

A Ticket to Athens

Interview with Ken Wilber *Pathways: A Magazine of Psychological and Spiritual Transformation*

Pathways: Why does Spirit bother to manifest at all especially when that manifestation is necessarily painful and requires that It become amnesiac to Its true identity?

Why does God incarnate?

Ken Wilber: Oh, I see you're starting with the easy questions. Well, I'll give you a few theoretical answers that have been offered over the years, and then I'll give you my personal experience, such as it is.

I have actually asked this same question of several spiritual teachers, and one of them gave a quick, classic answer: "It's no fun having dinner alone."

That's sort of flip or flippant, I suppose, but the more you think about it, the more it starts to make sense. What if, just for the fun of it, we pretend -- you and I blasphemously pretend, just for a moment -- that we are Spirit, that *Tat Tvam As?* Why would you, if you were God Almighty, why would you manifest a world? A world that, as you say, is necessarily one of separation and turmoil and pain? Why would you, as the One, ever give rise to the Many?

Pathways: It's no fun having dinner alone?

Ken Wilber: Doesn't that start to make sense? Here you are, the One and Only, the Alone and the Infinite. What are you going to do next? You bathe in your own glory for all eternity, you bask in your own delight for ages upon ages, and then what? Sooner or later, you might decide that it would be fun -- just fun - - to pretend that you were not you. I mean, what else are you going to do? What else can you do?

Pathways: Manifest a world.

Ken Wilber: Don't you think? But then it starts to get interesting. When I was a child, I used to try to play checkers with myself. You ever tried that?

Pathways: Yes, I remember doing something like that.

Ken Wilber: Does it work?

Pathways: Not exactly, because I always knew what my "opponent's" move was going to be. I was playing both sides, so I couldn't "surprise" myself. I always knew what I was going to do on both sides, so it wasn't much of a game. You need somebody "else" to play the game.

Ken Wilber: Yes, exactly, that's the problem. You need an "other." So if you are the only Being in all existence, and you want to play -- you want to play any sort of game -- you have to take the role of the other, and then forget that you are playing both sides. Otherwise the game is no fun, as you say. You have to pretend you are the other player with such conviction that you forget that you are playing all the roles. If you don't forget, then you got no game, it's just no fun.

Pathways: So if you want to play -- I think the Eastern term is *lila* -- then you have to forget who you are. Amnesia.

Ken Wilber: Yes, I think so. And that is exactly the core of the answer given by the mystics the world over. If you are the One, and -- out of sheer exuberance, plenitude, superabundance -- you want to play, to rejoice, to have fun, then you must first, manifest the Many, and thensecond, forget it is you who are the Many. Otherwise, no game. Manifestation, incarnation, is the great Game of the One playing at being the Many, for the sheer sport and fun of it.

Pathways: But it's not always fun.

Ken Wilber: Well, yes and no. The manifest world is a world of opposites -- of pleasure versus pain, up versus down, good versus evil, subject versus object, light versus shadow. But if you are going to play the great cosmic Game, that is what you yourself set into motion. How else can you do it? If there are no parts and no players and no suffering and no Many, then you simply remain as the One and Only, Alone and Aloof. But it's no fun having dinner alone.

Pathways: So to start the game of manifestation is start the world of suffering.

Ken Wilber: It starts to look like that, doesn't it? And the mystics seem to agree. But there is a way out of suffering, a way to be free of the opposites, and that involves the overwhelming and direct realization that Spirit is not good versus evil, or pleasure versus pain, or light versus dark, or life versus death, or whole versus part, or holistic versus analytic. Spirit is the great Player that gives rise to all those opposites equally -- "I the Lord make the Light to fall on the good and the bad alike; I the Lord do all these things" -- and the mystic the world over agree. Spirit is not the good half of the opposites, but the ground of all the opposites, and our "salvation," as it were, is not to find the good half of the dualism but to find the Source of both halves of the dualism, for that is what we are in truth. We are both sides in the great Game of Life, because we -- you and I, in the deepest recesses of our very Self -- have created both of these opposites in order to have a grand game of cosmic checkers.

That, anyway, is the "theoretical" answer that the mystics almost always give. "Nonduality" means, as the Upanishads put it, "to be freed of the pairs." That is, the great liberation consists in being freed of the pairs of opposites, freed of duality -- and finding instead the nondual One Taste that gives rise to both. This is liberation because we cease the impossible, painful dream of spending our entire lives trying to find an up without a down, an inside without an outside, a good without an evil, a pleasure without its inevitable pain.

Pathways: You said that you had a more personal response as well.

Ken Wilber: Yes, such as it is. When I first experienced, however haltingly, "*nirvikalpa samadhi*" -- which means, meditative absorption in the formless One -- I remember having the vague feeling -- very subtle, very faint -- that I didn't want to be alone in this wonderful expanse. I remember feeling, very diffusely but very insistently, that I wanted to share this with somebody. So what would one do in that state of loneliness?

Pathways: Manifest the world.

Ken Wilber: That's how it seems to me. And I knew, however amateurishly, that if I came out of that formless Oneness and recognized the world of the Many, that I would then suffer, because the Many always hurt each other, as well as

help each other. And you know what? I was glad to surrender the peace of the One even though it meant the pain of the Many. Now this is just a little tongue taste of what the great mystics have seen, but my limited experience seems to conform to their great pronouncement: You are the One freely giving rise to the Many -- to pain and pleasure and all the opposites -- because you choose not to abide as the exquisite loneliness of Infinity, and because you don't want to have dinner alone.

Pathways: And the pain that is involved?

Ken Wilber: Is freely chosen as part of the necessary Game of Life. You cannot have a manifest world without all the opposites of pleasure and pain. And to get rid of the pain -- the sin, the suffering, the dukkha -- you must remember who and what you really are. This remembrance, this recollection, this anamnesis -- "Do this in Remembrance of Me" -- means, "Do this in Remembrance of the Self that You Are" -- *Tat Tvam Asi*. The great mystical religions the world over consist of a series of profound practices to quiet the small self that we pretend we are -- which causes the pain and suffering that you feel -- and awaken as the Great Self that is our own true ground and goal and destiny -- "Let this consciousness be in you which was in Christ Jesus."

Pathways: Is this realization an all-or-nothing affair?

Ken Wilber: Not usually. It's often a series of glimpses of One Taste -- glimpses of the fact that you are one with absolutely all manifestation, in its good and bad aspects, in all its frost and fever, its wonder and its pain. You are the Kosmos, literally. But you tend to understand this ultimate fact in increasing glimpses of the infinity that you are, and you realize exactly why you started this wonderful, horrible Game of Life. But it is absolutely not a cruel Game, not ultimately, because you, and you alone, instigated this Drama, this Lila, this Kenosis.

Pathways: But what about the notion that these experiences of "One Taste" or "Kosmic Consciousness" are just a by-product of meditation, and therefore aren't "really real"?

Ken Wilber: Well, that can be said of any type of knowledge that depends on an instrument. "Kosmic consciousness" often depends on the instrument of meditation. So what? Seeing the nucleus of a cell depends on a microscope. Do we then say that the cell nucleus isn't real because it's only a by-product of a microscope? Do we say the moons of Jupiter aren't real because they depend on a telescope? The people who raise this objection are almost always people who don't want to look through the instrument of meditation, just as the Churchmen refused to look through Galileo's telescope and thus acknowledge the moons of Jupiter. Let them live with their refusal. But let us -- to the best of our ability, and hopefully driven by the best of charity or compassion -- try to convince them to look, just once, and see for themselves. Not coerce them, just invite them. I suspect a different world might open for them, a world that has been abundantly verified by all who look through the telescope, and microscope, of meditation.

Pathways: Could you tell us....

Ken Wilber: If I could interrupt, do you mind if I give you one of my favorite quotes from Aldous Huxley?

Pathways: Please.

Ken Wilber: This is from *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*:

“I like the words I use to bear some relation to facts. That’s why I’m interested in eternity -- psychological eternity. Because it’s a fact.”

“For you perhaps,” said Jeremy.

“For anyone who chooses to fulfill the conditions under which it can be experienced.”

“And why should anyone wish to fulfill them?”

“Why should anyone choose to go to Athens to see the Parthenon? Because it’s worth the bother. And the same is true of eternity. The experience of timeless good is worth all the trouble it involved.”

“Timeless good,” Jeremy repeated with distaste. “I don’t know what the words mean.”

“Why should you?” said Mr. Propter. “You’ve never bought your ticket for Athens.”

Pathways: So contemplation is the ticket to Athens?

Ken Wilber: Don’t you think?

Pathways: Definitely. I wonder, could you tell us a little bit about your own ticket to Athens? Could you tell us a little about the history of your own experiences with meditation? And what is “integral practice” and what does it offer the modern spiritual seeker?

Ken Wilber: Well, as for my own history, I’m not sure I can say anything meaningful in a short space. I’ve been meditating for twenty-five years, and I suspect my experiences are not terribly different from many who have tread a similar path. But I will try to say a few things about “integral practice,” because I suspect it might be the wave of the future. The idea is fairly simple, and Tony Schwartz, author of *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*, summarized it as the attempt “to marry Freud and Buddha.” But that really just means, the attempt to integrate the contributions of Western “depth psychology” with the great wisdom traditions of “height psychology” -- the attempt to integrate id and Spirit, shadow and God, libido and Brahman, instinct and Goddess, lower and higher -- whatever terms you wish, the idea is clear enough, I suspect.

Pathways: As an actual practice?

Ken Wilber: Yes, the actual practice is based on something like this: Given the Great Nest of Being -- ranging from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit --

how can we acknowledge, honor, and exercise all of those levels in our own being? And if we do so -- if we engage all of the levels of our own potential -- won't that better help us to remember the Source of the great Game of Life, which is not other than our own deepest Self? If Spirit is the Ground and Goal of all of these levels, and if we are Spirit in truth, won't the whole-hearted engagement of all of these levels help us remember who and what we really are?

Well, that is the theory, which I realize I have put in rather dry terms. The idea, concretely, is this: Take a practice (or practices) from each of those levels, and engage whole-heartedly in all of those practices. For the physical level, you might include physical yoga, weight lifting, vitamins, nutrition, jogging, etc. For the emotional/body level, you might try tantric sexuality, therapy that helps you contact the feeling side of your being, bioenergetics, etc. For the mental level, cognitive therapy, narrative therapy, talking therapy, psychodynamic therapy, etc. For the soul level, contemplative meditation, deity yoga, subtle contemplation, centering prayer, and so on. And for the spirit level, the more nondual practices, such as Zen, Dzogchen, Advaita Vedanta, Kashmir Shaivism, formless Christian mysticism, and so on.

I hesitate to give that list, because, as you know, there are literally thousands of wonderful practices for all of those levels, and I shudder at excluding any of them. But please just focus on the general idea: take one or more practices from each of the levels of your own being -- matter to body to mind to soul to spirit -- and exercise all of them to the best of your ability, individually and collectively. Not only will you, on a mundane level, simply start to feel better, you will dramatically increase your chances of falling into your own radical Estate, which is Spirit itself, your own deepest identity and impulse.

Pathways: Are there any teachers who are now doing this type of integral practice?

Ken Wilber: Well, unfortunately, there are not many teachers, at this early time, who are doing this. In part, this type of integral practice is a union of East and West, and they have just recently been introduced to each other. But there are many superb teachers dealing with one or more of the many levels in your own being -- and therefore, at this time, you simply have to "mix and match" -- or choose the best teachers for you at each of the levels. Find a good physical exercise that works for you, and a decent nutritional program. Try to engage in a good psychotherapeutic practice -- it could be as simple as writing down your dreams, or belonging to a discussion group. Try a good meditation practice, and engage in community service. I don't want to make this sound like it's a horrible fascist type of thing -- but just try, a best you can, to engage all of you in order to awaken all of you.

Pathways: Are there any teachers who are at least moving toward this integral practice?

Ken Wilber: Yes. There are a few writers who today emphasize the importance of an integral approach, and although all of them are very preliminary, they are a good place to start. You might try Michael Murphy and George Leonard's *The Life We Are Given*; Tony Schwartz's *What Really Matters*; Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan's *Paths Beyond Ego*; and my *The Eye of Spirit*.

But the idea is simple enough: practicing on only one level of your being will not enlighten all of you. If you just meditate, your psychodynamic “junk” will not automatically go away. If you just meditate, your job or your relationship with your spouse will not automatically get better. On the other hand, if you only do psychotherapy, do not think that you will be relieved from the burden of death and terror. Render unto Freud what is Freud’s, and render unto Buddha what is Buddha’s. And best of all, render unto the Divine all of yourself, by engaging all that you are.

Oh geez, I sound like a commercial for the Marines: “Be all that you can be.” But the point, really, is that the more of your own dimensions you engage in the quest to find the Source of this crazy Game of Life, the more likely you are to discover the stunning fact that you are its one and only Author. And that’s not a theoretical proposition, it is the very best chance we have to get our ticket to Athens.

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