



Sense & Soul
Ken Wilber

An Integral Spirituality

The silken thread that unites the world's great wisdom traditions.

Renowned philosopher and theoretical psychologist Ken Wilber, now 55, has devoted himself to integrating Eastern and Western philosophical systems.

The author of 22 books translated into 30 languages, Wilber has built a following of activist/thinkers—from philosophers and spiritual teachers to psychologists and scientists — and is the founder of the Integral Institute, a think tank encouraging the cross-fertilization of ideas. Beliefnet is pleased to introduce Wilber as a new columnist.

What's my philosophy? In a word, integral. And what on earth—or in heaven—do I mean by "integral"? The dictionary meaning is fairly simple: "comprehensive, balanced, inclusive, essential for completeness." Short definition, tall order.

What would something like an inclusive or comprehensive spirituality mean? What *could* it mean? And would it even be remotely possible? Integral, in a sense, would be the ultimate ecumenical movement, if such a thing is even desirable. It would be a spirituality that claimed to leave nothing essential out. It would be a spirituality that in principle could be recognized and even practiced by believers in all the world's religions without abandoning their own essentials. It would be based on what seem to be universal human capacities to interface with the Divine. It would be inclusive and comprehensive, touching on all the bases of this elusive thing called "spirituality." It would be....

Impossible, is what it would be. But consider where we are in today's modern and postmodern world. We have, for the first time in history, easy access to all of the world's great religions. Examine the many great traditions—from Christianity to Buddhism, Islam to Taoism, Paganism to Neoplatonism—and you are struck by two items: there are an enormous number of differences between them, and a handful of striking similarities.

When you find a few essential items that all, or virtually all, of the world's great religions agree on, you have probably found something incredibly important about the human condition, at least as important as, say, a few things that physicists can manage to agree on (which nowadays, by the way, ain't all that impressive).

What are these spiritual similarities? I'll come back to those shortly, honest. For now, simply notice what it would mean if there were a handful of general items that regularly recur in humanity's attempts to know God (and presumably God's correlative attempts to reach a slumbering humanity, if God indeed exists). These similarities would seem to suggest, among other things, that there are spiritual patterns at work in the universe, at least as far as we can tell, and these spiritual patterns announce themselves with impressive regularity wherever human hearts and minds attempt to attune themselves to the cosmos in all its radiant dimensions.

And that would mean, would *have to mean*, that the standard-issue human being is hardwired for spiritual realities. That is, the human organism itself seems to be hardwired for these deep spiritual patterns, although not necessarily for the specific ways that they show up in a particular religion important as those are. Rather, the human being seems imbued by the realities suggested by these cross-cultural spiritual currents and patterns, with which individual religions and spiritual movements resonate, according to their own capacities and

to their own degrees of fidelity. The simple recognition of these deep spiritual patterns would be the glimmering of an integral spirituality.

That recognition would also imply that, any practices that would help individual human beings attune themselves to these patterns would increase humanity's understanding of, and attunement with, the spiritual patterns of the universe. This attunement could occur through any of the great religions, but would be tied exclusively to none of them. A person could be attuned to an "integral spirituality" while still be a practicing Christian, Buddhist, New-Age advocate, or Neopagan. This would be something added to one's religion, not subtracted from it. The only thing it would subtract (and there's no way around this) is the belief that one's own path is the only true path to salvation.

If humanity's attunement to the spiritual patterns of the universe are helped by various practices—which might include prayer, meditation, yoga, contemplation—then modern psychological and psychotherapeutic measures would surely be part of any integral spirituality, since those measures can help increase a person's capacity for various sorts of practice. What do I mean by "psychotherapeutic measures"? This in itself is a large topic, so let me say, for introductory purposes, they are any measures that might be taken if you have an emotional problem and visit the office of a psychologist, psychotherapist, or psychiatrist—all of the measures for treating human psychological issues that have been developed in the last century or so, and that have demonstrated the capacity to help alleviate or remove emotional problems or obstructions.

Finally, integral spirituality—as the very name "integral" implies—transcends and includes science, it does not exclude, repress, or deny science. To say that the spiritual currents of the cosmos cannot be captured by empirical science is not to say that they deny science, only that they show their face to other methods of seeking knowledge, of which the world has an abundance.

Well, then, what are some of these spiritual currents, or some of the similarities that recur in virtually all of the great wisdom traditions? These are items that we will be discussing in future essays and interviews in this column, so let me start with a short and simple list. This is not the last word on the topic, but the first word, a simple list of suggestions to get the conversation going. Most of the great wisdom traditions agree that:

1. Spirit, by whatever name, exists.
2. Spirit, although existing "out there," is found "in here," or revealed within to the open heart and mind.
3. Most of us don't realize this Spirit within, however, because we are living in a world of sin, separation, or duality—that is, we are living in a fallen, illusory, or fragmented state.
4. There is a way out of this fallen state (of sin or illusion or disharmony), there is a Path to our liberation.
5. If we follow this Path to its conclusion, the result is a Rebirth or Enlightenment, a direct experience of Spirit within and without, a Supreme Liberation, which
6. marks the end of sin and suffering, and
7. manifests in social action of mercy and compassion on behalf of all sentient beings.

Does a list *something like that* make sense to you? Because if there are these general spiritual patterns in the cosmos, at least wherever human beings appear, then this changes everything. You can be a practicing Christian and still agree with that list; you can be a practicing Neopagan and still agree with that list. We can argue the fine details—and will do

so in subsequent columns—but the simple existence of those types of currents profoundly changes the nature of belief itself.

If we add to those spiritual currents the other two ingredients that I mentioned—authentic spirituality must transcend and include modern science (not deny it), and psychological measures can help accelerate spiritual capacities—then we are getting very close to what might in fact be an integral spirituality, a spirituality for the modern and postmodern world that includes the best of the premodern traditions as well.

“Integral: inclusive, whole, essential for completeness.” Please join me in future Beliefnet columns as we explore this exciting and exhilarating topic.

Renowned author, philosopher, and psychologist Ken Wilber is the founder of [Integral Institute](#), and, among other things, moderates a lively website called [Integral Naked: Behind the Scenes with the World's Most Influential Thinkers](#).