

Wisdom Circles 2012

April

What Does It Mean To Be a Transformed Person?

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There are many terms for the final stage of human growth used by the world's religions. Christians are saved, Buddhist enlightened, Hindus liberated. The Christian word salvation actually comes from a Greek word that means healing. There are all kinds of visual metaphors for this desired human destiny as well. Hindus and Buddhists use a lotus, a flower whose roots are deep underwater in mud and garbage, transforming all that base material into a gorgeous blossom in the sunlight, the blooming of the transformed human consciousness. In the Sufi tradition of Islam, the soul is likened to a rose, tight in its bud at first but in its own time bursting forth in glory. An early Christian symbol of resurrection is a butterfly, bursting from its chrysalis.

I think all these words represent some aspect or other of human potential—wholeness, healing, salvation, resurrection, enlightenment, liberation, awakening, apotheosis, realization, born-again, and re-born.

I think human transformation is more a matter of growing your soul than saving your soul. Whatever word we use, we are speaking of a process of progressively moving from an unaware and self-centered existence to a constant and ever-present awareness of how our own individual lives are connected to all that exists, in a profound sense. It is a moving from selfishness to selflessness – to a greater self. Or as we once sang at a meditation retreat I attended, “You can't always get what you want, but if you make the right effort, over time there is a high likelihood you will achieve a happiness independent of conditions.”

In the early 19th Century, the great Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing called this process “self-culture.” “Culture” here is meant in the agricultural or horticultural sense. Human beings are born with what Channing called, “a likeness to God.” We all potentially have attributes attributed to God such as wisdom, compassion, serenity, insight, goodness and a desire to serve others. While we are born with these potentials, they won't

grow and ripen by themselves. We need to water and feed them, that is, we need to nurture the habits of thought and deed that will allow these attributes to flourish. These early Unitarians used service to others, time in nature and daily reflection with such practices as journal keeping, meditative reading and reflections on the day to come and the day just past to cultivate this likeness to God in themselves.

Many other practices help to nurture a whole, if imperfect, human being. With the coming of Eastern religions to the West, meditation techniques have now entered the culture and they have been extensively studied. Meditator's brains have even been observed while meditating. It is becoming clear that many of the benefits claimed by meditation teachers are indeed true.

A powerful Western spiritual tradition for transformation which has been proven in the lives of millions of people is the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs.

Philosopher Ken Wilbur, who has made it his life work to find the unity between spiritual traditions, Western science and Western psychology, has advocated what he calls integral spirituality. This means we need to cultivate several modes of human potential at once. While meditation is perhaps the most powerful means of human transformation, an integrated person will also cultivate physical health, loving relationships, integrating one's broken and unhealed places, and adherence to a code of ethics that one is committed to.

Questions To Wrestle With:

These are for you to think about *all month*. We will discuss them together in our groups, but don't wait until your groups to think about them. As always, the gift of Wisdom Circles is that it asks us to think about things that rarely get attention in the rest of our lives. So pull these questions out early. Let them break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts.

1. What practices do you do to create transformation, to develop positive potentials in yourself? Do you see service or justice work as a means of spiritual growth? Do you have a meditation or prayer practice? Do you

try to bring awareness and intentionality to your everyday life? How do you do this? Do you practice tai chi, yoga or another mind/body practice? What is spiritual practice for you? Why?

- 2. Measure your spiritual progress. Meditation teacher Shinzen Young says there are five signs that you are making spiritual progress. 1) You suffer less. 2) You experience more fulfillment in your life. 3) Your behavior is improving. You don't do as many things that hurt yourself or others. 4) You have more insights into the nature of things and the interconnection of things. And 5), you naturally feel more loving toward others and want to help and serve them more.**

Look back to a year ago. Have you made progress in any of these areas? What did you do to help that happen? Are there areas where you did not make progress or even regressed? What insights do you have about that? Do you see a way to move forward in a positive direction?

Our Spiritual Exercise:

PRACTICE MEDITATIVE SELF-EXAMINATION

This month our spiritual exercise is a modern version of a self-culture practice that was very important to our Unitarian ancestors in the early 1800s. It's called meditative self-examination.

This exercise is best done in the evening as close to retiring for the night as possible. Anywhere quiet will work. You can even do this in bed before you go to sleep.

Close your eyes and think back on your day. Starting with the time you awakened, picture going through the day just past. Here are some suggestions of questions you might want to ask yourself.

“What did I do? How did I feel?”

Pay attention to the moral and ethical dimensions of your day. “What work did I do? What parts of my work aligned with my values? What felt contrary to my values? Were there ethical or moral dilemmas? Did I resolve them with integrity?”

“With whom did I interact—spouse, partner, children, co-workers, family, friends and strangers? How did I treat them? As possessing worth and dignity, or as means to an end? Were my intentions and actions loving?”

“Did I glimpse the holy today? Was I spiritually alive? When during the day was I most myself? When during the day did I feel cut off from the holy? Or spiritually dead? Or lack integrity?”

“What lessons did I learn and how might I act differently?”

Forgive yourself and others and give thanks for the day.

Do this at least five times before your wisdom circle meets, if you can. Ideally you would do this for five nights in a row. If you didn't do this exercise, or found it difficult, or resisted it, what did you learn from that resistance?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

As always, these are not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect them in our group. They are meant simply to get your thinking going--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking. Consider them to be companions on your journey.

WISE WORDS

Alcoholics Anonymous What are the 12 Steps?

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*
4. *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*
5. *Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*
6. *Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*
7. *Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*
8. *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*
9. *Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*
10. *Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*
11. *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*
12. *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

Do not think you will necessarily be aware of your own enlightenment.

[Dogen](#)

Enlightenment must come little by little - otherwise it would overwhelm.

[Idries Shah](#)

Are the mystics and sages insane? Because they all tell variations on the same story, don't they? The story of awakening one morning and discovering you are one with the All, in a timeless and eternal and infinite fashion. Yes, maybe they are crazy, these divine fools. Maybe they are mumbling idiots in the face of the Abyss. Maybe they need a nice, understanding therapist. Yes, I'm sure that would help. But then, I wonder. Maybe the evolutionary sequence really is from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit, each transcending and including, each with a greater depth and greater consciousness and wider embrace. And in the highest reaches of evolution, maybe, just maybe, an individual's consciousness does indeed touch infinity — a total embrace of the entire Kosmos — a Cosmic consciousness that is Spirit awakened to its own true nature. It's at least plausible. And tell me: is that story, sung by mystics and sages the world over, any crazier than the scientific materialism story, which is that the entire sequence is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying absolutely nothing? Listen very carefully: just which of those two stories actually sounds totally insane?

Ken Wilber



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...



Attunement could occur through any of the great religions, but would be tied exclusively to none of them...



Spirit, although existing "out there," is found "in here," or revealed within to the open heart and mind.
Ken Wilber

'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.

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).

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.

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.

Ken Wilber

- *We shall not cease from exploration*
- *And the end of all our exploring*
- *Will be to arrive where we started*
- *And know the place for the first time.*
 - T.S. Eliot

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime.

Therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.

Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.

Therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite a virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own.

Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

- Reinhold Niebuhr

BOOKS

The World's Religions by Huston Smith is the best and most interesting book on the world religions ever written.

The Seekers Guide (formerly The New American Spirituality by Elizabeth Lesser is a great overview of the paths to spiritual growth and transformation.

I love Ken Wilber's thought though some people find his writing too intellectually dense. A Theory Of Everything is a great overview of his work. More accessible is his spiritual journal One Taste. For a description of how he developed his ideas through the trial of his wife's death from breast cancer read Grace and Grit.

Online Videos and Audios:

There is a lot of stuff from Ken Wilber on line if you Google him. Here is a video where he explains his ideas on integral spirituality:

<http://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?p=ken+wilber+integral+spiritualit>
[y](#)

Shinzen Young, a meditation teacher has some common sense view of enlightenment:

http://search.yahoo.com/search;_ylt=A0oGdV8Ly0pPcS4AB9tXNyoA?p=shinzen%20young%20enlightenment&fr2=sb-top&fr=yfp-t-701-s

And here is a good interview: <http://harprakashkhalsa.com/2009/09/05/on-enlightenment-an-interview-with-shinzen-young/>

View the video of my Apr 10 2011 sermon, "I Shall Be Human Yet".

<http://vimeo.com/22518974>, including the guided meditation at the end of this sermon