we can look upon our planet as a **physical reality** with a skin of life encircling it, and with a thinner skin of human life encircling that. Perhaps we raise questions about how **biological life** emerged from its unliving precursors. And perhaps we also raise questions about how the **human form of consciousness and culture building** has emerged from those highly developed forms of primate life which immediately preceded the homo-sapien form of conscious living. Such questions are questions about the evolution of consciousness.

## The Evolution of Consciousness

In order to understand more clearly the progression “physiosphere” to “biosphere” to “noosphere,” we must clarify what we mean by “consciousness.” Is my cat “conscious”? She may not be conscious with the same intensity that I am conscious, but she is certainly aware of her surroundings and responsive to them. Is a worm conscious? Is a bacterium? Is a virus? When in the sequence of life emergence does consciousness arise?

Let me define “consciousness” as the inward capacity to be aware of surroundings and to be responsive to them. By this definition, animals and also plants are clearly conscious. A bacterium is also conscious. Even a virus may be thought of as conscious. A rock, however, is not conscious. A carbon atom is not conscious. Molecules, atoms, and the subparts of the atoms are not conscious. Some thoughtful persons are attributing a form of inwardness to these “inanimate” beings, but what precisely is this inwardness like? An atom is not sensitive and responsive in the sense that a living cell is sensitive and responsive. The inwardness of an atom may possess a range of options, but these options are quite rigid, statistically speaking. An atom may have a type of unpredictability, but it can manifest no basic departures from its set statistical range of options. A living cell, however, is unpredictable in a much more fundamental fashion. We might say that cells decide things, try things, invent things. Life did not have to evolve in the way it did. Life is in many ways a wild and unpredictable phenomenon. Such options an atom does not possess. Its inwardness is a vastly different sort of inwardness than that of a living cell. So let us not refer to the inwardness of an atom as a form of consciousness. Let us reserve that precious word to indicate the inwardness of living beings.

Such a restriction of the term “consciousness” need not take away any of the grandeur of the “inanimate world.” The fact that the wondrous complexities of conscious life, of human intelligence and of the consciousness of consciousness emerged from simpler forms like carbon atoms tells us something about the wonder and potentiality of the carbon atom. In that sense, carbon atoms might be said to be “alive” with the potentiality of aliveness.

We usually use the term “evolution” to refer to biological life, but stages of emergence also took place in inanimate life. In the hot fury that immediately followed the Big Bang, even the lightest atoms had not yet emerged. The next major state of emergence was the combining of atoms into those more complex organizations we call “molecules.” Atoms and molecules enabled the galaxies, stars, and planets to be formed. The heavier elements waited to emerge until the phenomena of super-nova explosions “cooked” them into being. Then more complex molecules could come into being. Then on the planet Earth (and perhaps other planets) those billions of years of inanimate emergence found the conditions needed for millions of complex molecules to ally themselves into living cells.

Our tendency to explain complex entities in terms of what we know about their simpler parts is a theory that does not always work. Molecular behavior is not entirely explained by the simpler workings of atoms. And the behavior of living cells is not entirely explained by the workings of molecules. Major stages of emergence bring into being entirely “new” modes of emergence. The evolution of life does not have the same mode of emergence as we observe in the emergence of atoms and molecules. The dawn of life brings with it a new mode of emergence. Let us call that mode of emergence “conscious choice.” Living beings make conscious choices. This is most obvious within human life, for we can note in our inward awareness the process of choice going on. We can notice in the wide variety of human cultures that choices were made to be this culture rather than that culture. In animal life generally the dynamic of conscious choice is more restricted but certainly not absent from the living that each individual animal performs. In the evolution of animal species, this factor of conscious choice in the behavior of the adult animals interacts with environmental limitations and possibilities to become one of the factors in “determining” the outcomes of life emergence.

Thus the emergence of living beings is “determined” by three factors: (1) the surrounding environment, (2) the chance combination of genetic factors, and (3) conscious choice. These three factors operate not only in the living processes of animals but also in those of plants and microbes. Conscious choice is far less obvious in plants and microbes, but we cannot rule it out. When we look through our microscopes and see single-cell creatures responding to their environments, we are observing the inward processing of choices as well as the random selection of options which we might observe in the behavior of a pair of dice.

The inanimate process of evolvment is different from the process of evolvment of living beings. In the inanimate process of evolvment, the dynamic of conscious choice is not operative. We see only environmental factors and chance. Some biologists and scientific minded philosophizers have assumed that the consciousness of living cells and the consciousness of consciousness in human beings emerged as statistically unlikely accidents following the same statistical processes we see operating in atoms and molecules. But how could conscious choice arise from or be explained by statistical randomness or chance? This question will not go away. It is true that huge amounts of evidence have been gathered to support the theory that randomness or chance plays a large role in the evolution of both inanimate and animate beings. But the entire story of life’s evolution cannot be adequately told without including the dynamic of creative choice. With the emergence of life, a new mode of emergence also emerged.

We do not have to explain the evolution of life in the same manner that we explain the emergence of the inanimate foundations for life. The unity of the cosmos need not be seen as a unity in human conceptuality. The emergence of the cosmos (cosmogensis) is indeed one master process, but that process is not necessarily reducible to one set of human images. The realization that we need a different set of images for life and consciousness than we need for inanimate reality need not concern us. What should concern us is our attempts to restrict our observations of life to our inanimate imaginations. It is an intellectual blind spot to talk about living beings as if they were inanimate, and it is equality blinding to talk about inanimate realities

as if they were some form of life. The master process of cosmogenesis is not animate or inanimate it is **both** animate and inanimate.

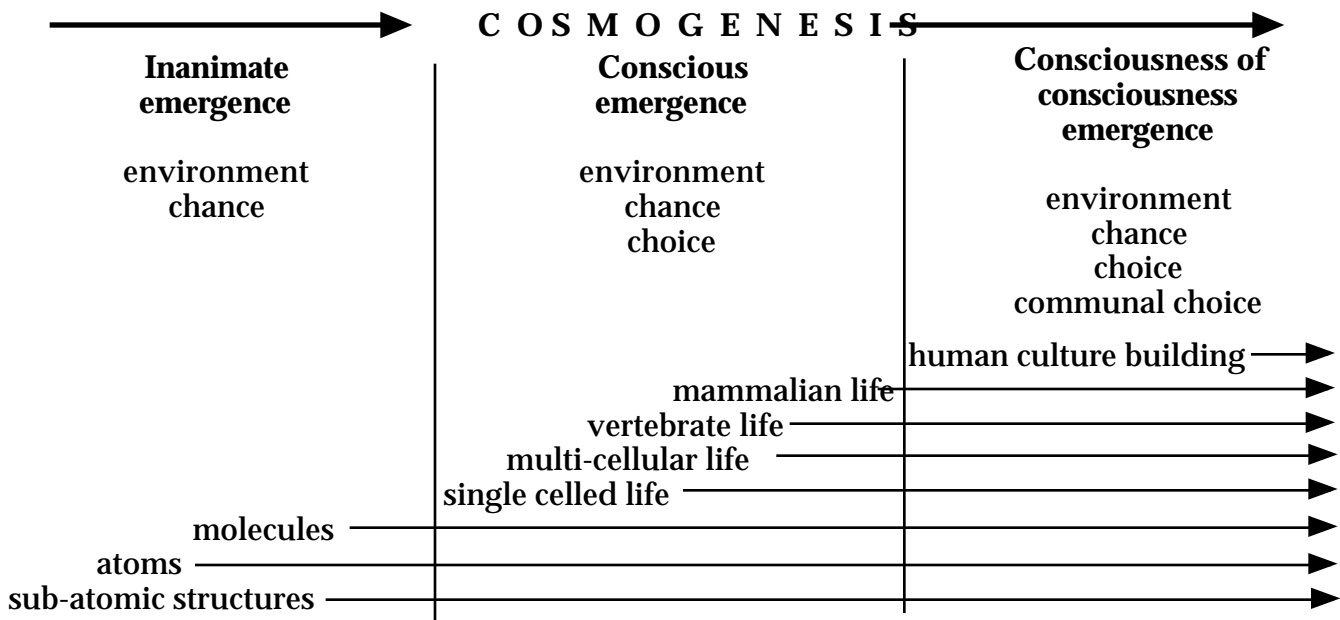
## Consciousness of Consciousness

Within the animate or conscious portion of cosmogenesis, the consciousness of consciousness arose. Consciousness of consciousness is a way of describing the emergence of humanity. Humanity, as I wish to define "humanity," did not emerge with the emergence of an upright-walking primate or with larger brains or with tool making but with the consciousness of consciousness. The consciousness of consciousness was made possible by and is intertwined with the emergence of symbol-using intelligence (language, art, religion); nevertheless, the consciousness of consciousness needs to be distinguished from symbol-using. Small children, it seems, can become adept at symbol-using before the consciousness of consciousness dawns in their lives.

The consciousness of consciousness brings into being a **new mode of emergence: the building of human cultures**. Cultures are vast storehouses of memory held in common by whole societies of humans. These commonly maintained and enriched storehouses enable an effectiveness in anticipating and planning for the future that is unprecedented in all previous stages of emergence. Culture building introduces into the process of cosmogenesis a new mode of emergence. We usually call it "human social history."

Through becoming culture-builders, humans become very powerful forces in the entire story of emergence. The dynamic of personal choice already operative in all animal species, is upgraded into the dynamic of **communal choice** by entire societies of humans. These cultures then empower the effectiveness of personal choices by individual humans. Human individuals are the creative roots from which cultures emerge, and at the same time culture building enriches mightily each individual that is part of it. These obvious yet profound factors constitute a third mode of emergence in the overall process of cosmogenesis.

The following chart holds in visual imagery the story I have been painting in words:



Now let us notice the following:

1. Only a few of the many thousands of leaps of emergence are listed in the above chart.
2. Each of these leaps of emergence is a move into a realm of further emergence that cannot be

- anticipated or explained in terms of its predecessors.
3. The leap from inanimate to animate is huge because it is a leap into a whole new mode of emergence.
  4. The leap from consciousness to the consciousness of consciousness is another huge leap because it is also a leap into a whole new mode of emergence.
  5. Each leap pictured on the chart is a change in the mode of emergence, but the change is not as radical as the two primary changes outlined at the top of the chart.
  6. Each of the listed emergent forms remains in being into present time, and continues evolving within the boundaries of that form.
  7. This entire picture is drawn from the perspective of human beings. From the perspective of a present-time mosquito, emergence has been taking place for the same 15 billion years, but the consciousness of consciousness has not happened. Vertebrate and mammalian leaps are likewise not part of the mosquito's story. In fact, the mosquito does not have a story. Story telling is part of the consciousness of consciousness.
  8. Within the human or consciousness of consciousness emergence there are many stages of consciousness not pictured on this chart.

### **The Stages of Human Consciousness of Consciousness**

Since the dawn of humanity (where humanity is defined by the consciousness of consciousness) many stages of consciousness have been achieved and passed beyond. These stages are echoed in the development of the contemporary human child. I do not want to describe here a comprehensive picture of child development or of the history of humanity, but I do want to give some illustrations of this movement.

In a human infant the consciousness of consciousness has not yet emerged. The potential for this uniquely human emergence is being built, but the infant's preoccupation is with the basic foundations of primate mammalian consciousness.

As the very young child learns to talk, another foundation for the consciousness of consciousness is being laid. Sometime in early childhood we see the emergence of the consciousness of consciousness. At that point, the child knows that he or she is conscious and that other similarly aware human beings are looking back. This amazing happening is a reenactment of human emergence on this planet, an emergence that is at least 100,000 years old and perhaps much, much older. Primate species other than our own may also have experienced this emergence. The big brain characteristic of our species may have evolved after and because of this interior emergence. But the validity or invalidity of such speculations does not matter as far as the general picture is concerned. Consciousness of consciousness emerged sometime in the childhood of our species.

In the earliest human cultures in which the consciousness of consciousness lived, not all members were awake in this way. Most children and many adults were still awakening. Only some members of these groups were functioning in the consciousness of consciousness and leading others to do so.

Throughout the history of our species this "leadership by the few" has been the pattern. Some members became more conscious and thus became leadership in the further emergence of the cultural group.

Here is an example from our own recent scientific history about becoming more conscious. A scant few hundred years ago, humans were conscious of being part of the cycles of the seasons and the cycles of the sun and the moon, but they were not conscious of being part of an

irreversible process of cosmogenesis. They were not conscious of the vast process of emergence from the Big Bang to the formation of our planet, to the emergence of life on this planet, to the emergence of human life. The entire idea of emergence was of minimal importance in their thinking. The absence of such consciousness did not mean that they were not highly conscious beings, but this additional consciousness they did not yet possess. Now once such consciousness has dawned, we cannot go back to the consciousness we previously had. Consciousness is like being on a one way ladder. Consciousness is always finite in amount, but when consciousness increases it is stuck with the increase. We cannot with authenticity refuse to know what we now know.

I have given a scientific example, but this dynamic is also true in the arena of existential wisdom. Once a human being or a human culture realizes something about being a feelingful, thoughtful, decisive being, that additional wisdom becomes our life. We move beyond our previous stage of consciousness, however pleasant or useful it may have been. When we resist or refuse to move into the additional consciousness being given to us, our wellbeing (perhaps even our sanity) is in peril.

Consciousness and the consciousness of consciousness have evolved and continue to evolve. This true statement is not, however, support for a belief in inevitable progress. A more wholesome life is not inevitable, for with each advance in consciousness we experience an increase in our capacity for evil as well as an increase in our capacity for good. More consciousness does not mean a better life, it just means more consciousness. A “healthy” humanity is open to more consciousness, but this openness is something deeper than a state of consciousness. This openness is part of what I mean by “Spirit.” The experience of Spirit is the key to understanding what is healthy and what is evil at each and every stage of the consciousness of consciousness.

## The Leap of Spirit

In the chart I drew in the last section, I left the category of “Spirit” off my “stack” of emergent realities. I do not want to imply that Spirit is simply another departure in the emergence of finite consciousness. **Spirit, as defined in the discourses of this book, is not a finite stage of consciousness. Spirit is a relatedness to the Infinite and as such includes being a healthy or unhealthy relatedness to whatever stage of consciousness I am (or you are) currently living. Consciousness, however, is a finite reality which always has the potential of moving toward a more intense finite stage.**

Nevertheless, Spirit had a beginning and has a history. Spirit is made possible by the presence in our lives of the consciousness of consciousness and our symbol-using intelligence. The experience of Spirit began on this planet sometime after the emergence of consciousness of consciousness. But Spirit is not more consciousness of consciousness. Spirit is not the consciousness of the consciousness of consciousness which is just more consciousness of consciousness. Spirit is present when we become conscious that all our consciousness is finite and passing away. Spirit is present when we become conscious that we are endowed with a profound freedom to shape the consciousness we are going to have next. The experience of Spirit is both the experience of absolute death and the experience of raw creativity. Some of our old myths have spoken of a Creator who creates something out of nothing. This is a valid description of the Infinite “VOID” from which all “somethings” come. Similarly Spirit, as a relationship with the Infinite, is a freedom which creates something which did not exist before. Spirit freedom in the human being does not create the physical dynamics of the cosmos. Spirit freedom in the human being does not create the biological dynamics of the cosmos. But Spirit freedom does create knowledge of the physical and biological aspects of reality and does forge

new outward arrangements of physical and biological actualities. And this creativity cannot be explained as a physical or biological process; it is not determined by anything except itself. Spirit freedom is the experience of being determined by the Infinite Determiner to be a co-determiner with the Infinite Determiner.

Spirit obedience is a surrender to being this profound freedom--being this profound freedom within the actual givens of the whole process of reality being determined for us by the Infinite Determiner. Spirit disobedience is not freedom, but a use of freedom to flee from freedom or to flee from and/or rebel against the surrounding conditions in which freedom must make its choices. Spirit disobedience can take the form of denying freedom altogether and thereby excusing one's entire life of any and all responsibility. Spirit disobedience can also take the form of using freedom to adopt as absolute some specific finite moral standard which then restrains our freedom into a narrow, principled box. Thirdly, Spirit disobedience can take the form of twisting the actuality of our being into a fight with the Infinite Determiner over what we do not have the freedom to be or do. Spirit freedom is both coming to terms with our limits, and at the same time embracing a type of unlimitedness in our ability to respond to those limits and to the actual possibilities that exist within those limits..

Spirit obedience, which includes freedom, came into being on the first day of humanity's experience of Spirit. If Spirit obedience had not been rendered, then Spirit would not have come into being, for this is the first requirement for becoming a Spirit being: the willingness to be Spirit--the willingness to be the profound freedom which this willingness itself is.

Spirit disobedience may have come into being later that same day. Spirit disobedience requires the existence of freedom in order to flee from freedom. Spirit disobedience, therefore, is a flight from that which cannot be escaped. Once humanity has become Spirit freedom, it is inauthentic to refuse to be Spirit freedom. This is why Spirit disobedience can be viewed as a "fall." Spirit disobedience is a move away from our authenticity; it is a perversion of our actuality. Spirit disobedience is also a fragile, hopeless, and futile movement. This is so because Spirit disobedience is an attempt to not be what we have come to be. Spirit disobedience is an attempt to flee what cannot be fled. Spirit disobedience is an attempt to defeat what cannot be defeated. Spirit disobedience is an attempt to destroy what cannot be destroyed. Spirit disobedience is an illusory life that may seem true and peaceful for a time but in the end burns up in a flame of self-aware despair.

The coming of our awareness of despair in our lives is the coming of the doorway back to our authentic Spirit obedience, and it is the only doorway back. This humiliation of our deluded living is the pathway to enlightenment. There is no other path.

**So when did Spirit (Spirit obedience, Spirit disobedience, and despair) begin in the history of humanity?**

Very early in the life of human cultures, some members of those very earliest cultures acquired the detachment needed for criticizing their inherited culture and inventing new cultural elements for themselves and their companions. This detachment and this creativity were expressions of Spirit freedom. **The person who leaves his or her cultural herd enters a Land of Mystery in which there are no answers except answers that have to be created from the deep well of our boundless freedom.** It is this freedom that invents all human cultures.

Human culture can also be invented by Spirit disobedience, for Spirit disobedience carries within it the freedom it is fleeing. All human cultural inventions can be seen to serve one or both of these two purposes: (1) assisting us to be our authenticity or (2) assisting us to flee our

authenticity. Herein is the criteria for both good culture and bad culture. Herein is the secret for defining good and evil, (angels and devils) in the dynamics of human living. Being our Spirit beings is good. Refusing to be our Spirit beings is evil. Not knowing we are Spirit beings at all is innocence, but this infant-like innocence we adult human beings can no longer claim.

## Are There Stages of Spirit?

Though Spirit came into being on this planet at a particular point in time, once in being Spirit does not evolve in the sense that finite realities evolve. This is an important realization: only finite realities can evolve through stages. Spirit is not a finite reality, so it cannot evolve. Physical nature can evolve. Biological life can evolve. Human consciousness can evolve. Human society can evolve. But Spirit cannot be said to evolve, because Spirit is not a finite reality. Instead, Spirit has the quality of OFF or ON. Spirit is a binary process. Once Spirit is turned ON, it can be turned OFF and thereby become sick Spirit. Sick Spirit can then be turned back ON or healed. **But evolutionary stages of Spirit do not exist, because picturing Spirit in stages violates the very essence of what Spirit is.**

Ken Wilber, as I will discuss in the next discourse, speaks of stages of Spirit, but the stages which he describes are not actually stages of Spirit as I have defined "Spirit." The stages that Wilber describe are stages of religion--that is, stages in the expression of Spirit or in the consciousness of Spirit. Furthermore, I intend to demonstrate in the next discourse that Ken Wilber's four stages are not sequential but are merely four different ways of expressing the same thing.

I do find, however, that I can talk meaningfully about stages in our conscious realization of Spirit. These stages are not different types or qualities of Spirit, but degrees in the intensification of Spirit living. As an example, I will describe these four categories:

- 1. The First Whiff of Spirit**
- 2. The Battle between Ego and Spirit**
- 3. The Tip Toward Spirit**
- 4. The Fulfillment of Spirit**

**1. The First Whiff of Spirit:** Each change in our ego is a whiff of **Freedom** blowing up from the land of "no-self," the land of mystery, the land of uncertainty and creativity. At first, a human being identifies with his or her own ego--either some old ego or the present ego or some new ego one hopes one day to be. So at first, human beings tend to view **Spirit Freedom** as something that invades their lives from some alien place. But actually **Spirit Freedom** is the real self, the true self even though it is a "no-self" relative to ego-selfhood. Perhaps we could picture ourselves as living inside an egg shell. The first whiff of Spirit is like a crack in that egg shell. The egg shell represents the overview of reality that is being projected by the existing ego. When this projection of reality is cracked, the projector is fragmented as well. The ego feels the shock when its view of reality is cracked. Spirit first appears as a crack in the "cosmic egg" being projected by the existing ego. An ego that is unconscious of Spirit believes that the sense of reality which it is projecting is "Reality" in some final, stable sense. But true Reality is always larger than our sense of reality. Reality is always larger than the reality each of us, as a finite ego is projecting as "Reality." The dawning of this awareness is the first whiff of Spirit.

**2. The Battle between Ego and Spirit:** Spirit maturity begins as a battle between one's Spirit-self and one's ego-self. This battle is for primacy. Neither self is going away. The Spirit self is a relationship with the Infinite Wholeness: this relationship is a permanent part of being human. Similarly, though each particular ego-self must die, another ego-self will always take its place



until the finality of physical death ends all our ego constructions. Thus in any living moment, some ego-self is always present. **Therefore, my Spirit-maturity issue is not how to get rid of my ego, but rather how to put my ego in its proper place.** That proper place is “second” to the Spirit self. Putting my ego in its proper place means embracing the willingness for my ego to undergo deaths and rebirths continually. The ego-self is part of the passing world. Therefore, ego constructions will always be passing away to be replaced by some other ego-self. If I attempt to hang on to a particular ego or to hope someday to have an ego that will not pass away, I will be disappointed. This disappointment will be manifest as some sort of “despair.” This despair can be healed only by realizing that the Spirit-self, not the ego is the true me. The passing of all ego-selves can then be seen as quite normal. With that awareness I, the Spirit-me, can consent with equanimity to the deaths of all my egos, just as I might consent to the passing of my particular thoughts or my particular feelings.

**3. The Tip Toward Spirit:** This next stage of Spirit maturity begins when a person chooses Spirit as his or her central identity. This might be pictured as a tip of a teeter-totter. Before the tip I am identified with my ego and thus experience the advent of Spirit as an alien disturbance. After the tip I am identified with Spirit, and thus I am no longer struggling to retain unchanged my established ego and all its finite relationships. I am struggling instead to fully be my Spirit-me and to resist the temptations to become re-addicted to some ego-identification. I must now struggle to take charge of my ego traits, to affirm them, to intentionally change them, and to use my ego traits constructively in the purposes of my Spirit-self.

**4. The Fulfillment of Spirit:** Perhaps no name suffices to describe the full being of one’s Spirit being. The names “Jesus,” “Buddha,” and the primordial shaman “Samantha” are useful images, but what do these names actually mean? What is fulfillment? How does fulfillment differ from the first whiff of Spirit we have described as stage one? A Spirit-fulfilled life is not changeless. Even if I identify fully with my Spirit-me, my ego-me still exists and it still changes--each ego still dies and is replaced by yet another ego--hopefully a more conscious and intentional ego. So Spirit fulfillment does not mean a final stage of consciousness. There is no final stage of consciousness. All consciousness is finite. So consciousness can always become more than it currently is. If Spirit is not one of these stages of consciousness, what is it? **Spirit is a conscious relationship with whatever consciousness I have and thus a relationship with that Infinite Ground that is sustaining all states of consciousness. Spirit fulfillment is an unconditional surrender to that state of affairs.**

When we trust this INFINITE SOURCE, PRESENCE and TOMB of our lives, then we see that every action of Infinite Being is love for us and has always been love for us. We can affirm ourselves as Spirit beings. We can affirm ourselves as ever-changing egos. We can also affirm all other beings--rocks, bacteria, cats, and human neighbors. Each of these beings is being sustained by the same undergirding INFINITE PRESENCE that sustains us.

## Poem Five: Eternal Union

We live in one realm  
not two, not many.  
There are no levels,  
no planes,  
no hierarchy of being.

Nor does a hierarchy exist  
in our stages of development.  
There is just encampment  
in some partial consciousness  
and then movement beyond it  
to encamp in a more inclusive  
partiality.

Tomorrow, or the next day  
or next year  
or next decade,  
we may move once again,  
not into a higher level  
but, if we are fortunate,  
into another  
still more inclusive  
partiality.

The everlasting,  
the eternal  
the final,  
the endless,  
is **not** coming.

Our hunger  
to see,  
to know,  
to realize  
the whole of allness  
will have to chew on this:  
**more** never becomes **all**,  
**next** never becomes **last**.

The taste of Eternity  
allowed our species  
is this:  
to die to what we have been  
and to rise from death  
into what we have  
never been  
before.

## Discourse eleven:

# Ken Wilber's Stages of Transpersonal Consciousness

At least half a dozen of my friends have urged me to read Ken Wilber. So I did. I read a number of his books very carefully and I agree with those who count him one of the premier religious philosophers of our time. He has brought a single perspective to a truly amazing array of profound considerations. And since his focus is upon the Spirit dimension of humanity and the role of Spirit in the total destiny of our species, I find his work hard to avoid.

Nevertheless, why do I want to write a discourse on my dialogue with Ken Wilber? And why might that be important to you or to anyone who aspires to be a mature Spirit person and perhaps a Spirit teacher? Clarity on what we mean by the term "Spirit" is key for doing effective religious thinking and teaching. In all these discourses, clarifying the experience of Spirit has been my underlying aim. This discourse is a continuation in my effort to clarify what is and what is not "Spirit."

Students of Wilber will realize that what I have been saying about Spirit overlaps with what Wilber points to with this same word. Yet at certain points, I depart from Wilber's perspective. In this discourse I clarify some things that I am **not** saying with the word "Spirit." Ken Wilber is an intimidating thinker moving into the far reaches of reflection on any and all topics. If you have not read him and never intend to read him, you may not want to trouble yourself with battling your way through this discourse. Yet what I say in this discourse does not depend on a correct understanding of Wilber. I intend for this discourse to be understandable to the reader without any need to read or understand Wilber's writings. At the same time, I want to honor my debt to Wilber and to express my gratitude to him for spurring me to articulate what I believe are some very important clarifications.

It is important to me to establish clearly what I mean and don't mean when I say, "**Spirit is a relationship with the Infinite.**" The image of Spirit as a relationship with the Infinite avoids two pitfalls into which Wilber falls. In some places Wilber makes Spirit identical with the Infinite and at other places he speaks of Spirit as something finite. Making Spirit finite is especially evident when Wilber depicts Spirit as a series of four developmental stages.

So, I am going to attempt to describe Ken Wilber's four stages of transpersonal consciousness in my own words and then say why these stages are not progressive stages and why Spirit as I have defined Spirit does not have stages. To do this in a brief way runs the risk of distorting Wilber. So the reader may want to check out Wilber's own elaborations of his perspective and thereby test the validity of my summations. .

## Wilber's Four Stages of Transpersonal Consciousness

Wilber has defined four stages of transpersonal consciousness: (1) the psychic stage, which he also calls "**naturemysticism,**" (2) the subtle stage which he also calls "**deitymysticism,**" (3) the causal stage which he also calls "**formlessmysticism,**" and (4) the nondual stage, which he also calls "**nondual mysticism.**"

Wilber uses the terms "mystical" and "transpersonal" to point to actual experiences that transcend the personal self. These experiences are not less than personal (animal) but more than personal (Spirit). They are not less than ego but more than ego. A mystical or transpersonal experience is not an experience of some finite aspect of the interior human person.

Transpersonal experience is an experience of a wholeness larger than humanity, a wholeness larger than finite nature---the WHOLENESS OF BEING, we might say. Wilber uses the term “Kosmos” to distinguish this “Wholeness” from the “flatland” of the finite “cosmos.”

1. Wilber’s first stage of transpersonal experience, **naturemysticism**, points to an experience of this “Wholeness.” Wilber claims that this experience is something more than simply seeing beyond our social conditioning into the arena of our natural being. Nature mysticism is an experience in which we see beyond finite nature as well as finite society. Nature mysticism is an encounter with what I call “The Awesome Wholeness of Being” or simply “The Infinite.” This experience honors nature, but does not imply a contempt for human culture. Nature mysticism is an experience of Reality in which the “see-er” (or Seer) can see both nature and society infused with the light of Being shining from beyond them both.

Wilber frequently uses the word “Spirit” to mean both the actuality of Awesome Otherness (my term) as well as the Awe response within humanity (also my term). I, however, do not like to blur this distinction. The distinction between the Awesome and the Awe is the distinction between God, the Almighty, and God, the Holy Spirit, in Christian theology. Using my language, nature mysticism is both an experience of Awe and an experience of that Awesome Otherness that shines through both the wondrous fullness of nature and the wondrous reality of human culture building.

2. Wilber’s second stage of transpersonal experience, **deitymysticism**, points to an experience of “Reality” which celebrates in personal relationship language the active ongoing dialogue between the Awe-filled human and the Awesome Otherness. Wilber uses Teresa of Avila’s description of moving through the seven mansions of her *Interior Castle* to illustrate this sort of mysticism. Wilber sees that Teresa is not a typical literalist in her use of the God language. He sees that she is using religious myth to talk about actual experiences with which he, Wilber, can identify. He is appreciative of her vivid descriptions of disentangling oneself from outward attachments and finding that state of inwardness which Teresa calls “marriage with God.” But for Wilber, the metaphor of “marriage with God” represents a stage of expression that needs to be transcended toward the “stages” which he calls “formless mysticism” and “nondual mysticism.”

From my perspective, Wilber’s nondual mysticism is simply another metaphorical system, one which Wilber clearly prefers to the I-Thou metaphorical system used by Teresa and the entire biblical heritage. From my perspective, what needs to be dismissed is not the I-Thou metaphorical system but the literalism that so commonly characterizes the popular use of the I-Thou metaphorical system. As Teresa herself illustrates, literalism has never characterized the best of Christian witnessing. Cured of its literalism, the I-Thou metaphor is not inferior to the formless or nondual metaphors that Wilber prefers.

3. Wilber’s third stage of transpersonal experience, **formless mysticism**, points to an experience of “Reality” which human rational forms cannot contain. Formless mysticism is not a philosophical idea but an actual (though perhaps rare) experience. In this state of being, a human being directly experiences the formless essence of BEING. The participant in this direct experience has left rational forms behind, including the rational form “subject and object.” So, in the experience of formless mysticism, I am no longer a subject viewing an object. I am no longer a face that faces God. As a participant in this formless experience, I have moved beyond even the dualism of an Awe-filled human standing in the Presence of the Awesome. The Awe and the Awesome are one. Atman and Brahman are one. I, Atman, am also Brahman. Putting this in its most shocking form: “I am God.”

Strange as this language may sound to those of us steeped in the I-Thou metaphor, I recognize the experience that Wilber is indicating here. Let me attempt to express this experience in my own careful manner in order to avoid an important misunderstanding. "I am God" is true for me in this sense: I, the experiencer of Absolute Mystery, am just as mysterious as the Absolute Mystery which I experience. My experience of Mystery dissolves every rational sense of myself as well as every rational sense of that which is other-than myself. Nevertheless, I also believe that the formula "I am God" can be profoundly misleading. Certainly my finite ego is not God, for my finite ego is not Infinite. Wilber's formless mysticism does not mean exalting the finite ego to infinitude. Rather, the formless experience Wilber describes is one of complete detachment from the finite ego. It means full clarity that the finite ego is passing away. As the Seer (See-er) who sees my passing ego, I also sees that "I" am not the passing ego but the WATCHER of the ego's passing. In formless mysticism, the Seer is having a full experience of not being the ego.

But formless mysticism is more than a rare state of consciousness: it is also a way of viewing that rare experience. Let me propose another way of viewing that same experience. If by "Spirit-Self" I mean a relationship with the Infinite, then the Spirit-self cannot be viewed as identical with the Infinite. Seeing myself as a relationship with the Infinite means that I see myself as derived from the Infinite but not as the Infinite itself. This is the essence of I-Thou symbolism: the Infinite is constituting me as an ongoing relationship with the Infinite. This derived or constituted Spirit-Me is not finite in the strict sense, for it participates in the Infinite by being a relationship with the Infinite. Yet such a derived finite-to-Infinite relatedness cannot be viewed as identical with the Infinite. "I am God" tempts me to view my derived Spirit-self as synonymous with that Infinite Wholeness from which all realities, including my Spirit-Self, has derived. This entirely washes out the objectivity of the Infinite. It makes the Infinite merely a subjective experience. It fuses subjective and objective in such a way that it makes my subjectivity the whole of Reality.

If identification with the Infinite is taken literally, all contact with my finite existence is likewise cut away. I fly away into formlessness like a drop of water in the Infinite ocean. I become nothing in the boundless seas of Nothingness. Relative to egohood, I am indeed nothing. But as Spirit-Self I am actual as a living relationship with Infinite Nothingness and with Infinite Fullness. Furthermore, this relationship which I am relates to itself and thus relates to the objectivity of that Infinite Void and Fullness which is constituting Me. I, the Spirit-Self, do not disappear into the formless Mystery. Rather, I appear in all my Spirit glory not as "identity with the Infinite" but as "relationship with the Infinite," a relationship which is in dialogue with the Infinite. I am encounter with and I am response to the Infinite.

With this poetry of dialogue (encounter and response), I am describing the biblical "I-Thou" metaphor, and I am doing so in a non-literalistic fashion. I am not presupposing a literal second story on the cosmos or a literal Super-Being who lives there. I am simply using "I-in-dialogue-with-Infinite-Thou" as a metaphor for talking about my actual everyday experience. So understood, the I-Thou metaphor is no less adequate than the formlessness metaphor. For many purposes it is more adequate. Yet I want to affirm that the best of formless mysticism expresses part of the truth in all religious experience. To be in Awe is to be beyond all rational forms. But here is the depth of my critique of formless mysticism: formlessness is a metaphor--that is, formlessness is one more rational form. Formlessness is a metaphor that must take its place alongside but not above or beyond the I-Thou metaphor.

4. When Wilber describes his fourth stage of transpersonal experience, **nondualmysticism**, he recognizes the limitations of "formless mysticism." Wilber points out that after the experience of formlessness, the Spirit-Self does not cease to participate in the changing forms of the finite

world. On the other side of the formless experience, the finite forms reappear, but they reappear in a new context. They reappear in the context of having already disappeared as enduring reality.

Within the imagery of nondual mysticism, Wilber seeks to overcome the limitations of pure formless mysticism. His mode of overcoming formless mysticism, however, is different from the way I suggested above. I used a non-literalistic understanding of the I-Thou metaphor. Wilber's nondual mysticism rejects the I-Thou metaphor in both its literal and nonliteral forms in favor of another metaphor, a metaphor we might call "double identity." In this metaphor, I, the Spirit-self, identify with the Infinite and I also identify with the finite. I come to this nondual awareness by passed through these three stages of identification: (1) I, the Seer, see that I am not my finite ego's relationships with the finite cosmos. (2) I identify instead with that formless Infinity out of which all forms arise. Then, (3) I see that I am also these finite forms that are arising out of the formless Infinity. Finite and Infinite are just one taste. There is no duality between finite and Infinite; both are the same Oneness. In nondual awareness there is no ongoing dialogue between finite and Infinite, there is just **this**.

In experiencing **this** we have moved beyond viewing reality through the rational screen of subject and object. Only in the finite order of things can there be subject and object. Only in the finite order of things do I have a face behind which I, the subject, exists--a face in front of which the other-than-I exists. In the experience of non-dual mysticism, I am faceless. I am nothing and I am everything. My experience is not "I-Thou" but "I-I." I, the Atman or Spirit Self am also Brahman as sheer Nothingness that is also the Source of all. I am Atman. I am Brahman. And then I am also the cosmos. Atman, Brahman, and the cosmos are all one taste. Wilber sees this as a self-authenticating experience not as a rational way of talking about our experience. Listen to the following Wilber quotation with ears deeper than your mind. See if you can intuit the experience that Wilber is pointing to.

"When all things are nothing but God, there are then no things, and no God but only *this*.

No objects, No subjects, only *this*. No entering this state, no leaving it, it is absolutely and eternally and always already the case: the simple feeling of being, the basic and simple immediacy of any and all states, ..... prior to the split between inside and outside, prior to seer and seen, prior to the rise of worlds, ever-present as pure Presence, the simple feeling of being; empty awareness as the opening or clearing in which all worlds arise, ceaselessly. I-I is the box the universe comes in."<sup>1</sup>

Here is the essence of my dialogue with Wilber: "I-I" is not the only box the universe comes in: "I-I" is just one finite religious metaphor which is no more the box for REALITY than other finite metaphor (such as the "I-Thou" metaphor). No matter how poetically and feelingfully the I-I metaphor is expounded, it remains a finite religious metaphor. This is the final irony that Wilber does not seem to fully grasp. "I-I," being a finite metaphor created by human beings, can also be said to "not exist" in absolute terms. "I-Thou" does not literally exist either. But the "I-Thou" metaphor is as good a metaphor as the "I-I" metaphor for expressing the very same experiences that Wilber is concerned to communicate.

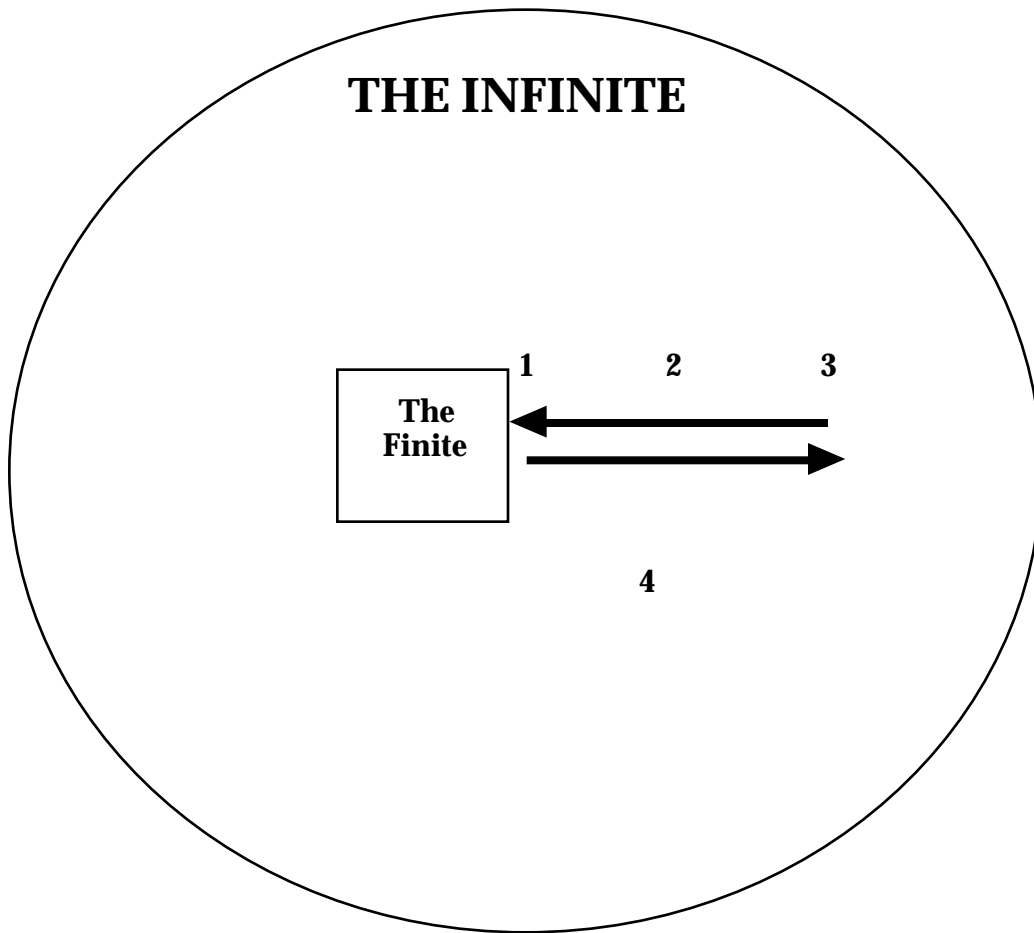
## The Relationship Metaphor

Next, I will illustrate how Wilber's mystical insights look when we use the I-Thou metaphor as our inclusive context and then view Wilber's four mystical stages as aspects of that perspective. In the following diagram, Spirit is symbolized by the double arrow of encounter

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (Shambhala: 1995) page 309-310

and response. Both arrows are Spirit in the I-Thou perspective. Neither arrow is finite. Neither arrow is Infinite. The arrows symbolize the double-movement of this relationship: Infinite to finite and finite to Infinite. Together the two arrows picture Spirit as a process moving through time: encounter and response; encounter and response; encounter and response;.... indefinitely.



The four numbers represent Wilber's four types of mysticism. **1. Nature mysticism** is a focus of consciousness upon the Spirit relationship in its proximity to the finite. **2. Deity mysticism** is a focus of consciousness upon the Spirit relationship in its dialogical quality. **3. Formless mysticism** is a focus of consciousness upon the Spirit relationship in its proximity to the Infinite Void where all forms disappear. **4. Nondual mysticism** is a focus of consciousness upon the master picture in which finite and the Infinite hold together as one inseparable canvas.

When Wilber's four stages are seen as parts of the overall picture of Spirit as relationship, it becomes clear that they are **not stages** at all. All four of these stages always exist simultaneously. There is just one type of Spirit: relationship with the Infinite, a relationship composed of all four of Wilber's mysticisms.

Wilber's thinking about Spirit is trapped in his "stages of consciousness" context. Spirit for him is one more stage of consciousness, and thus there can be several stages of Spirit consciousness leading to that final stage of non-dual transpersonal consciousness. But the definition of "Spirit" I am attempting to clarify does not see Spirit as consciousness or a stage of consciousness. Spirit is a relationship taken to whatever consciousness I happen to have. Consciousness, all consciousness, is part of the finite realm. So there is no **final** consciousness,

no **pure** consciousness! There is just **more** consciousness. And there will always be more consciousness, because consciousness is a finite reality. Consciousness does increase; therefore stages can be described for the journey of this increase, but consciousness never arrives at **pure** consciousness for the same reason that a rock can never become **infinitely large**. The finite does not become Infinite.

We, as Spirit beings, can relate to our finitude and in so doing relate to the Infinite that is constituting us in being the finite beings we are, including our finite consciousness. But it is inappropriate to picture Spirit as a stage of consciousness in continuity with those finite stages of consciousness that begin unfolding in human infancy and proceed through the various stages of childhood and adulthood. Human consciousness is not Spirit. Human consciousness is a finite and progressively increasing actuality. Spirit, if we define Spirit as a relationship with the Infinite, does not increase or decrease. It just **IS**.

I want to explore another layer of possible confusion: even though Spirit is not finite, our consciousness of Spirit is finite. Consciousness of Spirit can increase or decrease, change or evolve, but Spirit just **IS**. And when Spirit **IS**, it **IS** in its whole actuality. Spirit may have describable aspects, but it does not unfold these aspects 1, 2, 3, 4. Whenever Spirit blows through human life in the least way, the Whole of Spirit is blowing.

I believe that Wilber creates confusion when he implies that Spirit can be pictured as a series of progressive stages. Only finite realities can have stages. Spirit, in being more than a finite reality, does not have stages. If you are going to have stages, you must have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc. You cannot have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, . . . And you cannot have 1, 2, 3, and 4. In mathematics, infinity is not a number you can mix with finite numbers without carefully noting that  $\infty$  is a different type of number. Similarly, an experience of the Infinite Mystery cannot be grouped with finite experiences without paying attention to the gulf between these two types of experience.

So, to the extent that Wilber's four stages are indeed stages, they are not Spirit. What are they then? They might be viewed as stages in our finite consciousness of Spirit. We can, over the course of our lives, become more conscious of Spirit. An increase in our consciousness of Spirit does tend to increase our ability to know, do, and be Spirit in our actual day-to-day living. But let us note the difference between our finite consciousness of Spirit and Spirit itself. For example, there is no end of the road in our increasing finite consciousness of Spirit. This is the nature of a finite reality: whatever it is, it can always be more. But Spirit, when understood as a relationship with the Infinite, is the end of the road. There is no more.

Furthermore, the more consciousness of Spirit we have, the more capable we become of opting for false Spirit, evil Spirit, Spirit running away from Spirit. Since Spirit is our essential actuality, Spirit sustains us in being Spirit. Nevertheless, as we become more powerful in our consciousness of Spirit, we become more capable of evil as well as good. This tragic truth Wilber does not clearly confront.

Let me suggest the following gimmick for holding in mind the relationship between consciousness and Spirit. Imagine an ascending line that symbolizes increasing consciousness of Spirit. Spirit itself, however, is not on this line or at the end of this line. Spirit is the space on both sides of the paper on which this line is drawn. On one side of the paper is a Spirit space called "despair." On the other side of the paper is a Spirit space called "trust." Therefore, at each point along the line of increasing consciousness of Spirit, two options in "real" Spirit exist: despair or trust. A person far less conscious than you or I or Wilber can be a person of trust. A person far more conscious than you or I or Wilber can be a person in despair. At each point



along the line of increasing consciousness, every human being faces the same elemental challenge: **despair or trust**. Despair or trust is the **FINAL EITHER/OR** of human living.

Therefore, more consciousness does not necessarily mean more Spirit health. It can mean greater evil. Nevertheless, more consciousness is valuable in the same way that more food or more health or more money might be seen as valuable. In fact, a person in Spirit sickness tends to withdraw from more consciousness, and a person in Spirit health tends to be open to more consciousness. The trusting person has nothing to fear in the prospect of becoming more conscious, for this means being more conscious of that Mysterious Reality which is trusted. Furthermore, more consciousness means more power in loving Reality. So a person of trust values more consciousness, even though it is not needed to be a person of trust.

Wilber's perspective tempts us into a confusion that can lead us into despair. Wilber claims that his fourth stage of Spirit is the fulfillment--the end of the road in Spirit emergence. But this is not true. As I have already explained, nondual mysticism is merely one of several finite metaphors for viewing Spirit. Wilber is correct that nondual religious imaging has deep meaning and a long lineage. He quotes the following nondual formula from Sri Ramana Maharshi (echoing Shankara).

The world is illusory  
Brahman alone is Real  
Brahman is the world.<sup>2</sup>

This koan of thought may be useful for provoking human consciousness to an awareness of Spirit. But illusion envelopes us when we attempt to literally identify our Spirit selves with Brahman or with the world. What does it actually mean to say, "I am Brahman; I am the world"? Do we actually mean this in some literal fashion? Do we actually mean to say that "I AM I, THE SOURCE OF ALL, THE MANIFESTATION OF ALL"? Is such self-identification being my actual Spirit being, or is it a type of arrogance which will surely lead to despair?

## **The Vulnerability of the Spirit Self**

The Spirit Self can be described in a far more modest fashion than the one Wilber emphasizes. I, the Spirit I, am a relationship with Brahman, not Brahman itself. Similarly, I am not the cosmos. I am not the entire finite order of things. I, the Spirit I, can only claim to be a relationship between one very specific space-time spot in the cosmos and the Infinite that is constituting that cosmos. In my willingness to be this relationship, I do indeed cease to identify with my finite ego and thus opt to identify with a more-than-ego-Self. But if I see my Spirit identity as a finite-to-Infinite relationship, I am relieved of any necessity for attempting to identify with the Final-Void-Final-Fullness of Brahman or with the entire manifest cosmos. I am not these actualities; I am relationship with them.

When I view my Spirit self as relationship, I can still speak of myself as being the manifest cosmos in its capacity to be aware of itself and of its Infinite Ground. I can indeed see the Infinite Ground streaming like a backlight through each and every component of the manifest world. But this is true not because I am the Infinite Ground or because I am the entire manifest world. Rather, my identification with the Earth is real because I am a relationship between a specific space-time coordinate of consciousness and the Infinite Source of all coordinates.

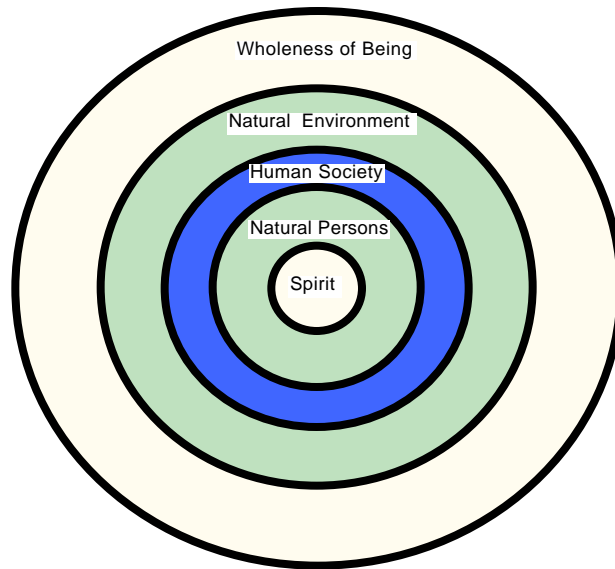
Similarly, using the relationship metaphor, we can still affirm Wilber's experience of moving beyond the subjective-objective duality. The INFINITE THAT of external experience and the SPIRIT-I who experiences THAT are not two different universes of Reality. Subjective and objective are two different human approaches to the same Reality. As a "seat" of finite

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 302

consciousness, I look within and I look without. Then as my “I” of consciousness makes the leap beyond ego, I become aware that the Spirit-I is not my subjective construction but MYSTERIOUS BEING bubbling up inside me. And this BEING that is bubbling inside me is the same BEING that I am confronting outwardly. “THAT I AM” is a witness to the unity of objective and subjective in the experience of Mysterious Reality.

Here is a diagram I have found helpful for picturing this Infinite nonduality in relationship to our ordinary experiences of subjective and objective approaches to Reality



The light colored outer ring and the light colored inner circle are parts of the same large circle upon which the darker rings sit. These light colored spaces symbolize that **Spirit**, an inward experience, and the **Wholeness of Being**, an outward experience, are aspects of one circle--that is, of the same experience. Spirit is that part of the larger circle which is bubbling up inside the human person. The Wholeness of Being is that part of the larger circle which is outwardly confronting us.

The darkest ring is **human society**. This ring can be pictured as sitting on top of the wider medium-dark ring that includes both the **natural person** inside the ring of society and the **natural environment** outside the ring of society. As a finite natural person, I can look within where I see my natural being of thoughts, feelings, and ego struggles. As I look deeper I also see Spirit; I see that I am Spirit. As a finite natural person, I can also look without where I see my own body, the societies which we humans have built, and the natural cosmos upon which we have built society. And beyond both society and nature I see the WHOLENESS which shines through every social and natural event.

This diagram holds the unity of subjective and objective without contradicting the vision that I, as Spirit Being, am a vulnerable relationship with the Infinite. As a finite-to-Infinite-relationship, I am **dependent** each moment upon the Infinite Source that constitutes me as this relationship. My confidence, my security, my courage is founded in my active trust of this Infinite Source. In trust, I consent to be blown by the wild wind of relatedness to the Infinite. Yet I remain a derived being. I need not claim that my confidence is grounded in actually being the Infinite Source in all its All-powerfulness. I need not claim that my Earth-naturalness is grounded in actually being the entire cosmos in all its variety. Such invulnerability is a delusion. And all delusion leads to despair. Indeed, delusion already is despair waiting to be exposed, felt, and perhaps healed.

Not only is my Spirit life vulnerable because Spirit is a **dependent reality**, but also my Spirit

life is vulnerable because I, the Spirit being, am **vulnerable to temptation**. Since my trusting relationship with the Infinite Source is freely chosen, it is also true that I am capable of freely choosing to be suspicious--that is, to rebel. rather than trust. Religious stories which witness to the enduring truth of Spirit aliveness are true, but also true are those stories which tell of the exemplary Spirit personage being tempted to not trust. These stories, written by those who trust Reality, witness to these twin truths: (1) we are always tempted to flee our relationship with the Infinite Source, and (2) the Infinite Source is always providing us with the strength necessary to resist whatever temptation is present.

Not only am I currently vulnerable to the temptation not to trust, but also my life history is a story of many falls into such temptation. Even if I see my life history as a positive journey toward greater consciousness, I can also see that it has been a story of wrong turns that remain tragic even though they have led to where I now am. If I am in a place of trust at this time in my life, I have gotten there not through making those wrong turns but through being rescued from those wrong turns by the resourcefulness of the Infinite Source in providing fresh starts. This means that being my actual relatedness with the Infinite entails confession of my having fallen away from my Infinite relatedness. Only in the context of such ongoing and open confession can I fully appreciate the wonder of my Welcome Home to full and complete Spirit after my particular and grievous falls. My falls have been grievous not because they marred my arrogant hope for a perfect record, but because they led to despair, which is the root of all evil.

So, as a relational Spirit being, I stand always in the crisis of choosing either: (1) rebellion and despair or (2) trusting consent to be my Spirit relatedness. Since the option of trust is sustained by the constituting power and welcoming grace of the Infinite Source, trust might be viewed as the easiest of these two options. Being the rebel is hard work: it means swimming against the stream of my constituting Actuality. Also, the rebel option is a hopeless effort to escape the Inescapable, to destroy the Indestructible, to achieve the Unachievable, to seek the Unfindable. The rebel option, however comforting or self-affirming it may seem at first, leads in the end to a here-and-now "hell" of despair.

Nevertheless, in another sense, the despair option is the easier option, for strong currents of human living are flowing in this direction. The life of trust, the life of being the Spirit relationship which I am, is a life lived against the stream formed by "mostpeople," by most of humanity, by most of the trends in social history. The presence of a humanity that is captive and captivated by the despair option makes the trust option an upstream journey. Every prophet, every saint, every seer, every warrior for justice has witnessed to the truth that Spirit health is an unpopular option. And one of the reasons it is unpopular is that taking this option runs the risk of rejection and persecution from those who do not wish to be healthy or even hear about it.

This conflict between trust and despair goes on not only upon the general stage of human history but within the personal interior of each human individual. Each of us battles the evil option within as well as without. A journey toward Spirit maturity may indeed be a journey of increasing consciousness, but it is also a journey from the unwillingness to be Spirit to a willingness to be Spirit. In Discourse Ten above, I described a sequence in which Spirit can be experienced as a progressive increase in intensification: (1) The Whiff of Spirit, (2) the Battle of Ego and Spirit, (3) the Tip Toward Spirit, and (4) the Fulfillment of Spirit. These four steps are very different from Wilber's four stages of transpersonal consciousness. They picture an increase in our consciousness of being Spirit, and they also picture an increase in our willingness to be our Spirit being. They do not picture turning points in a developmental sequence. Rather they picture the **intensification** of our consciousness of Spirit and of the maturation of our trust.

More consciousness is an advantage for living more powerfully, but in and of itself more consciousness is not a bringer of health. The healing of our despair can take place at **any level** of

consciousness. So this is the key question: **are we willing or are we unwilling to live openly and fully whatever level of consciousness we now possess?**

More consciousness will surely come, and when it does, we will face the same question in some new form: **do we say “Yes” or “No” to whatever consciousness we now possess?**

### **Poem six: True Bliss**

Seers advise: “Find your bliss,”  
as if bliss were a far way off--  
at the top of some mountain,  
at the end of some arduous journey.

True bliss is, indeed, a lofty destination.  
And it takes a journey to get there.  
Yet “there” is not a far way off;  
it is here and now.

The long, hard journey takes us  
through our reluctance  
to be here and to be now . . . .  
what we always were, still are, and will be.

Bliss is not adding something  
to my ordinary life.  
It is taking something away:  
my flight, my rebellion.

Who is the real me?  
Underneath all the dross, I am:  
Awesome liberty, compassion,  
trust, tranquility, and joy.

This real me is my bliss,  
and this bliss is not far away,  
though I may be far away  
from my bliss.

Yet my case is not hopeless.  
I can return to my bliss.  
I can admit my waywardness.  
I can accept my Welcome Home.

I can celebrate.  
I can feast,  
here and now,  
at the table of forgiveness.