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Editorial: How Rigid the Hierarchy?

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Judging from shelf space and sales, books and records in the "New Age" category are much in demand. Several of such items have been on best sellers lists for months. Ken Wilber's books are often put under New Age because they deal with consciousness, but they are also put under the general category of philosophy-religion.

It is difficult to define "New Age", but store shelves give some idea of what the publishers and sellers think fits under this heading. Clearly, much that is called "New Age" is actually old tradition. Much Eastern philosophical esoterica marketed in new translations and anthologies is from traditions over 2500 years old. Many other practices considered New Age, such as crystal work, divination, and geomancy, also have roots in ancient traditions - some predating literate civilizations.

What is new then about New Age? One factor is the cultural context of "high" technology permeating New Age activity. A lot on how to get high on technology and technique. Eastern mysticism blended with modern Western technological power leads to outer space and new planets to colonize. Higher evolution goes with high tech, and Teilhardian dreams are there. Wilber's theory of evolution of consciousness is widely available as well. Used in certain ways, his hierarchy of development of consciousness has upper reaches that seem to leave the Earth and body behind. His theory can be used to support New Age disembodied consciousness and engineered control of evolution. This might be why he sees the Deep Ecology Movement and nature spirituality as regressive, since they eschew high tech.

Gus diZerega criticizes Wilber's inaccurate account of Deep Ecology and nature spirituality in this issue. The matters he takes up are of critical importance to the future of the long- range ecology movement. Many think that the conflict between New Age and the Deep Ecology Movement is a critical one. Let us look further at New Age images and ideas.

An ad shows a man sitting on a mountain top with his pack nearby. On his lap is a powerful portable computer which displays the ancient symbol for *Om* on the screen, while its speaker makes the sound that the symbol stands for (the sound that contains all sounds). The man is wearing modern fabrics, carrying ultra advanced gear. His boots look like plastic space shoes. He sits with a group out to learn meditative arts for connecting with nature and their inner selves. Many wear crystal pendants around their necks. Some have done rebirthing and past life "work". Some are into Asian Martial Arts, ceremonial drumming or shamanic journeying. Does their equipment and computer make their summit higher than those who arrive almost naked?

New Age shelves are filled with an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western lore, knowledge, art, wisdom, magic, alternative technologies, and questing narratives. There is a focus on growth, development, transformation to higher consciousness, and lots of material on techniques, methods, processes and practices

of transformation. Some nature spirituality is thrown into this brew. The result is a heady libation for those new to these realms. However, much is just a repackaging of very old stuff.

Wilber is a leading explorer of evolving New Age consciousness as Western culture absorbs and is influenced by the spiritual traditions of other cultures and its own deep past. His books span two decades, and his recent work on spirituality, sex and ecology is heralded as a major contribution to understanding the ecology of self and relationships to nature. Wilber's view of our situation is optimistic. He sees our technological and cultural development as conducive to transformation to higher levels of consciousness. Our computer technology and industrial systems enable us to prospect globally for not only ore and genetic material, but also for spiritual goods. Our communication and information systems enable us to seek out the values of other cultures. New Age marries Western technology and Eastern mystical traditions.

However, does the Western system of development, called Modernization, represent a genuine advance for humanity over all other ways of living in nature? Western culture applies technology to redesign humans and Nature. This is a driving force in modernization. The environmental crisis leads some of us to think that Modernism ought to be transformed in an *ecocentric* direction. The drive for perfect control through technological power is a dead end. Why not cultivate mind power linked to our technologies and techniques according to a hierarchical system of developing consciousness? Wilber holds that all development or evolution occurs in such stages. But many of us have had unitive experiences which do not fit the schemes he offers. This is a primary criticism that diZerega makes of Wilber's grand developmental theory.

Is it possible that older technologies, methods, and techniques are in many cases more subtle and wiser than our powerful, energy demanding ones? Or, is there a natural evolutionary process that has led Western Civilization to develop its technological systems to reflect our more advanced consciousness? Or, do very old traditions, such as primal shamanism, offer the same possibilities for personal and community transformation (as Wilber sees in our situation as Westerners) to the highest levels of awareness open to humans? Is the West unique, since we unleashed a technological genie that appears to give humans unlimited power? Wilber's hierarchical system of consciousness does lend itself to making cross-cultural judgements regarding who is the most evolved.

Hierarchical systems are used by literate civilizations for many purposes. The classification systems on which they are based have many unstated presuppositions about value priorities. Hierarchical systems reflect the social and class structures of the societies which propound them. It is very difficult to create a system with no inherent value assumptions and Wilber's has them.

When we consider human growth and development from conception to maturity, we can define many stages in this long process. It is useful, especially for

purposes of instruction, to divide the learning process leading to mastery of an Art into different steps and stages. These can be arranged hierarchically, as can practitioners, with the more advanced at the top and the more basic at the bottom. Such systems are often taken for granted and become subconscious screens filtering experience. Primal cultures are generally not hierarchical, but are value rich in nature.

The distance between us and the Stone Age shaman is not genetic but cultural. The primal shaman's practices can take him or her to the highest levels of human development, maturity, integration and enlightenment. In Buddhist teachings all beings have Buddha nature, even the grass under our feet. To believe our culture is at a critical juncture that makes it possible for us to reach the highest state of consciousness is fine, but to say that earlier nature oriented cultures are barred from this possibility is a mistake. DiZerega says that Wilber makes such a mistake. Cultures can facilitate or impede such processes of transformation. For centuries in the West, e.g., religious persecution made cultivation of human consciousness extremely difficult and even highly dangerous.

In New Age literature there are books on the transformation of consciousness and the multiorgasmic nature of human sexuality. The Tantric and Taoist practice of cultivating sexual energy to balance masculine and feminine energies yields higher and higher levels of integration up to complete unity of awareness. This is described in great detail in Taoist alchemical texts in use for centuries. There is a series of stages and centers of energy described in the old texts. Anyone who cultivates their sexual energies in the ways taught will reach higher levels of unitive awareness as described. This capacity is our birth right as humans, and cultures are more or less conducive to their members realizing this, just as they are more or less ecologically wise. Western religious traditions have been highly repressive of these energy practices. When one experiences energizing the heart center there are profound effects in one's personal life, one's relationships to other humans, to other beings and nature; they all move to much higher levels of quality.

The challenge that diZerega issues to Wilber is that his analysis of nature religions does not square with the experience of those who practice nature spirituality, such as some neopagan Goddess worshipers. DiZerega speaks from years of experience as a participant and apprentice shaman, a skilled insightful artist, and scholar of high competence. He shows how Wilber fails to give an accurate account of the Deep Ecology Movement. He sheds light on the relationship of Emerson to nature spirituality in North America. He shows that, contrary to Wilber's claim, Emerson did not condemn nature spirituality, but thought that authentic encounters with the natural world can lead to cosmic consciousness.

Many of us are sympathetic with a lot that is under the New Age banner, including Wilber's theory of transpersonal consciousness. We have learned much from his contributions to understanding Eastern and Western spiritual life. And yet we are also bothered by some contradictions between his staged hierarchies

and our own spontaneous, grounded experience. His theories could lead to ungrounded awareness. The ungrounded intellect can live for theory and abstraction, as if the Earth is not important. Its purpose was to produce us, and now we can leave it without any spiritual loss. For a supporter of Deep Ecology such abstractionism leaves us with aloneness and alienation, especially if we spend our time in electronic systems of bodiless cyberspace. Followers of Deep Ecology seek grounding in the concrete experience of nature first hand. The ungrounded intellect can only find ultimate authority in subjective human consciousness, and then the small human mind gets turned into the creator of reality, instead of being a participant in shaping its own version of *experienced* reality. I wrote about this many realities talk in the Winter 1996 *Trumpeter*.

Supporters of the Deep Ecology Movement accept two principles that much New Age literature ignores: that intrinsic values are found throughout nature and that diversity and richness are good in themselves. Whatever personal ecosophy we develop is open to many creative possibilities, but it must be anchored in a context and place. *There are Earth bound ecological constraints*. Our ecosophies are real when they relate grounded selves committed to specific places and relationships. To learn the ecology of self and realize our ecological Self on Earth is a life long *embodied* process. It can be described via stages, but in any time or place total unitive awakening can (and does) occur. Flexible hierarchies, as rules of thumb, are useful, but we must beware of rigid ones that might encourage rejection of diversity. Wilber's system is a useful one and can be modified to accommodate diZerega's criticisms.

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