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Magazine Reprint Series

The Guru and the Pandit
Dialogue III

exploring the **Future** of **Religion**

Andrew Cohen & Ken Wilber in dialogue



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The Mission of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine

What Is Enlightenment? is dedicated to a revolution in human consciousness and human culture. Guided by the always-evolving vision of founder Andrew Cohen, whose tireless passion for spiritual inquiry continues to push the edge of contemporary thinking, we are in search of a radical new moral and philosophical architecture for twenty-first-century society. We believe that finding this framework for transformation—rooted in the timeless revelation of enlightenment, reaching toward a truly coherent ethics for the postmodern world—is imperative, not only for the evolution of our species, but for our very survival. By asking the hard questions of the new science and the ancient traditions, of art and culture, of business and politics, *What Is Enlightenment?* seeks to create a dynamic context for conscious engagement with the greatest challenges of our times, a groundwork for the ongoing liberation of human potential.

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EVOLUTION IS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL BUSINESS—its movements painted in the broadest strokes across the contours of the cosmos, yet mirrored in the subtleties of each human soul. And indeed, a growing number of people—from scientists to mystics, from futurists to psychologists—are telling us that it is in the human soul that the responsibility for the next step in life’s unfolding lies. Understanding this biggest of pictures, and our place in it, has never seemed more crucial—or more spiritually relevant.

In our last few issues, the spiritual implications of this greater context have been echoed and amplified by many different voices, and nowhere more so than in the ongoing series of dialogues between integral philosopher Ken Wilber and *WIE* founder Andrew Cohen. Bringing together a pandit’s breadth of wisdom with a guru’s hands-on experience of the inner dynamics of transformation, these dialogues simultaneously expand and deepen to encompass dimensions that rarely meet on one page. The result is far more than an exchange of ideas. When the ever-expanding integrity of Wilber’s “theory of everything” meets the living passion of Cohen’s uncompromising vision, new vistas of inquiry seem to emerge, calling on all of us to question more deeply and make more room in our hearts for unimagined potentials. Now, as *WIE* explores the challenges of our future, the guru and the pandit offer the third in their series of dialogues, boldly questioning the timeless truths of tradition and seeking to discern the deeper currents in consciousness today that will give form to the world of tomorrow.

—E.D.

andrew **cohen** & **wilber**
ken **wilber** in dialogue



the Guru and the Pandit

exploring the Future of Religion

"The third millennium will be dominated by the 'religion/spirituality paradox': the decline of organized religion on one hand coupled with a growing interest in spirituality and wisdom on the other. . . . This demands a reordering of priorities in terms of the spiritual, and an urgent need for a relevant faith. . . . By relevant, I mean a faith that speaks to the current and future concerns of our time."

Caleb Rosado, "What Is Spirituality?"

"The devastation taking place cannot be critiqued effectively from within the traditional religions or humanist ethics. We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the Earth's functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions know how to deal with suicide, homicide, and even genocide; but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide, the extinction of the vulnerable life systems of the Earth, and geocide, the devastation of the Earth itself. . . . The human is at a cultural impasse. . . . Radical new forms are needed."

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*

ANDREW COHEN: *It seems that the unprecedented complexity of the time we are living in demands from many of us a profound reevaluation of the spiritual context and direction of our lives. The world is changing faster than it ever has, and this rapid pace of change is simultaneously thrilling, frightening, bewildering, and overwhelming. It is increasingly difficult to sustain perspectives, worldviews, and spiritual and philosophical beliefs that are not broad enough to embrace the enormity of our circumstances. I can definitely tell that many of the people that I come in contact with are searching for new answers. It suddenly seems that for many of those who are, as you would say, at the leading edge, satisfying answers are no longer being found in the great traditions. It really seems that a new spirituality with a higher reach and a deeper embrace is necessary at this time, one that will enable us to discover our true identity, the timeless source of our being, while simultaneously compelling us to face the actuality of the world context that we're living in. Indeed, it would seem that now, the spiritual path must free the individual in a very specific way, a way that would cultivate enough strength and maturity to bear the incredible*

emotional and psychological urgency of the life conditions we're in the midst of. We need a path that will free the awakening human in the face of fear, despair, and self-doubt, a path that will make it possible for him or her to respond with a worldcentric passion and God-centered devotion to the evolutionary needs of the life process at this point in time.

So I thought it would be great if we could speak together about what this new spirituality might be like. To begin, maybe you could briefly describe what an integral perspective on spirituality would be.

KEN WILBER: First, it would be good to talk about what the meaning of "spirituality" is because it can get very confusing. An *integral* spirituality, I believe, would be a conception that would take into account, and attempt to honor, all of the different meanings of spirituality, and also draw some conclusions about what happens when you stop using a merely *partial* approach to spiritual potential. I'll give you three of the main ways that people use the word *spiritual*. I'm not saying any of these uses are right or wrong—actually, I'm saying they're all correct. But it's

andrew **cohen** & **wilber** ken in dialogue



important that we know what we're talking about.

One very common definition of spirituality is a “peak experience.” Somebody actually *has* a spiritual experience. It can be a *satori*, it can be an experience of nature mysticism, it can be a revelation from the Divine, it can be luminosity or light. It's some sort of a peak experience that has a beginning in time, confers a great deal of meaning and value, and sometimes includes overwhelming emotion—bliss, love, gratitude, humility, compassion. These things tend to be so overwhelming that the separate self is blasted to smithereens in the moment of the experience and has some deep and profound understanding or realization about the world and his or her place in it. If you look at a lot of the world's great religious traditions, they all *started* when their founder had one of those experiences. So that's one definition of spirituality—a direct, immediate realization or experience.

Another way people use the word spirituality, and this can be a little more scholarly, is to mean the highest *levels* of development in any *line* of development. There are about a dozen major lines of development—cognitive, emotional, moral, interpersonal, psychosexual, and so on. So, for example, people tend to call the highest type of cognition spiritual. Lower types of cognition, like a word or an image or a logical concept, people don't generally call spiritual. But if you have a transrational awareness or a higher intuition or something that's transverbal, people will tend to call that spiritual. Or in the emotional line, for example, if you have low levels of emotion like hatred, anger, or greed, people don't generally call that spiritual. But highly developed emotions, like universal compassion or love or bliss, people tend to call spiritual. Higher levels of moral development are called spiritual. Higher levels of interpersonal development are called spiritual. This definition is very common. And you can start to see how there's tension between these definitions as well.

AC: *Definitely.*

KW: Because that second meaning is based on a *developmental*

process, so only someone who is highly developed would have those kinds of spiritual experiences. Whereas, in terms of the first definition, anybody can have a spiritual experience—a two-year-old, a five-year-old, a ten-year-old, an elderly person, and so on. People in the field argue about which definition is right, but I think they're all right.

The third common definition is that spirituality is neither a state nor the highest level in a line, but is its *own* developmental line. And therefore, you can be at a low level of development in the spiritual line, you can be at a medium level of development in the spiritual line, or you can be at a high level of development in the spiritual line. There has actually been some very respectable scholarly work using that definition. So there we have three major definitions, and there are others that I've outlined in some of my writings.

If we look at spirituality as a line of development, as a series of unfolding levels—for example, archaic, magic, mythic, rational, and integral, then you could say there's archaic religion, there's magical religion, there's mythic religion, there's rational religion, and there's integral religion. A lot of people are implicitly using that third definition—including both Thomas Berry and Caleb Rosado, whom you quoted. And what they're both saying is that magic and mythic religion no longer protects the earth, so therefore, we need an integral or higher spirituality. And I agree. But what they're saying is also very partial. It has to be balanced with these other types of understanding.

I also think that in addition to looking at those three different definitions, we also need to understand a kind of broad orienting generalization, which is that a lot of the traditions, past and present, and a lot of the realized teachers, past and present, make an important distinction between the manifest world of form, the unmanifest world of emptiness, and then their nonduality—the union of emptiness and form. I think that we have to be careful, when we talk about spirituality yesterday, today, and tomorrow, to find a balance in those three domains as well.

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So, for example, both Thomas Berry and Caleb Rosado were, in essence, just talking about the world of form. Both of them left out an experience of the unborn, or the pure emptiness before the big bang. And unless you have that emptiness as your fundamental background, then you're basically just talking about the manifest world itself and playing in finite forms. Then your idea of spirituality is merely saving that finite form: "We don't want the earth to croak." Well, that's fine. But who were you before the earth was born? Who were you before the big bang? What *is* this emptiness that never enters the stream of time? Spirituality, integral spirituality, certainly has to include a profound realization of the unborn, the unmanifest, the timeless, the spaceless, combined with a reverence for the world of form—all of it, ecological, personal, global, and so on. My experience is that people tend to err on one side or the other. Either they get into this transcendental purity that doesn't care about the earth and Gaia, or they merely identify with Gaia and they forget the unborn. What we want to try to do, of course, is include both. So that's my overview on some of the essentials that we would want to include in an integral approach to the topic.

A Reassessment of Our Faith

AC: *So I think we agree that the religious traditions, because they emerged at a very different time in history, generally do not appear to be equipped to appropriately deal with and respond to the fast-changing life conditions that we find ourselves in the midst of. Therefore, it would seem that this extraordinary time we're living in demands a radical reassessment of our faith.*

KW: I think that's exactly right. Most of what we call the world's great religions were born in the magic and mythic eras. They were born about fifty thousand years ago, all the way up to about two thousand years ago. And it's not that the great shamans, saints, and sages of those periods weren't realized. They could, all of them, be plunged into that vast emptiness—because emptiness doesn't change. So a great saint, like Gautama Buddha, for example, could plunge into nirvana and be just as in touch with that emptiness as anybody can be today. But the world of form, the actual manifest world, is *evolving*. So they didn't fall short of the mark in terms of their own realization of emptiness. It's just that the world of form has so dramatically changed that they *are* short of the mark on that side of the street, so to speak. So that's where they definitely need updating. And both of those two people whom you quoted are quite right, in my opinion, that the rules of the manifest domain that were developed in the magic and mythic eras are

really inadequate for today's world. So in that sense, the great traditions are woefully inadequate.

AC: *And because the world of form is constantly evolving, without that half of the story being taken into consideration—and always being updated—it's inevitable that our responses are going to miss the mark.*

KW: Right. It's also important to take into consideration that in today's world, *less than two percent of the population are at integral waves of development*. Seventy percent of the world's population is at mythic or lower, which are ethnocentric levels of development. You know, there were a lot of people, particularly us boomers, who felt we had the new paradigm that was going to be the greatest transformation in the history of the world—this holistic, "everything is one, Gaia great Goddess" kind of thing. And that *can* be a wonderful turquoise belief (to use Spiral Dynamics terminology*). But unfortunately only a half of a percent of the population is at a cognitive level that can actually comprehend that turquoise conception. The rest of the world is at red (egocentric) and blue (absolutist) and orange (scientific/rational) and is just nowhere near that kind of thing. So we're not going to get some future spiritual orientation that's going to save this planet. The chances of that happening are virtually nil. So an enlightened society wouldn't just be one that had its governance systems coming from an integral level of development. It would also need to include sane ways that people could be at these earlier stages of development—ways that didn't harm the planet.

AC: *Right.*

KW: It's a very delicate, difficult topic to talk about. If you read someone like Thomas Berry, you get the sense that if we just adopted this nice holistic worldview, then everybody would be happy. But that's not going to change the fact that people are still at earlier stages of development, and simply learning a new worldview is not going to help them. That's just an *exhortation*. It's a goal without a path. You really have to have an understanding of the development of consciousness. Otherwise, just exhorting people to adopt new paradigms is pretty worthless. People can sound the alarm—everybody's been doing that for decades. But what we're short on are actual paths for interior development

*For a quick reference model explaining the basic stages of Spiral Dynamics, see page 55. This comprehensive developmental model of human value systems is explored in detail in the Fall/Winter 2002 issue of *WIE*. (read online at www.wie.org/spiraldynamics)

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Ken Wilber

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AC: Yes, we certainly are. And especially now, we need paths for interior development that are appropriate, as I was saying earlier, for the unprecedented complexity of the times we're living in. And, as you were saying, we need paths that will take into account the entire spectrum of human development. But those at the leading edge, those who will be in a position to recognize and appreciate the developmental perspective, especially need a path that will challenge them to meet the demands of today's dramatic life conditions. They need a path that not only will facilitate the experience of transcendence or personal release but, more significantly, will catalyze a leap beyond relativism that compels the individual to engage the life process at a level of deeper authenticity and maturity—a maturity that would, by its nature, recognize and freely embrace a greater responsibility for the future of life itself. If the impulse to awaken, the desire for enlightenment, is going to ultimately be able to elevate the consciousness of this world, then that urge is going to have to occur within a context that is informed by the fact that for better or worse the world is in a state of rapid change—change that desperately needs our conscious cooperation and participation. The spiritual impulse, the urge for transcendence, becomes evolutionary only when it becomes a duty—

KW: —an obligation.

AC: Yes! A duty, obligation, and commitment. A commitment to completely give oneself over to what we could ultimately call our spiritual obligation: the total transformation of the manifest world, using whatever our God-given capacity is. Along the lines

of everything we've been speaking about, and as we've previously discussed, I think that we may also need to redefine what the meaning of enlightenment itself is for the time we're living in. We may need, as Caleb Rosado mentioned, a more "relevant" definition. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on transcendence or the discovery of and abidance in the empty ground of being beyond the world and beyond time. But at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I question whether this kind of orientation is really relevant or appropriate. In fact, I feel that the whole purpose of enlightenment or going beyond ego, in our own time is to enable us to finally be truly available to participate in the transformation of the manifest world from a position of higher consciousness or development. Right now, this is truly what is needed more than ever. Indeed, and this is what's so important to understand, as long as there remains in the seeker of enlightenment any clinging to a posture of transcendence, even if it's a subtle one, the effect will be that one will still, to some degree, be divided. And that division will inhibit one's ability to act because one will still be holding on. And so this is why there is such a great need at this time to give the evolutionary context more and more precedence in the way the path to enlightenment is presented.

KW: As part of that comprehensive vision, yes. I mentioned before the simple notion that there is the world of form and the world of the formless, and then their union, their nondual *one taste*, their coming together (which is, in fact, what they already are). There's a plus and a minus to each of those domains, if you will, and there is always a pitfall if one emphasizes only one of them. So what I try to do when we're talking about integral spirituality is to look at the pitfalls of all of those domains if we don't embrace all of them

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together. And you're describing beautifully the pitfall of continuing to get into merely the transcendental component, which, in fact, is the subtlest block to nondual realization.

AC: *Right. As long as we're divided, even subtly, in our passion, i.e., more attached to the position of transcendence than to total, unrestricted, unselfconscious, full-hearted, full-bodied, ecstatic, and fully committed engagement with the life process, inevitably, on gross and subtle levels, we will be resisting, not abiding as that total release and complete engagement with the life process.*

KW: I agree. In the experiential introduction that I've had to some of this, it's almost a tension around the heart that excludes manifestation. Does that make sense to you?

AC: Yes.

KW: It *seems* like a transcendental freedom or purity, and certainly at the beginning it has more freedom than a mere immersion in passing finite domains. But when you get in and sort of look around, there's very subtle tension that actually represents a contraction and that holds *samsara*, the manifest world, at bay, as if it's some sort of disease—very subtly. But that is the final barrier to radical love or radical release or radical embrace—an embrace that then finds itself both prior to the manifest world but not other than the manifest world in any way whatsoever. It really is a sort of radical embrace of evolutionary form as its own body, its substance, its own vitality, its own manifestation.

AC: *And that impulse, the liberated impulse for that radical embrace, is freedom itself already. That's why nothing needs to be held on to.*

KW: Exactly. And it's an exuberant embrace that's both joyful and a sense of duty, as you say.

AC: *Yes, a sense of duty that commits us to a task that will never end. So the whole point is to be able to embrace manifestation with an ever-widening reach while ever remaining rooted in the unborn, unmanifest ground that always is and always was.*

KW: Yes, that's true. Because, of course, the other pitfall, which I think is much more common in today's culture, is the mere immersion in the manifest realm, the merely pagan orientation. The pitfall there, of course, is that you have no transcendence. You have no freedom from the finite realm. You have no unborn.

And you don't know your original face, the face you had before the big bang. And then that's celebrated *as if* it's integral spirituality! And all of the transcendental impulses are condemned. But unfortunately, you can't really embrace Gaia until you transcend Gaia. Otherwise, you have a mere addiction to the finite realm. You're not embracing it with love; you're embracing it with basically the same addiction you would heroin or any sort of sensory indulgence. Of course, because as a spiritual teacher you are dealing with students who are being brought along a path of awakening, the pitfall you would run into most often is people still clinging to that transcendental escapism, so to speak. But, as you know, out there in the world at large, most people are addicted to the manifest finite domain.

A New Religion?

AC: *Now, a direction I'd really like to explore with you, one I've been thinking about quite a lot lately, is: What would an evolved theism, appropriate for our times, look like? In other words, how would a new religion, founded upon authentic, radical, nondual realization, emerge in a postmodern cultural context?*

Part of the background to this line of inquiry is that I've noticed that many of the people at the leading edge today, specifically those who are interested in spiritual development and the evolution of consciousness, seem to have outgrown many of the traditional religious paths, simply because those individuals have evolved to a higher stage of development than the one out of which the traditions originally emerged, in some cases, thousands of years ago. Many of the traditions are felt to be inherently limiting because of their often outmoded responses to the individual and collective needs of human beings who are at the leading edge as we move into the twenty-first century. Indeed, the traditions are no longer seen to represent a relevant path to freedom and unrestricted evolution, and therefore, many individuals have become interested in alternative approaches. But what often happens, for many of those people, is that the overarching context becomes blurred, and then being on the path almost always becomes a strictly personal matter.

What's very compelling is that I think we're coming to a point where, sooner or later, the higher potentials realized in the steps and leaps that these individuals are taking are going to require some kind of structure—a spiritual or religious structure, if we want to use that kind of language—to actually be able to embrace and organize the higher-level experiences they are having. It's possible we may need to give birth to a new tradition. In other words, we need to create a framework or context in which we can come together to make sense out of these experiences so that we can really use them

four quadrants

In Ken Wilber's integral philosophy, our multidimensional Kosmos consists entirely of sentient beings, or "holons," spanning atoms to amoebas to astronauts. All holons can be perceived from at least four fundamental perspectives. In the Four Quadrants diagram, the Upper Left quadrant represents an individual holon viewed from the interior (as an "I" or subjective mind), and the Upper Right represents the view of that holon from the exterior (as an "It" or objective body). Because no holon exists in isolation, the Lower Left quadrant represents the view from within a collective of holons (as a "We" or intersubjective culture), and the Lower Right represents a collective viewed from the outside (as an "Its" or interobjective society). All four dimensions of this matrix, Wilber believes, are essential components of any truly integral pursuit.

as a foundation from which to restructure our whole relationship to the human experience.

KW: Yes, I think so. I think what you're talking about is a very important point. It's pretty common nowadays, and understandable, for people to say that there is a difference between being "religious" and being "spiritual." They say, "I am spiritual, but I'm not religious." And what they mean by that, of course, is that "spirituality" is not dogmatic or based on traditions—it's based on personal experience and personal understanding, and so on. But if that spirituality survives *them*, and other people can take up that spiritual approach, then it becomes a religion. Because all "religion" means is established, organized spirituality. So when people say, "Well, I don't like religion, but I *am* spiritual," all they mean is that they don't like organized forms of spirituality. But what they're *really* saying is that their *own* personal experience is all that counts. But what happens if they have a spiritual realization that's important, or they're part of a practicing *sangha* or community that has a realization that's important? If that's going to be passed on to subsequent generations, then it's going to be organized spirituality—and that's religion. They're going

to have to create a religion, a structure in which to carry it on, to institutionalize it—

AC: *God forbid!*

KW: Most people don't like religion—they just have their own spiritual experience in this moment, and they don't think beyond that. But if that spiritual experience is going to have meaning to *anybody* other than their own ego, it's going to *have* to be carried forward. And that means it would be what I call a four-quadrant affair. [See diagram above.] That means it has to be anchored in the lower right quadrant (collective exterior) in terms of social institutions—structures that can actually carry it on. It has to have a lower left (collective interior) intersubjective worldview—a set of beliefs, interpretations, and understandings that indicate how you orient yourself toward these higher potential experiences that you're having. And of course, it also has to have the upper left (individual interior) and upper right (individual exterior) domains.

So when you say we may need a new religion, I'd say that it's happening right now, but it's happening in very small groups or practicing communities that are having these higher, what I

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If the impulse to awaken, the desire for enlightenment, is going to ultimately be able to elevate the consciousness of this world, then that urge is going to have to occur within a context that is informed by the fact that for better or worse the world is in a state of rapid change — change that desperately needs our conscious cooperation and participation.

Andrew Cohen

would call third-tier spiritual experiences. But they have to bring them down, so to speak, and start to give them structure. They have to embody them, they have to institutionalize them, they have to find some way to reproduce them and carry them forward. However, that's only going to be happening in very small pockets of practice for the time being, in practicing *sanghas*—yours is an example, and there are also some terrific Buddhist communities and Taoist communities and Christian contemplative communities that all, in their own way, are attempting to embody higher potential states and trying to bring them down and give them structure so that they carry on. And that means creating a new religion.

Beyond Individuality

AC: *To take this further, it seems to me that this next step that we're speaking about points beyond individual enlightenment. It points way beyond the personal domain of the individual to the emergence of some kind of collective or intersubjective higher mind. I'm talking about a kind of emergence that would release an awakened consciousness whose source of power comes directly and miraculously from the merging of minds beyond individual and collective ego.*

Of course, this is a challenging concept for us to grasp because those of us who come from the privileged classes all over the world, and especially in the West, have been brought up in a cultural climate where a kind of inauthentic ego-based autonomy is nurtured. And also, because the concept of enlightenment itself, up until very recently, has generally been very much about an individual journey. But this cult of individuality, I feel, is what we may all be called to transcend for the sake of the emergence of our own higher potentials. Obviously this would begin to occur in those focused contexts that we've been speaking about, but the implications for all of us are enormous. In terms of the evolution of consciousness, it seems to me that a higher level of development does point toward the emergence

of a capacity of mind that literally transcends individuality.

KW: Oh, I think so. My own opinion, of course, is that every holon has four quadrants, so every awareness has an intersubjective component. But what happens in the higher waves, levels, or stages of development is that all of the quadrants, in a sense, become more vivid and vibrant, so you tend to notice them more. I mean, on the one hand, it's true that higher stages involve a sort of intensification of intersubjective consciousness. But on the other hand, paradoxically, the people experiencing that also become more autonomous.

AC: *That's absolutely true.*

KW: So it's not that autonomy is decreasing and intersubjectivity is increasing. I think they *both* just become much more vibrant, more noticeable. And in that sense, intersubjectivity does stand out in a way that it doesn't at earlier stages.

AC: *Definitely, because in these higher stages, there would be a much greater degree of egolessness. And contrary to what most people may imagine, the natural result of a decrease in ego is always a greater and more authentic autonomy. And if this greater autonomy beyond ego begins to manifest in a number of individuals simultaneously, then the liberated mind of enlightenment itself automatically emerges through an awakened intersubjective context in a way that simply would not be possible through a singular individual.*

KW: Yes, and also, that wouldn't be possible in earlier stages of development. Another way to put this is that, as you well know, what happens when you're getting into these more evolved spiritual states, the One Self becomes more and more obvious in others. So you can be sitting there looking at another person,

and all of a sudden you experience an intimate oneness with *their* interior. And simultaneously they're looking back at you experiencing an intimate oneness with *your* interior because you're both resonating to the only Self there is in the entire universe. So intersubjectivity, so to speak, becomes a kind of harmonic resonance that just jumps out.

AC: *And what if the kind of event that you just described became the foundation for the emergence of our own higher potentials? In other words, don't you think that in our future—assuming we survive and we're able to carry on with all this—there is going to be a level of development where the distinction between autonomous individuality and higher unity is going to become thinner and thinner?*

KW: Definitely.

AC: *And that through this greater nondual intimacy, unimaginable potentials—many of which you're beginning to have access to yourself, I think, through your own work—are going to begin to emerge—*

KW: Yes. I think that's right. And I think that at a sort of rarified level, so to speak, even though a lot of the distinctions in the finite domain, the manifest domain, become clearer and simpler and more obvious, paradoxically, *those distinctions all start to fade*. They become kind of pale—and not just the distinction between self and others. You get this intersubjectivity that is constantly vibrating and vivid. For example, the traditional distinctions between masculine and feminine fade away as well. Agency and communion—it's hard to tell the difference. It's like you have both more communion *and* more agency at the same time.

AC: *Right! Because when gender begins to identify more with the authentic self and less with ego, that singularity begins to emerge.*

KW: But it's *not* a meltdown. That's what's interesting. In other words, you become both more masculine and more feminine—

AC: *Exactly.*

KW: And more autonomous *and* more group or intersubjectively oriented—transcending opposites in this very paradoxical way. I think that clearly happens. And it happens across the board.

AC: *Yes. And what's so significant about this, I believe, is that what begins to emerge in this awakened context of nondual inter-*

subjectivity is a completely new possibility—a different order of human potential altogether. I mean, it's literally like a new world emerges in this one, with new rules, because now the context has completely changed. It's the future, experienced now. It's a world or state of consciousness beyond ego, where together, as one, we can begin to consciously participate in the evolution of consciousness itself.

Creative Evolution

AC: *You know, I've been intuiting for many years these kinds of higher evolutionary potentials that I had no objective evidence for. I simply saw them in the eye of my own intuition and found myself mysteriously compelled to do whatever I could to enable them to become manifest within my body of students. This was often disconcerting because when you see something that you're sure can exist, and indeed will if you try hard enough, but you continue to have no evidence to prove it, it can make you feel a little crazy. But finally, as a result of not giving up and continuing to exert tremendous pressure, these very potentials have actually begun to emerge.*

I have found the things you've written about what you call a “post-metaphysical spirituality” to confirm my own experiences and also to enlighten my understanding of them. According to what I've understood, what I was seeing in the eye of my own intuition did not yet exist—not in the metaphysical sense of the perennial philosophy, which holds that all higher levels are preexisting ontological structures. In fact, what I was seeing was only a potential, not yet an actual preexisting level that simply needed to be reached. Indeed, my own experience confirms your declaration that those newly emerging levels of consciousness/being have not yet appeared with enough consistency to become self-existing levels, or what you have called “Kosmic habits.” But, and this is the most thrilling part of it, they do in fact become existing levels or Kosmic habits to the degree that we ourselves co-participate with consciousness to mutually develop that very capacity in ourselves.*

KW: That's exactly right. I really do believe that is the case. And it's mutually supportive, in a sense, to have people's own inner realization and experience confirm that. Because it's certainly my own realization, but it's also obviously the product of a kind of philosophical orientation. And now we're thinking through what some of these things mean in conjunction with your own spiritual practice and spiritual awareness.

*Term used to refer to the common core of the world's great wisdom traditions.

exploring the **Future of Religion**

“Unlike the perennial philosophy, the details of which I mostly reject, I believe that the levels of consciousness are largely plastic . . . a vast . . . field of potentials and not a predetermined set of levels through which humanity must rigidly march on the way to its own realization. However, once a level of consciousness emerges in enough people, then that level becomes a Kosmic pattern for future development, and thus it becomes something of a fixed level, not in a Platonic sense, but in the sense [of] . . . a set of Kosmic habits, habits that are consequently repeated in stages of subsequent development (just as atoms and molecules are part of all subsequent evolution). This approach overcomes and rejects a metaphysical viewpoint and replaces it with an empirical, phenomenological, experiential, and evidential approach.”

Ken Wilber

“On the Nature of a
Post-Metaphysical Spirituality”

AC: Before I'd become familiar with your ideas on this topic, I had assumed that these levels and potentials I was intuiting already existed. And then I realized, “No, they exist as potentials and therefore don't yet actually exist because not enough individuals have reached that level of development.”

KW: That's just how I see it. And this understanding allows us to get rid of an enormous amount of metaphysical and ontological baggage that not only is not needed but that completely prejudices the spiritual orientation in the eyes of the modern and postmodern world. You see, the modern and postmodern world has developed very powerful arguments for why those merely ontological and metaphysical structures don't exist. And they don't. But you can still derive every single thing you need for a fully integral spirituality without using that baggage.

So using the levels defined by Spiral Dynamics as examples, we can say that once the lower levels emerge—beige and purple and red and blue and orange and green—once they emerge and take on structure and become Kosmic habits, then they exist independent of individuals. So in today's world, the structures of those lower levels are so old that every infant has to go through

those stages. There is no getting around them—they are just there. So they become real, and that means in a very concrete, not metaphysical, way, as actual levels of development among real human beings in a real world. And so these levels or structures, right up to around turquoise, are, in fact, fairly fixed. And the older they are, the more they're a Kosmic habit, and the harder it is to break them.

But when you get up around turquoise and coral,* those levels are just now lightly getting formed. So that's where evolution's edge is right now—at turquoise and coral—and it's frothy and it's creative and it's emergent. And everything we do *right now* is going to contribute to how those levels are laid down as Kosmic habits.

AC: Right.

KW: So that's very interesting. And then there are even *higher* levels, but those are just vast potentials in the subtle and causal and nondual domains.

AC: That's what is so thrilling about this and what makes it infinitely more satisfying than the traditional take on all this—the shocking recognition that we are actually creating these levels

*The highest levels of development yet identified by the Spiral Dynamics system (see p. 55).

of consciousness, and of course, in an evolutionary context, we are desperately needed to do it. It ain't going to happen by itself because they don't yet exist!

KW: Absolutely.

AC: *And what could make the meaning of the spiritual impulse more clear than the recognition of the necessity for our own conscious participation in the evolution of consciousness itself? What could make more sense and be more compelling for the awakening human on an emotional, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual level than this? If we assume that these levels already exist, we are completely leaving out of the picture the all-important role that we have to play in the actual creation of these levels. And that's the most thrilling part of all this—because the purpose of human incarnation is revealed in the most obvious way when one realizes, "It is up to me."*

KW: Yes, it really is co-creation because right at that frothy, foaming, chaotic, emerging edge of spirit's unfolding is where *leela*, the creative play, is. And all that's required, of course, is that whatever emerges has to transcend and include its past because those are past forms of spirit. Molecules emerge, they transcend and include atoms, atoms include quarks, and so on. So we have to embrace the past, and that's called love. But looking at it the other way, you're bringing *down* that creative edge every time you have these kinds of experiences.

AC: *Exactly. Speaking of bringing down the creative edge, there's something profound I've noticed, and also that some of my students have experienced, that I'd like to tell you about. When one is actually engaging with the evolution of consciousness in the way we've been discussing, there is literally the sense that—God, I don't know what metaphor to use to describe this, but—it's almost as if a thing (if we can call consciousness a thing) is being "cooked" by the individuals who are consciously realizing it. In fact, as those individuals would move in and out of this state of conscious realization, it seemed like it was informing them and they were informing it. And then at a later point in time, when they awakened to it again, it literally seemed as if the thing—consciousness itself—had moved forward, evolved.*

KW: I believe that's *exactly* how it happens.

AC: *I've had this kind of experience for a long time, but recently,*

many of my students have described having the same recognition collectively. They realize that when they give attention to this thing, it begins to inform them and they evolve as a result, and when they return to it, they find that a mysterious moving forward has occurred in the thing itself. So in this one can actually intuit—you can't quite say see because it's on a more subtle level than that—but whatever consciousness is, you can almost see that it is evolving in just the way that we've been speaking about.

KW: That's exactly right. You can do a thought experiment where you think back fifty thousand years, where everybody's at a much earlier stage of development, sort of beige and purple. Purple is the leading edge at that time, and yet there are small groups of people that start to have an experience of the next level, which would be red. And red at that moment is not fully formed, so there are still a lot of different ways that red can go. And all it has to do is transcend and include purple and beige—it's fixed in that sense because its past has to be carried along to some degree. But at that creative edge, large parts of red could have gone in any number of different directions. And I'm sure that as the first pioneers in consciousness pushed into red, they were having just the kinds of experiences you described. They would sort of touch into it and then come back, and go, "Wow, what was that?" And then they'd go and touch it again and come back. And then eventually it starts to flow, it comes out, it sediments down. And the more people have that experience, the more it becomes a Kosmic habit available to other human beings, who then begin to move into that domain. And then ten thousand years later, it's become such a Kosmic habit that people have no choice at that point. They automatically evolve through red on the way to the next level, blue—that's just the way it is. Later on, at the leading edge of creative evolution, people at blue are starting to have experiences of orange. That was a very exciting time—it was called the Western Enlightenment (with previews of that emergence in early Greece when the bright boys down there pushed into orange and higher). So I think that's exactly what happens. You know, a thousand years from now, they'll be looking back on all this as "that kindergarten stuff" that we were pushing into back then. ■