

## WHO IS KEN WILBER?

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*“I’m a pandit, not a guru”*

Wilber’s parents met and married shortly after the Second World War, his father having served as a pilot during the war. Their first and only child was born Kenneth Earl Wilber II on 31 January 1949 in Oklahoma City, the state capital of Oklahoma in the United States.<sup>1</sup> His parents were simply travelling through Oklahoma at the time. Because Ken’s father worked for the air force, the family never settled in one place for very long. Every few years they moved from one air force base to another.

As an only child Ken Wilber had a relatively happy childhood. Yet, while his parents allowed him to do largely as he pleased, the frequent moves called for a great deal of adaptability on his part. During his early years the family moved from the island of Bermuda to El Paso, Texas, and from there to Great Falls, Montana. From there they moved to Idaho and then back to Great Falls again, where Ken went to high school. During his last year at high school the family moved again, this time to Lincoln, Nebraska, where Ken completed his schooling (four different schools in four years). The many moves proved to have a formative influence on Ken’s character both in a positive sense and in a negative sense: “The good news is that you learn a certain type of non-attachment, because you are moving all the time. So you make friends, but you lose them a year or two later. You make friends, you lose them. So it was rather traumatic. That part was very hard.”<sup>2</sup>

In later years whenever things weren’t going well, he would blame the fact that he had had a difficult youth. Yet, by the same token, when things were going well, he would feel that in some sense he could thank his youth because it taught him to stand on his own two feet.

His father's side of the family was not particularly close; his mother's side of the family was far closer. His mother had three sisters, two of whom had two sons, and the cousins frequently played together. Because his father's work often took him away from home, Ken was brought up largely by his mother who evoked in him a strong sense of the aesthetic, implicitly encouraging his interest in things like interior design, fashion, and the world of art in general. As a result of her influence, the feminine side of Wilber's character is strongly developed. His father was an outstanding athlete; for years he held the New York State record for sprinting. From his father Ken inherited his athletic build and a disciplined attitude to life—an attitude that would serve him well when it came to the intensive work of writing.

### TOP OF THE CLASS

Although both of Wilber's parents were intelligent, neither of them was particularly intellectual. Yet from the start Ken was an exceptionally bright and gifted pupil (a straight A student every year in middle and high school). He had a natural aptitude for intellectual study and was also inclined to invest considerable time and energy in it. At high school he rapidly came to be known as "the brain" because he was at the top of the class year in and year out. This didn't make him particularly popular with his classmates because the pupil who was top of the class effectively set the standard by which the performance of the other pupils was assessed. On leaving high school, as is customary in the United States, as the valedictorian—the pupil with the highest grade average—Ken was invited to give the farewell speech on behalf his classmates.

Because Ken was keen to be popular, he tried to play down his intellectual talent. He certainly didn't relish being known as 'the brain'—through throughout his life it has been virtually impossible for him to throw off this image—and deliberately threw himself into the social side of school life. He became an active member of the student body, twice being elected student body president and once as class president. He also excelled at football, basketball, volleyball, gymnastics, and track and enjoyed not only the sport itself but also the popularity that came with it.

The tension between being engaged in intellectual pursuit and being accepted by his peers would continue to be a significant theme in Wilber's life—despite the fact that his extraordinary powers of reasoning have led him to be recognized the world over. Given his natural gregariousness, it was not easy for Wilber to come to terms with the fact that as a writer

he was more or less compelled to lead a relatively lonely existence from a very early age: "People think that I am a born hermit, that I don't want to be with people, that I am anti-social, and that is quite wrong. People that are anti-social show it from about age four or five on. You just can't hide it. But I have exactly the opposite record. I was very sociable and really liked it. The hardest thing about starting writing, when I was twenty-three, was that I had to stop being with people. My two adult interests—writing and meditation—mean that I have basically spent my entire adult life by myself in a corner. Either reading, writing or meditating. That was really a hard transition for me."<sup>3</sup> While still at school Wilber even hosted a television show called "The Indispensables" in which he interviewed people, a role he was invited to perform on account of his obvious social skills.

During these early years Wilber showed little interest in writing itself; in fact, he disliked it. The compulsory essays he had to write at school held little appeal. Even after he had become a famous author, he rarely looked forward to the actual task of writing. The reason for this is that he sees himself first and foremost as a thinker: "Basically I'm just a thinker. And because I had some new ideas, relatively interesting ideas, I felt I should communicate them. And to communicate them I had to write them down. But I didn't particularly enjoy that part."<sup>4</sup> Once he had decided to write books, in order to develop his fluency as a writer he took Alan Watts—then a popular author—as a model: "I basically taught myself how to write using Alan Watts' books. Alan Watts was one of the clearest writers I had read. He is really a great, clear, elegant writer. I took all thirteen or fourteen of his books and copied every one of them, literally sentence by sentence. I still have the notebooks downstairs. I wrote the books out, so that I could know the style of writing. Just getting a sense of being able to write clearly, and study syntax, seeing how you put paragraphs together."<sup>5</sup> Over the years Wilber has gone on to develop his own clearly recognizable style, which is both abstract and theoretical as well as being extremely direct and personal, and sometimes even lyrical. Yet it is only recently, after having written eighteen books, that he has the feeling that he has finally mastered the art of writing to some extent.<sup>6</sup>

Neither did Ken show any noticeable interest in religious or spiritual matters during his years at high school. On the contrary—in those years he was interested in exact science. In a long autobiographical article on this period written some years later he wrote: "My true passion, my inner daemon, was for science. I fashioned a self that was built on logic, structured by physics, and moved by chemistry. I was precociously successful

in that world, obtaining numerous awards and honours, and was at college to corner that success and extrapolate it into a life's destiny. My mental youth was an idyll of precision and accuracy, a fortress of the clear and the evident."<sup>7</sup> And more recently in speaking of this period: "I have always been appreciative of my degrees in science. Take something like the Schrödinger wave equation, or integral calculus. Once you learn that, then you can read Buddha, or you can read Shakespeare. But if you get your college degree in Shakespeare, and try to teach yourself calculus, it is probably not going to happen."<sup>8</sup>

### **"AN ENTIRELY NEW WORLD"**

Wilber's parents thought he would make a good doctor and he enrolled to study medicine at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. However, that first year of study had a very different outcome from the one that might have been expected, given Wilber's track record to date. From one day to the next, exact science gradually lost its appeal. He suddenly felt that there was absolutely no point in devoting his life to science, for he was aware that what science had to offer was not what he really wanted to know. All of this made him very unhappy. He quit going to class, his grades were barely sufficient—quite a drop by his standards. His parents were unable to understand him. He came home with long hair and talked about some strange Eastern literature they had never heard of. Referring to this turning point in his life at a relatively young age, he himself says: "I went to Duke University and on the day I walked into the campus, I sat down in my dorm, in my room, and knew that I didn't want to have anything to do with it any more. I did not want to study any more of that conventional knowledge. I had already done tons of that, and it wasn't answering my questions. So basically I completely dropped out."<sup>9</sup>

That was in 1968, the era of the hippies and flower power. For a brief period Ken flirted with the trappings of this way of life, but by and large the psychedelic revolution passed him by. Marijuana made him giddy and he avoided the psychedelic scene. In retrospect he is glad things turned out this way: "Basically I did not really do the drug scene. Which actually I think is rather fortunate, for I have seen a lot of people that get into this field through psychedelics who have very strange ideas about spirituality, down the line."<sup>10</sup> Ken set out in search of more reliable methods of entering expanded states of consciousness and began to study the literature of Eastern spirituality. His own experience has shown—and his work reflects the fact—that in the long term the craving for spectacular spiritual

experiences effectively runs counter to spiritual development. While spiritual experiences undoubtedly have a place within the process of spiritual development, these experiences are best seen as a side effect rather than a goal.

Early on in his exploration of the literature he came across a passage in the *Tao Te Ching*, a classic volume of Chinese wisdom by the sage Lao Tzu. In terms of the impact it had on his future development, this passage proved to be of huge significance. The *Tao Te Ching* opens with the following lines:

*The Way that can be told of is not the eternal Way.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.  
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.  
The Named is but the mother of ten thousand things.*

*Truly, only he that rid himself forever of desire  
can see the Secret Essences;  
He that has never rid himself of desire  
can only see Outcomes.*

*These two things issue from the same Source,  
but nevertheless are different in form.  
This Source we can but call the Mystery,  
The Doorway whence issue all Secret Essences.*

These words written centuries earlier provoked what was virtually a religious conversion in Wilber. “As I stood reading the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, it was as if I were being exposed, for the very first time, to an entirely new and drastically different world—a world beyond the sensical, a world outside of science, and therefore a world quite beyond myself. The result was that those ancient words of Lao Tzu took me quite by surprise; worse, the surprise refused to wear off, and my entire world outlook began a subtle but drastic shift. Within a period of a few months—months, spent in introductory readings of Taoism and Buddhism—the meaning of my life, as I had known it, simply began to disappear. Oh, it was nothing dramatic; more like waking up one morning, after twenty years of marriage, with the ‘sudden’ realization that you no longer loved (or even recognized) your spouse. There is really no upset, no bitterness, no tears—just the tacit realization that it is time to separate. Just so, the old sage had touched a cord so deep in me (and so much stronger due to its 20-year-old repression) that I suddenly awoke to the silent but certain realization

that my old life, my old self, my old beliefs could no longer be energized. It was time for a separation.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time a new sense of direction began to emerge. He told me: “I did not know what else to do. Back then there were no meditation centers, there was basically nothing like that. But there was Krishnamurti, there was Alan Watts, and there was D. T. Suzuki, who was writing about Zen Buddhism. And I just caught hold of those books. As soon as I read a few sentences I knew that that was what I was going to do—study these higher waves of knowing and being. I felt very certain about that. But then it was very difficult, because there were few ways to actually pursue this study. You couldn’t get a degree in it, and there were few places you could actually study it.”<sup>12</sup>

His first year at college was essentially a lost year. He returned to Nebraska, where his parents were currently stationed, and got a double bachelor’s degree, one in chemistry and one in biology, and then received a scholarship in graduate studies in biophysics and biochemistry. But while ostensibly studying biochemistry, he devoted most of his time to his own self-devised program of study: “The next two years were spent, almost literally, in solitary reading and research, eight to ten hours a day. I had decided to pursue degrees in chemistry and biology, simply because they came so easily to me that I didn’t have to waste time studying them, but could instead spend every hour out of class pursuing Eastern philosophy and religion, Western psychology and metaphysics. I recklessly managed somehow to graduate with enough honors to be offered a scholarship at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln) in biochemistry/biophysics, and during the first year of graduate school, continued to do nothing more than read, study, and take notes—and the names in my notebooks were not Krebs, Miller, Watson, or Crick. But Gaudapada, Hui Neng, Padmasambhava, and Eckhart.”<sup>13</sup>

### “LIFE FOR ME WAS SOUR”

This research of the psychological and spiritual and religious literature was far more than an intellectual quest—for Ken it seemed to be a matter of life or death. He wasn’t doing it with a view to gaining a degree or because it was likely to enable him to earn a living. He did it because he had the feeling that that he had no choice—it was a Grail search. And the search was by no means confined to theory. At the same time he began to intensify his practice of Zen meditation. At a certain point he even travelled to Mexico, where Philip Kapleau, the author of the well known book *The Three Pillars of Zen*, was on holiday. He managed to find

Kapleau and practiced seated meditation with him, a practice he continued seriously under the guidance of Katigiri Roshi.<sup>14</sup> He went on to explore various forms of psychotherapy, including Gestalt therapy and dream analysis, as well as other forms of meditation, including TM and Vedanta. Because he sensed that he derived benefit both from meditation as well as from psychotherapy, the contradictions he detected in the psychological and spiritual literature started to become a source of considerable concern to him.

Ken was clearly going through a crisis which was directly related to his own life: “When I left Duke, with my old belief structures terribly undermined, I was, in the simplest sense of the word, unhappy. Not profoundly depressed, not clinically morose, not even darkly moody—just plain unhappy. This simple unhappiness is really the way Gautama Buddha used the word ‘*dukkha*’; although it is usually translated as ‘suffering’, it more accurately means ‘sour’. The Buddha’s first truth: life as normally lived is sour, and awakening to this sourness is the first step on the path to liberation . . . Life for me *was* sour; it was unhappy. And in part I was obsessed with reading all the great psychologists and sages because I was searching for a way out of the sour life; reading was motivated by personal existential therapy, to put it in dry terms. The point is that I had to ‘read everything’ because I was trying mentally and emotionally to put together in a comprehensive framework that which I felt was necessary for my own salvation. I was particularly drawn to Perls, Jung, Boss, and the existentialists; Norman O. Brown, Krishnamurti, Zen, Vedanta, and Eckhart; the traditionalists, Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and Schuon, but also Freud, Ferenczi, Rank, and Klein—a more motley group you could not imagine.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to make extra money Ken offered to coach students. He tutored in law, science, Shakespeare—it made little difference to him. In 1972 a beautiful student, Amy Wagner, turned up on his doorstep and never left. After living together for a year, the two got married. Amy worked long days at a large bookstore, which left Ken free to study undisturbed in the empty apartment. They agreed that they would each pay half of the rent and in order to be able to pay his share of the rent, Ken took on various jobs. For the next nine years he washed dishes, cleared tables in restaurants, worked in a grocery store, as a check-out clerk. He now jokes: “The only real job I’ve ever had was dishwashing. The only thing I am qualified to do is wash dishes!”<sup>16</sup>

It was actually a lifestyle very much in line with the tenets of the Zen Buddhism he was practicing, which saw value in menial tasks. At that

time Ken was meditating for three hours a day and often spent an entire day in seated meditation on the weekend. The unskilled labor he was engaged in also helped to balance his profoundly intellectual work: "I was deeply drawn to the Zen notion of bringing honor to the most menial of tasks, even, or especially, 'lowly' manual labor. If meditation exercised the spirit and writing-thinking exercised the mind, how could I best engage the world in bodily exchange? Because I wanted and valued this gesture of balance, I deliberately sought out and took part-time jobs in manual labor . . . I hardly need tell you that this whole situation was an extraordinary education. It was an education first and foremost in humility. Forget the degrees, forget the books and articles, forget the titles, forget everything really, and wash dishes for two years. It was also an education in *grounding*, in engaging the world in an intimate, concrete, tangible fashion, not through words or concepts or books or courses."<sup>17</sup>

#### **"THE EINSTEIN OF CONSCIOUSNESS RESEARCH"**

After he had been living and working in this way for about three years, the first contours of a book that would undertake to bring together spirituality and psychotherapy, East and West, began to emerge in Wilber's mind. Though a number of other books had already been written in a similar vein, Ken was convinced that he was able to offer a fresh and original angle of approach. In the autumn of 1973 he completed a voluminous manuscript entitled *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. He wrote the book over a period of three months and made very few revisions. The basic idea behind *The Spectrum of Consciousness* was that human consciousness could be represented metaphorically as a spectrum of different bands, and that it was possible to reconcile the numerous schools in the fields of psychotherapy and spirituality by relating them to one or more of these bands. Since none of these schools addressed all of the aspects of the human individual, a "spectrum psychology" (which he would later call "integral psychology") was called for. The spectrum model effectively introduces order within the otherwise apparently random fields of psychology and spirituality.

The way in which he produced this first manuscript would prove to be characteristic of his method as a writer: "It just sort of 'shows up' fully written in my head. I just 'see' it. And then it is a matter of writing it down. Typically that was the way I would work during that decade. I would read and study for about ten months. And then at the end of that period, I would wake up one and suddenly 'Book!' I always hated that

because I knew that for the next month or two it was going to be horrible. Especially the way I did it then. I would sleep on a sofa, with a typewriter next to me, and I would wake up early in the morning and just start typing. I put a gallon of milk on the table, and I would not move. I would type for maybe fifteen hours, go to sleep, get up, and start typing. I did that non-stop until the book was done. I think it was because I was holding it all together in my mind. Anyway, that's how I would basically work. When that was done, and it was typed up, it was easy, because, I mean, I had the year off! Sitting around and reading was easy. You know, I would lie around the pool, read. . . . And people would see me and say 'That is just the *laziest* guy I have ever seen. Washes dishes, you know, but what does he *do*?' But then ten months later, I would wake up, and 'Book!'"<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, even though his first book had been committed to paper, it was another few years before the book was actually published. First, the bulky manuscript, which had been written longhand, had to be typed out. And then there was the process of finding a publisher, and initially things didn't look particularly promising—the manuscript was rejected by approximately thirty publishers. Finally in 1977 the theosophical publishers Quest Books ventured to publish what was to all intents and purposes a difficult book by an unknown author. Yet, as soon as it was published, the book caused an immediate sensation.

*The Spectrum of Consciousness* was highly praised by many of the leading authors within the field of psychology. For example, Jim Fadiman, who was then the president of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, wrote: "Wilber has written the most sensible, comprehensive book about consciousness since William James." Jean Houston, past president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, said: "Wilber might likely do for consciousness what Freud did for psychology." And John White, author and editor of almost a dozen books in the field, described Wilber as the "long sought Einstein of consciousness research."

Virtually overnight Wilber was acknowledged as a leading thinker in the fields of psychology and philosophy, with serious reviews comparing him to Freud, Hegel, even Plato. As a young author it was only natural that he should feel flattered by all of the approval, yet it also left him feeling somewhat embarrassed. Looking back on this period almost ten years later he would say: "I think they [the positive reviews] don't have too much to do with me at all. I think they reflect much more on the wisdom found in the great spiritual traditions. The point is that this spiritual wisdom is so forgotten in modern times, it is so neglected, that when an

even vaguely competent person stands up and points to it, and outlines it, and reminds you of its overwhelming importance, then people get a little excited and reviewers appreciate the effort. I think that's what those reviews were all about—I had suggested a way to integrate ancient wisdom with modern knowledge."<sup>19</sup> Still, when the existential psychologist Rollo May described him as the most passionate philosopher he had ever known, Wilber took it as a great compliment: "Rollo May is the brilliant American representative of the great humanistic-existential tradition, and so for him 'passion' is the highest praise. To be honest, that meant much more to me than being compared to a Hegel or a Freud."<sup>20</sup>

Indeed Wilber is best described as a passionate thinker—a man who is deeply moved by what he sees as the truth. The modesty he has retained despite all of the praise that has come his way does him credit and characterizes him as a person. It also reveals that he has always been relatively ambivalent towards the publicity that has inevitably been his lot.

### **"THE LONELY PURSUIT OF THE WRITER"**

Invitations to give lectures and workshops followed one after another and as a young author Wilber was happy to respond to this demand. For a year or so he gave courses at institutions offering adult education and he also gave a large number of lectures on *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. However, he gradually came to realize that lecturing was effectively preventing him from exploring new ground as a creative writer. This typifies Wilber's conception of his task as a writer and also accounts for his relatively reclusive lifestyle.

A few years ago he wrote about the crucial dilemma he found himself faced with: "When I wrote my first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, I was a tender twenty-three, and the attention that book generated catapulted me from obscure biochemistry graduate student to 'New Age teacher'. Offers to lecture and give workshops poured in, and I eagerly took many of them up. It was a heady, wonderful time. And yet, after a year or so of this minor public fame, a stark choice presented itself; it became obvious to me that I could continue this public path and get virtually no new work done, or I could close down the public route and return to a more solitary, and lonely, pursuit of the writer. I kept thinking at the time: 'I can live off what I did yesterday, or continue to create.' That line constantly went through my mind. It was obvious that, at least for me, I would not be able to mix the public and the private very easily; the more I did of one, the less I could do of the other. So, rather abruptly and

totally, I stopped any sort of public theatre, and began to concentrate totally on writing. Although I have often chafed under this decision, I have not changed my mind in twenty years.”<sup>21</sup>

Even before *The Spectrum of Consciousness* had appeared in print Wilber had already written a popular version of his first book. Published in 1979, *No Boundary* has thus far proved to be one of his most popular works, though the more recent *A Brief History of Everything* (1996) has recently surpassed *No Boundary* in this respect. Not only was *No Boundary* considerably less voluminous than *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, it was also more practical in terms of its approach. Thus at the end of each chapter, in place of a list of references to other works, there were suggestions as to which psychotherapeutic methods or meditative practices were likely to be helpful at different stages. The book clearly conveyed the message that rather than simply thinking about yoga or psychoanalysis, it was essential to actually engage with the chosen method or practice.

In the meantime Wilber was also involved in the work of setting up a scholarly journal. The first of his writing to appear in print, an article also bearing the title “The Spectrum of Consciousness,” was published in *Main Currents in Modern Thought* in 1974. *Main Currents* was a journal that had been set up in the forties by a group of theologians, including Fritz Kunz and Emily Sellon, with a view to signalling new trends in scientific, spiritual, and religious thinking. Shortly after Wilber’s article was published, the journal went out of publication. However, Wilber’s article had attracted the attention of Jack Crittenden, who contacted Wilber with a plan to set up a new journal. The journal he had in mind was to be similar to *Main Currents* and would center on the ideas presented in Wilber’s article. The new journal, *ReVision*, was to fill the gap left by the disappearance of *Main Currents*. Crittenden contacted Emily Sellon, who gave them her blessing, and the first edition of *ReVision* came out in 1978.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that his first two books had met with such a positive response, by now Wilber himself was actually of two minds. While he was writing *No Boundary*, he started to experience the uncomfortable feeling that there was something not quite right with what he had written. Thus not long after he had come through the existential crisis that preceded the writing of *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, he found himself caught up in a major theoretical crisis. The next two chapters cover this period—which effectively laid the basis for Wilber’s subsequent intellectual development—in some detail. What was it that concerned Wilber during this period of his life? What he had written in his first two books was not actually

wrong, but it was likely to lead to false conclusions. The problems came to light when Wilber attempted to map out the developmental process of the human individual with the aid of the spectrum model he had elaborated in *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. Upon closer examination, the phase of the newborn infant, which many spiritually inclined authors describe as a blissful, almost paradisiacal state lost to the adult, proved to be of an entirely different nature. This early infancy of consciousness was, in fact, far more likely to be a state of physical and emotional bondedness and often one of unlimited narcissism. Having made this sobering discovery, Wilber realized that he needed to revise his model accordingly. And this capacity to constantly subject his own conceptual models to critical examination would continue to be typical of his approach.

Once he had made this fundamental change in his conceptual model, Wilber finally had the feeling that he was now on the right track. He then went on to write a number of new books at a rapid pace. First he wrote *The Atman Project* (1980), a brief study of the complete developmental process of the human individual—from the state of the newly born infant to the state of the enlightened being. Virtually in tandem he also wrote *Up from Eden* (1981), which was published a year later—a relatively detailed study of the phases humanity as a whole has gone through during the course of its evolutionary journey. In writing *Up from Eden* Wilber drew on an article by the Swiss anthropologist and cultural philosopher Jean Gebser, which had also been published in the journal *Main Currents in Modern Thought*. Then, as a contribution to a congress on the sociology of religion, he compiled a small book entitled *A Sociable God* (1982), in which he sketched the outlines of a transcendental—in other words, a non-reductionist—sociology. Given that sociologists are even more inclined to see the human individual in purely materialist terms than materialist psychologists, in *A Sociable God*, which is extremely programmatic in its approach, Wilber attempts to correct this outlook.

Slowly but surely an overall pattern was emerging through the writing of these various books. Working on the basis of the spectrum model, Wilber went on to address various fields of knowledge one after another—developmental psychology, the history of civilization, the sociology of religion, and psychopathology. In doing so Wilber was effectively building bridges between these academic disciplines and the spiritual traditions. And his approach was particularly striking on account of the fact that it was deliberately grounded in the humanities, rather than in exact science, which is far more usually the case (*The Tao of Physics* by Frithjof

Capra, published in 1975, is an obvious example). Chapter 4 examines the issues relating to the philosophy of science that play a part in such comparative studies.

Initially the new journal, *ReVision*, demanded considerable editorial support, which meant that Wilber's presence was urgently needed at the editorial headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At about the same time Amy was offered a job elsewhere. Over the years the couple had grown apart and in 1981 they finally decided to separate on amicable terms. Wilber moved to Cambridge and devoted himself to the journal. With a view to supporting the journal, which was in dire straits financially, he offered to publish a book of articles that had already appeared in *ReVision*. In less than twenty-four hours he compiled *The Holographic Paradigm* (1982), and the royalties served to provide the journal with much-needed financial support. A collection of Wilber's own essays from various academic journals was published the following year as *Eye to Eye* (1983).

However, Wilber was finding life in Cambridge oppressive, and he gratefully took up the offer of two of his friends, Frances Vaughan and Roger Walsh, both of whom were also colleagues within the integral field, that he should come and live with them in Tiburon, a small town to the north of San Francisco. He found the atmosphere in San Francisco far more conducive. It was here in 1983 that Wilber met Terry Killam, the woman who would come to be his second wife. Only a few days after they first met, the two decided to get married. During the three months leading up to the wedding Wilber worked on *Quantum Questions* (1984), a collection of pieces by famous physicists on the relationship between physics and mysticism, and *Transformations of Consciousness* (1986), a collection of articles relating the spectrum model to recent developments in Western psychoanalytic literature. Then fate struck.

The medical examination that Terry underwent prior to her impending wedding revealed that she had breast cancer. Wilber immediately abandoned the work that engaged him so fully in order to constantly be with his wife. For the next five years the cancer continued to exact its toll and throughout this time Wilber devoted himself to caring for his wife. Having been used to producing a new book virtually on an annual basis, the sudden stemming of this flow of creativity inevitably generated a powerful tension. After Terry, who later changed her name to Treya, died in 1989, Wilber wrote a book about this debilitating period as she had requested. The book was published as *Grace and Grit* in 1991. Wilber then went on to pick up the thread of his earlier work.

## THE KOSMOS TRILOGY

Initially Wilber was planning to complete a textbook of integral psychology that he had had in mind under the provisional title of *System, Self and Structure* since the beginning of the eighties.<sup>23</sup> However, it rapidly became clear to Wilber that there had been a drastic leveling in the psychological literature since he himself had last published. Holism, the leading philosophy in alternative circles, was now oriented solely towards the exact sciences, such as physics and biology—largely with a view to acquiring quasi-scientific status. Wilber was saddened to see how the depth and detail of the traditional spiritual worldview had been almost entirely effaced in the holistic literature. It was this that prompted him to set aside the textbook of integral psychology for the time being in order to write a detailed work expounding the basic tenets of his integral philosophy. This work evolved into a trilogy, entitled simply *Kosmos*. The first volume of the trilogy, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, was published in 1995. Wilber uses the term *Kosmos* to refer to the multidimensional reality described by the perennial philosophy—a reality that encompasses not only matter, but also soul, spirit, and ultimately the Divine. Furthermore, as far as Wilber was concerned, the thinking in alternative circles with regard to spirituality was dominated by an excessively romantic and nostalgic yearning for the past—an attitude he found misguided. Over the years, some of the concepts he valued—depth, quality, nested hierarchy, evolution, interiority, even consciousness itself—had come to be rejected as suspect, to such an extent that, in his opinion, they now needed to be rehabilitated.

Wilber spent more than three years working on the first volume of the *Kosmos* trilogy, a period he spent in almost total isolation. During these years of self-imposed isolation he underwent a profound spiritual transformation. By this stage he had been meditating for twenty years and had had a number of satori experiences, but this new illumination surpassed anything he had experienced up until then. After he had been writing continuously for several months without seeing or speaking to anyone, he entered a mystical state of awareness which persisted for eleven days. He described this state to me as follows:

For eleven days and nights, I did not sleep at all. I was awake twenty-four hours a day. Towards the end of that time I would lie down and my body would go to sleep, and I started dreaming, but I was completely aware of the dreaming. Lucid dreaming. Then I would go to deep dreamless sleep and I was aware of this

deep dreamless sleep. Then, out of that, I would see the dream arise, and I would be aware of that. And out of that, the gross realm would arise. So it was basically a case of *turiya*, the fourth state [beyond waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep]. . . . Since then, access to that awareness has been present, fairly constantly. There were often glimpses of this before, but now it spontaneously became a type of constant nondual awareness—although there are times that it is more or less apparent, which involves “dropping” identification with this particular body-mind, or rather, recognizing that such a nondual state is always already present. And this “one taste” [Wilber’s expression for unity consciousness] is very obvious. It is very straightforward, a very simple, clear, ever-present awareness, described by Ramana Maharshi [a Hindu mystic], it is just *sahaja* [spontaneous enlightenment].<sup>24</sup>

In actual fact Wilber’s life shows two parallel lines of development—one venturing into the intellectual realm and the other venturing into the spiritual realm. Behind Wilber the thinker there is always Wilber the mystic, who has experienced in his own awareness what he attempts to convey through his writing. The spiritual intention behind his work is clearly discernible on every page of his oeuvre as he seeks to rehabilitate the spiritual dimension of reality and the individual within Western culture in an academically sound way.

After he had completed the exhausting work of writing *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* and having already elaborated the second and third volumes of the trilogy in draft form, he felt the need to produce a popular summary of the first volume of the *Kosmos* trilogy. A year later the popular version of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* was published as *A Brief History of Everything* (1996). In many respects *A Brief History of Everything* is very similar to *No Boundary*, written shortly after he had completed his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. The concepts presented in the more complex work are described in a simpler style in *A Brief History*, which helps to further clarify some of the thinking. Nevertheless, *A Brief History* is more than simply a summary of Wilber’s largest and most elaborate work to date, for Wilber also introduces a number of new ideas. Furthermore, in *A Brief History* Wilber undertook only to include that which could be asserted without the need for reference works and quotes, as if he were engaged in a personal conversation with the reader. As such, the entire book is written in the form of a long interview, which considerably enhances its readability.

By now Ken Wilber had come to be a relatively controversial figure in certain alternative circles—particularly in the circles in and around San Francisco. This state of affairs was prompted by a number of passages included in the end notes to *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, in which Wilber criticizes what he considers to be questionable notions and developments in the countercultural and alternative literature in no uncertain terms. Wilber deliberately included these polemical passages in his book with a view to rousing the stagnation that he felt had the whole field in its grip. However, some of his colleagues found these passages difficult to digest.

In 1996 the journal *ReVision* devoted three consecutive issues to Wilber's recent work. In these three issues of the journal some of his critics commented on Wilber's vision and Wilber was invited to respond to these comments. The resulting discussion continued in January 1997 during a conference held in San Francisco devoted entirely to Wilber's recent work. Several of the authors who had contributed to the *ReVision* series spoke at the conference. True to his principles, Wilber himself did not attend the conference, yet in the meantime he had compiled his contributions to *ReVision* together with several new chapters into a book entitled *The Eye of Spirit* (1997), which was published immediately prior to the conference. And he had also completed yet another manuscript. This was a relatively brief monograph on the relationship between science and religion, which was published the following year by Random House, bearing the title of *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998).

In 1997 Wilber kept a journal of his everyday experiences and less commonplace experiences. He had the impression that as an author who wrote about the inner dimension, he could not honestly evade writing about his own inner life. The manuscript was to be published as *One Taste* (1999) and was a testimony of the nondual state of the mystic, in which there is no distinction between high and low, spirit and matter, sacred and profane. The journal shows Wilber to be a full-fledged mystic, now beginning to reap the fruit of more than twenty-five years of meditation.

Due to the fact that all nineteen of Wilber's books were still in print—an extremely rare feat for an academic author—and given that his various books had been translated into more than thirty foreign languages—making Wilber one of the most highly translated living authors in America—Shambhala Publications and its distributing company Random House decided that it would be appropriate to compile and issue *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber*. This made Wilber the first psychologist-philosopher in history to have his collected works published while he was still alive—and Wilber was only forty-eight! Wilber himself was ambivalent

about doing this because it involved so much editorial work. He joked, “Usually they have the decency to wait until you die and stiff somebody else with this dreary editorial job, but nooooo. . . .”

Wilber spent the better part of 1998 editing his seventeen books. Fortunately, there was not much to change, but there was an enormous amount of material to go through, so Wilber worked around the clock. In what has become something of an inside joke, as he was going through his past works, he found a small book he had written and forgotten about. Called *Sociocultural Evolution*, it is published for the first time in volume 4 of the *Collected Works*.

But what made 1998 to 1999 a remarkable year for Wilber—arguably the most productive year of his life—was that, in addition to editing the *Collected Works*, he wrote three new books: *Integral Psychology*, *A Theory of Everything*, and *Boomeritis*. *Integral Psychology* is a succinct summary of the two-volume text he had been planning to write (*System, Self, and Structure*) and is undoubtedly his most important psychology book to date. *A Theory of Everything*—deliberately titled to challenge the modern theories in physics that claim to have a theory of everything but actually deal only with the physical realm—is perhaps the most accessible introduction to Wilber’s work yet, covering numerous applications in medicine, politics, business, and education—all of which are areas where interest in his work has exploded in the last few years (for example, both the former President Bill Clinton and the former Vice-President of America Al Gore have issued public praise of his work). And *Boomeritis* is his good-natured chastising of his generation—known in America as the “Me generation”—for being too self-absorbed.

Wilber is now in the process of completing his *Kosmos* trilogy—a project that is likely to take several years. In 1999 and 2000 Shambhala has published the first eight volumes of the *Collected Works of Ken Wilber*. And given that Wilber’s interest is increasingly turning towards politics, the chances are that he will also produce a monograph on the relationship between politics and religion. The last chapter of *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* gives us a foretaste of this as Wilber seeks to identify a “third way” somewhere between liberalism and conservatism—the two main movements in American politics, and attempts to integrate the Enlightenment of the West—rationalism and individual freedom—with the Enlightenment of the East—spiritual development and realization through meditation. In addition to all of this, for some years Wilber had also been toying with the idea of trying his hand at a very different literary genre. When I interviewed him back in 1995, he said: “Strange as it might

sound, I have thought very much about moving into writing novels. First of all, novels don't have footnotes. Every now and then you simply get tired of having to prove every sentence you utter. I think I have earned the right—after a dozen books—to simply suggest a world without having to prove it! But more than that, narrative is an extremely powerful form of communication. Look at what simple works of fiction have actually accomplished. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* almost single-handedly ended slavery in the States. We have Rousseau's *Emile*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. The worldwide environmental movement was almost totally started by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*—it's not really a novel, but it reads like one, and it does point up the power of narrative. For that matter, Freud himself only received one important award in his life, and that was the Goethe Award for literature. I probably won't be any good at it, so I will end up retiring from philosophy to write really bad novels."<sup>25</sup>

#### **"A FUNDAMENTAL PATTERN"**

Before proceeding to cover the books written by Ken Wilber in more detail in the following chapters, it is a good idea to examine whether there is in fact a discernible thread running through the books. When I asked Wilber about this during the 1995 interview, he came to realize that there was a certain logic in the sequence of his books, despite the fact that the books themselves address widely divergent fields of knowledge. He described this logic as follows: "The study of psychology inevitably leads to sociology, which inevitably leads to anthropology, which leads back to philosophy. And then, strangely, bizarrely, that leads to politics."<sup>26</sup> The way Wilber sees it, psychotherapy seeks to identify the reasons why people are unhappy and suggests that maladjusted behavior is one of the most significant contributing factors. But what if the society to which the individual is so ill-adapted is also dysfunctional? Thus psychology inevitably leads to sociology. Yet how can we hope to assess our own society in the absence of any comparative context? Thus in the endeavor to compare our own society with the societies created by other cultures, past and present, sociology leads us to anthropology. And then we are faced with the question as to what criteria we are to adopt with a view to assessing other cultures. Thus anthropology leads us to philosophy. And once we have succeed in identifying the values that need to be created within a culture, as far as Wilber is concerned, we are then more or less bound to

develop a political vision in which as many people as possible are enabled to share these values.

Referring to his own books, Wilber went on to say: “My approach has also gone through that basic pattern, from psychology to sociology and anthropology, to philosophy, to political theory. You can see this in the books: *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, *No Boundary*, and *The Atman Project* were my first three books, and they are all recognizable as psychology books, in a broad sense. Then *Up from Eden* and *A Sociable God*, which are anthropology and sociology. Then *Eye to Eye*—a very philosophical work. And then my most recent works, which are, well, hard to describe, because they sort of cover everything.”<sup>27</sup>

Wilber anticipates that integral psychology will have a significant effect on the culture as a whole, its impact is certainly likely to extend well beyond the confines of the discipline of psychology proper. In this respect he sees a similarity between integral psychology and psychoanalysis: “Psychoanalysis had much of its greatest impact in fields that were also outside of psychology. It had a major and profound influence in literature, in literary theory, in political theory and discourse (the enormously influential Frankfurt School of Critical Theory—Horkheimer, Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas—was a direct attempt to integrate the concerns of Marx and Freud), in art and in theories of art, even in artistic practice (the Surrealists, for example), and in education and educational theories and practices. Because psychoanalysis was in fact plugged into some very important—if limited—truths, it proved itself by completely exploding out of the narrow confines of psychology and having an extraordinary impact on other fields. And I think we are now on the verge of something quite similar happening with integral studies, perhaps not as widespread, but at least quite similar. Its impact is moving rapidly beyond the field of psychology. And many of us have been working in this much more expanded field of integral studies, and this also includes my own recent work.”<sup>28</sup>

In Wilber’s opinion, if there is any truth in the integral approach, it should ideally serve to integrate all of the various fields of knowledge: “Here’s what we are faced with: if the integral orientation has any validity, it ought to apply to every aspect of human endeavor. It ought to have something interesting to say about all of that—from physics to psychology, from philosophy to politics, from cosmology to consciousness. But you cannot do that as an eclecticism, or a smorgasbord of unrelated observations. There has to be something resembling coherence and integrative capacity. The integral orientation must be able to tie together an

enormous number of disciplines into a fairly complete, coherent, plausible, believable vision. Obviously, it remains to be seen if this can even be done at all. It might simply be an impossibility, for many reasons—‘fools rush in where angels fear to tread’. But that is what the *Kosmos* trilogy attempts to do—to integrate a comprehensive number of knowledge disciplines. Whether it succeeds or not, well, that definitely remains to be seen. But if nothing else, I think it will help people elevate their own visions to a more comprehensive and inclusive scale.”<sup>29</sup>

### SO, YET ANOTHER GRAND THEORY?

Ken Wilber can be characterized as a system philosopher—a thinker who seeks to establish the essential coherence of things, to gain an overview of the whole of reality in all of its diverse facets. In this respect Wilber is diametrically opposed to the postmodern spirit of the times, which considers such an approach to be impossible. Nowadays all-encompassing intellectual systems which attempt to explain the whole of reality on the basis of a single underlying theory are treated with huge and widespread scepticism. The era of the grand theories, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and evolutionism, definitely appears to have come to an end.

And it is not without reason that such systems are treated as suspect. For, time and time again history has shown that such grandiose systems of thought virtually always result in some form of totalitarianism. Anything that fails to fit within the system in question is rejected or identified as an inimical element, and is thus effectively marginalized—as the jargon would have it. In recent years Wilber’s system has also been subject to criticism largely motivated by the same kind of distrust. Some of the critics are of the opinion that Wilber’s all-encompassing model is not all-encompassing enough in view of the fact that it fails to appreciate the value of lesser developed cultures or the female perspective on reality. For a philosophy that purports to be an *integral* philosophy, these are criticisms that need to be taken seriously. Thus in the last chapter of this book we will examine whether there is in fact any truth in these criticisms.

However, it would be premature to reject Wilber’s vision out of hand as a totalitarian and marginalizing vision. In my opinion the standard criticism leveled by postmodernism—that grand theories are now a thing of the past—does not apply to Wilber’s vision in view of the fact that his approach is so radically different. For rather than attempting to pass off a certain *partial truth* as the one and only truth, as many of the major systems of thought evolved in the past have attempted to do, he is far