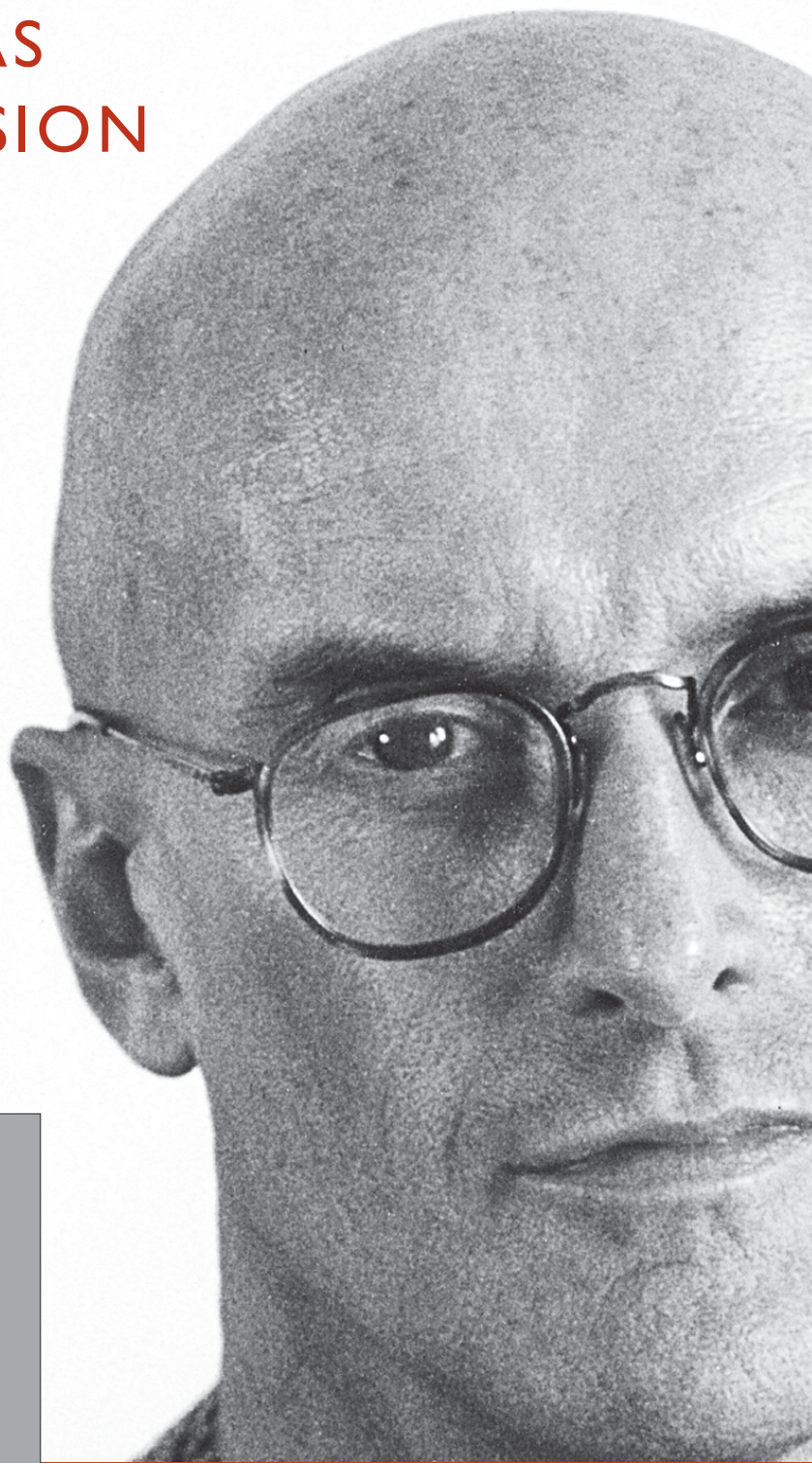


KEN WILBER

THOUGHT
AS
PASSION



Frank Visser
foreword by Ken Wilber

KEN WILBER

SUNY series in
TRANSPERSONAL AND HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Richard D. Mann, *editor*

KEN WILBER

thought as
passion

Frank Visser

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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The essence of my work is: God, or the absolute Spirit, exists—and can be proven—and there is a ladder that reaches to that summit, a ladder that you can be shown how to climb, a ladder that leads from time to eternity, and from death to immortality. And all philosophy and psychology swings into a remarkable synthesis around that ladder.

—Ken Wilber, *The Great Chain of Being*,
1987 (unpublished manuscript)

Is the outlook for the psychology of mysticism therefore bleak? On the contrary, it seems very promising. I would therefore not be surprised if the study of mysticism would one day be considered as a branch of psychology. This does not mean that mysticism would be reduced to what most present-day psychologists seem to spend most of their time on. Rather, it means that psychology would be deepened and widened so as to be in a position to take account of these particular aspects of the mind.

—Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 1975

Nothing so practical as a good theory.

—Kurt Lewin

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	xi
Ken Wilber	
INTRODUCTION	I
Ken Wilber: The person and his work	
The structure of this book	
CHAPTER I WHO IS KEN WILBER?	
“I’M A PANDIT, NOT A GURU”	17
Top of the class	
“An entirely new world”	
“Life for me was sour”	
“The Einstein of consciousness research”	
“The lonely pursuit of the writer”	
The <i>Kosmos</i> trilogy	
“A fundamental pattern”	
So, yet another Grand Theory?	
“I’m a pandit, not a guru”	
The seven faces of Ken Wilber	
CHAPTER 2 A FLYING START:	
“CONSCIOUSNESS IS LIKE A SPECTRUM”	43
What is transpersonal psychology?	
The perennial philosophy as a guiding concept	
A “perennial psychology”	

The spectrum of consciousness
 Evolution—the movement from Spirit to embodied individual
 Involution—the movement from embodied individual to Spirit
Consciousness without boundaries
“And yet, something was definitely wrong . . .”

**CHAPTER 3 CRISIS AND REORIENTATION:
IN SEARCH OF A NEW FOOTING** **71**

“Instantly the entire scheme became clear”
A forgotten truth
The search for the Self
 Developmental psychology as a starting point
 The prepersonal
 The personal
 The transpersonal
 General principles of development
 Pause for thought
A fall from Paradise?
 Cultural evolution
 The evolution of religion
 New Age or Dark Age?
“No longer lost in thoughts”
To sum up . . .

**CHAPTER 4 FURTHER REFINEMENTS:
SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES** **111**

Towards a New Paradigm?
 The three eyes of knowledge
 Three types of science
 The pre/trans fallacy
 A further refinement of the developmental model
Physics and mysticism: An unhappy marriage?
 A holographic paradigm?
 Quantum questions
Transpersonal sociology
 Methodological considerations

The new religious movements
The stage model is complete

**CHAPTER 5 LOVE, DEATH, AND REBIRTH:
YEARS OF TEST AND TRIAL**

151

“Love at first touch”
“I went into a profound depression”
“My path has been Buddhist”
“I do not condemn the *entire* New Age movement”
“And that is what Treya had done for me”
Death and rebirth in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition

**CHAPTER 6 AN EVEN BROADER HORIZON:
A MULTIDIMENSIONAL VIEW OF SPIRIT**

179

The *Kosmos* trilogy
 Popular holism falls short
 Individual and cultural progress
 The four quadrants
 The collapse into flatland
 Ascending and descending spirituality
An interview . . . with himself
 The four quadrants revisited
 Global consciousness as a platform
 In the grip of flatland
The eye of spirit
 The integral approach
 Is humanity evolving?
 The ever-present Spirit
The integration of science and religion
 A closer look at science and religion
 Earlier attempts at integration
 The integral agenda
The taste of Oneness
 A day in the life
 Pitfalls on the Path
 Continuity of consciousness

The Collected Works
 Integral Psychology
 Boomeritis
 A theory of everything
 The Integral Institute
 “By far the most productive years of my entire life”
 Towards a post-metaphysical spirituality

**CHAPTER 7 KEN WILBER IN PERSPECTIVE:
 THE BACKBONE OF WILBER’S MODEL 243**

Materialist science: the domain of matter
 Is there an inner dimension?
 “The hard problem”
 Back to introspection
 Orthodox psychology: the domain of the personality
 The realms of nature
 The stage paradigm
 Philosophy of development
 Transpersonal psychology: the domain of the soul
 Wilber versus Jung
 Wilber’s main opponents
 The Wilber conference in San Francisco
 Metaphysical religion: the domain of Spirit
 The perennialists
 The theosophical tradition
 A Western Vedanta?
 Epilogue: The map and the territory

NOTES 287

BIBLIOGRAPHY 311

Books by Ken Wilber
 Complete bibliography of Ken Wilber

INDEX 321

FOREWORD

KEN WILBER

It is a pleasure to introduce my friend Frank Visser's book *Ken Wilber: Thought as Passion*. Since I seem to be related to the subject of the book, sometimes intimately, perhaps I will be forgiven if I open with a self-serving comment. I very much appreciate the subtitle, *Thought as Passion*. In 1983, when I first moved to California and stayed with Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan in their lovely home in Tiburon, I became good friends with Rollo May, who at that time was seventy-five years old, but still vibrant, sharp, luminous. Rollo was a true hero of mine, for many reasons. First, he was a student and friend of Paul Tillich's, and Tillich was one of the truly great existentialists, as well as one of the two or three finest theologians of the twentieth century. Second, Rollo May was the major interpreter of existentialism for America, and especially of existential psychology. Rollo was a living connection to the great European philosophers who have been formative for me. (I have often described myself as a northern European thinker with a southern European lifestyle who practices Eastern religion—or something like that. But I do not particularly think of myself as American, although, annoyingly, that is how Europeans think of me, which shows how hard it is to shake cultural embeddedness. But really, Anglo-Saxon empiricism and cowboy pragmatism: who needs it?) Third, Rollo was a wonderful human being, warm and witty and wise.

Here's the self-serving comment. On the cover of one of my books, *Up from Eden*, was a quote from Rollo: "Ken Wilber is the most passionate philosopher I know." Every now and then somebody has said something kind about my work, but that is still my favorite, especially since it came from Rollo, who, as a true existentialist, believed that passion and

truth are close to identical. I mention it now because Frank's subtitle reminded me of that comment and how much it meant to me. To have any meaning at all, philosophy must sizzle with passion, boil your brain, fry your eyeballs, or you're just not doing it right. And that applies to the other end of the spectrum of feelings as well. Real philosophy is as gentle as fog and as quiet as tears; it holds the world as if it were a delicate infant, raw and open and vulnerable. I sincerely hope that if I have brought anything to this field, it is a bit of passion.

Although it purports to be about me and my work, the following book is actually about an integral approach to philosophy, spirituality—to the human condition on the whole. It is true that this book is a chronicle of my own journey to what I hope are increasingly integral stances, but I believe that the only enduring parts of that journey are the ideas themselves, not the bearer of those ideas.

In this volume, Frank presents a summary of some of the phases of my work and his commentary on them. Allow me to get the standard disclaimer out of the way, which is that, in fairness to other treatments of my work, I cannot endorse any of them, including this one. I have not read this book for accuracy (except some of the biographical material), and thus I cannot vouch for its soundness, nor can I respond to critics who use the interpretations given in this book. Having said that, Frank Visser has certainly studied this material as carefully as anybody, and I am deeply appreciative of his efforts to make an integral approach more available to the public. Whether or not this book represents my ideas accurately, it definitely represents ideas that need to be a part of any integral conversation, and for that reason alone, this is an invaluable contribution to the ongoing integral dialogue. I myself have some friendly disagreements with Frank about many of these topics, but I always learn something important from him in our exchanges, and I believe you will, too.

The word *integral* means comprehensive, inclusive, nonmarginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that—they include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are “meta-paradigms,” or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into a network of interrelated, mutually enriching perspectives. In consciousness studies, for example, there are at least a dozen different schools, but an integral approach insists that all twelve of them have important if partial truths that need to be included in any comprehensive account. The same is true for the many schools of psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, spirituality: they all have impor-

tant pieces of the integral puzzle, and all of them need to be honored and included in a more comprehensive or integral approach.

I am often asked which of my own books I would recommend as an introduction; I still believe *A Brief History of Everything* is perhaps the best (although *A Theory of Everything* is probably the shortest and simplest). *Brief History* was written as a popular or more accessible version of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (SES)*, which was the first major statement of my own integral view. The books prior to *SES* are preliminary explorations in integral studies, and, although many of them present what I hope are important pieces of an integral view, were I to summarize my work, I would not start before *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. As I said, *SES* was the first book to outline my own version of integral studies (which is sometimes called “AQAL,” short for “all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, all types”). After presenting *SES*, I would discuss the earlier books only as they were useful in forming the subcomponents of a more integral theory. The problem with chronological accounts of my work is that, in reliving earlier debates and dialogues, many of the terms as I now use them become irreversibly contaminated with the distortions of critics who at the time misunderstood what was being said. I personally do not believe that those debates are of much historical interest because they are more about distortion than facts. At the same time, as a story, the chronology is intriguing enough and has merit as a study in paradigm clashes, where all sides in the discussions (including me) had their fair share of misunderstandings.

The events leading up to *SES*, which was published in 1995, may be of interest. I had not written or published much for almost a decade, a decade largely devoted to caring for a wife who was diagnosed with cancer shortly after we were married; we hadn’t had a honeymoon when the shocking news arrived. Treya and I were married in 1983; she died in 1989. At her request, I wrote of our ordeal in *Grace and Grit*. Apart from that, I had written little in ten years. The events with Treya changed me deeply, profoundly, irrevocably. I believe that *SES* represented, in part, the results of the combined growth that Treya and I did for each other. We grew up together, we were enlightened together, and we died together. All of my books up to *SES* always had a dedication. Starting with *SES*, none of my books have had a dedication because all of them have been dedicated to her.

Whatever it was that happened, it was as if all the books I had written previously—some ten or eleven of them—were merely preparations, preliminary glimpses, or parts of an integral embrace still struggling

to emerge. It was as if the events that transpired with Treya allowed a growth in spirit, given by grace, that finally made enough room for me to even be able to see some of the integral horizons involved. In any event, I know that all of the work I have done subsequently came out of a Heart that I alone did not discover.

My work is sometimes divided into four phases, with the latest (phase-4) being dated with *SES* and six or seven subsequent books. I am often asked if there is a “phase-5” on the horizon, and I’m not sure exactly what to say about that. As Frank reports, I have in the last year written around 2,000 pages, and I suppose some of that, which seems to be fairly novel, might qualify. Since much of this material will be released only after Frank’s book is out, interested readers can see some of it posted at wilber.shambhala.com and integralinstitute.org, and you can decide for yourself whether it merits a high-sounding “phase-5” name or is simply rambling repetitions of earlier material. Part of it does seem definitely new—an integral semiotics, as well as an integral calculus, a form of mathematics that replaces variables with perspectives. But who knows?

The one thing I do know, and that I would like to emphasize, is that any integral theory is just that—a mere theory. I am always surprised, or rather shocked, at the common perception that I am recommending an intellectual approach to spirituality, when that is the opposite of my view. Just because an author writes, say, a history of dancing, does not mean that the author is advocating that people stop dancing and merely read about it instead. I have written academic treatises that cover areas such as spirituality and its relation to a larger scheme of things, but my recommendation is always that people take up an actual spiritual practice, not merely read about it. An integral approach to dancing says, take up dancing itself, and sure, read a book about it, too. Do both, but in any event, don’t merely read the book. That’s like taking a vacation to Bermuda by sitting at home and looking through a book of maps. My books are maps, but please, go to Bermuda and see for yourself.

See for yourself if, in the depths of your own awareness, right here and now, you can find the entire Kosmos, because that is where it resides. Birds are singing—in your awareness. Ocean waves are crashing—in your awareness. Clouds are floating by—in the sky of your own awareness. What is this awareness of yours, that holds the entire universe in its embrace and knows the secrets even of God? In the still point of the turning world, in the secret center of the known universe, in the eyes of the very one reading this page, at the very source of thought itself, watch the entire Kosmos emerge, dancing wildly with a passion philosophy tries

to capture, crowned with a glory and sealed with a wonder lovers seek to share, rushing through a radiant world of time that is but eternity's bid to be seen. What is this Self of yours?

An integral approach is merely an attempt to categorize, in conceptual terms, some of this glory as it manifests itself. But it is no more than that. Every one of my books has at least one sentence, usually buried, that says the following (this is the version found in *The Atman Project*): "There follows, then, the story of the Atman project. It is a sharing of what I have seen; it is a small offering of what I have remembered; it is also the Zen dust you should shake from your sandals; and it is finally a lie in the face of that Mystery which only alone is."

In other words, all of my books are lies. They are simply maps of a territory, shadows of a reality, gray symbols dragging their bellies across the dead page, suffocated signs full of muffled sound and faded glory, signifying absolutely nothing. And it is the nothing, the Mystery, the Emptiness alone that needs to be realized: not known but felt, not thought but breathed, not an object but an atmosphere, not a lesson but a life.

There follows a book of maps; hopefully more comprehensive maps, but maps nonetheless. Please use them only as a reminder to take up dancing itself, to inquire into this Self of yours, this Self that holds this page and this Kosmos all in a single glance. And then express that glory in integral maps, and sing with passion of the sights you have seen, the sounds that the tender Heart has whispered only to you in the late hours of the quiet night, and come and join us and tell us what you have heard, in your own trip to Bermuda, in the vibrant Silence that you alone own, and the radiant Heart that we alone, together, can discover.

K. W.
Denver, Colorado
December 2002

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INTRODUCTION

KEN WILBER: THE PERSON AND HIS WORK

Without holding any kind of degree in psychology, American autodidact Ken Wilber has managed to evolve into a leading theorist in the field. In particular, Wilber started as an exponent of transpersonal psychology—a school of religious psychology set up at the end of the sixties which endeavors to study the field of mystical spirituality in a scientifically sound way. Wilber himself studied biochemistry for a few years and for a time it looked as if he would continue and possibly excel in that direction. Yet during those early years at college Wilber was already starting to explore Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. He came to realize that his calling lay in bringing these two worlds together. Within a few years—he was still only twenty-three years old—he wrote up the results of his private studies in a book entitled *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, a book that would prove to be the first of a commanding oeuvre. *The Spectrum of Consciousness* sets out the basic principles of a vision of the individual and reality that incorporates and does justice to the insights of both East and West—not only the insights of the proverbial Freud and Buddha, but also those of Piaget and Patanjali, Kohlberg and Confucius, Skinner and Shankara, Neumann and Nagarjuna, Bowlby and Bodhidharma, Plato and Padmasambhava, to mention but a few illustrious names. Wilber's work as a whole is motivated by the effort to arrive at a world philosophy.¹ Inclusivity is the dominant hallmark of his vision.

Wilber's influence has since extended far beyond the realm of psychology. While his early works focused primarily on psychology, in his more recent work Wilber has emerged as a cultural philosopher who strives to place contemporary developments in the spheres of religion and

politics within the context of the wisdom of the ages. What is particularly striking is that in doing so Wilber is not only critical of the rationalist and materialist mainstream of Western culture, which either shows no interest in spirituality or entertains caricatures in this respect, he is also critical of the highly irrationally tinged counterculture of the New Age and so-called holism, which he accuses of gross superficiality, among other things. Wilber's main objection to New Age thinking is that it frequently equates spirituality with magical thinking, mythological fables, and a narcissistic concern with one's own spiritual well-being.² Time and time again Wilber points in his books to the depth and detail of the worldview expounded by the spiritual traditions—precisely what the contemporary alternative culture is in danger of losing sight of.

In the alternative world of the New Age Wilber has always been an outsider, if not an awkward customer, to put it mildly. Many today are extremely taken with Jung—Wilber isn't. Many have taken up with Freud—Wilber hasn't. Many place their hope in holism—Wilber doesn't. Many would see the intellect as the villain of the drama—Wilber won't. He even dares to openly object to such popular conceptions as “there's no such thing as chance,” “we create our own reality,” “we cause our own illnesses (and are also capable of healing ourselves),” “we need to be less in the mind and more in the body,” statements that have come to acquire the status of religious dogmas in the world of the New Age. Wilber sees these notions as twisted interpretations of the profound insights of the spiritual traditions, distortions that urgently need to be corrected. In this respect Wilber sides entirely with the critics of the New Age who see these notions as being symptomatic of the “me” decade. However, though Wilber ardently defends reason as being superior to prerational forms of expression such as magical and mythic thinking, he is fiercely critical of the Western dogma that contends that reason is man's highest possible attainment and that everything needs to be assessed in the light of reason. Wilber differs from those who hold this point of view in that he looks for ways to introduce authentic mystic spirituality into Western culture. Ultimately Wilber is concerned with mystic spirituality as a way of life.³

Wilber also differs from most authors who are preoccupied with religion and spirituality in that he attaches a great deal of value to typical Western attainments such as the ability to reason, the sense of individuality, and the drive towards emancipation. At the same time he denounces the materialism of Western philosophers who are only willing to study those aspects of reality that are visible and tangible, an approach which leads to the entire sphere of subjectivity being disregarded and carelessly

discarded as unscientific. Yet Wilber also has certain reservations regarding the Eastern way of thinking. While some of the most profound spiritual systems that humanity has ever known have emerged from the East, Wilber is certainly not oblivious to the fact that much of what comes from the East is primitive, magical, or dogmatic. Thus—as is likely to be clear by now—it is difficult to place Wilber in a certain category.

The nineteen books that Wilber has either authored or edited have been translated in more than thirty languages.⁴ This makes Wilber the most translated American author of academic books. The fact that all of these books have been in print continuously, in some cases for more than twenty years, is not only remarkable, particularly given the volatile nature of the book market, but it also testifies to the existence of a broadly based and continuous interest in Wilber's work. Although Wilber's books are highly academic in tone, as yet he has received little recognition from the world of academia (though there are signs that this is changing, at least in the United States). This may have something to do with the fact that his books have been published by two rather 'suspect' publishing houses: most of his books have been launched by the Buddhist publisher Shambhala, and several others have issued from the theosophical publisher Quest Books. By way of comparison, the works of two of Wilber's main opponents in the field of transpersonal psychology—Stanislav Grof and Michael Washburn, who we will hear more about in Chapter 7—are published by the State University of New York Press. Only one of Wilber's most recent works, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, which came out in 1998, was published by a large general publisher, Random House.⁵ All of this points to the fact that Wilber is a long way from the academic and scientific establishment in his thinking. For instance, while most of his opponents are still working within the framework of depth psychology—which is now acknowledged to some extent within academic circles—by basing their work on Freud, Jung, or other distinguished depth psychologists, Wilber has chosen a very different tack. His approach might best be described as "height psychology," particularly when it comes to his attempt to chart the field of mystic spirituality.

Thus Ken Wilber occupies a precarious position between the worlds of academia and esoteric religion, which makes it less likely that he will be accepted by either. Anyone who claims to be able to integrate the diverse and contradictory spheres of science and religion runs a huge risk of being taken seriously by neither. For as far as scientists are concerned, Wilber's work is too lyrical—they readily suspect him of smuggling religion into the world of science. On the other hand, those with a spiritual

orientation are inclined to find Wilber too abstract and too scientific—they are not convinced that the field of spirituality needs to be subjected to critical examination nor that it needs to be aligned with recent developments in clinical psychology or movements such as postmodernism. Even the interested layperson who attempts to follow the developments in both worlds as closely as possible is likely to find Wilber hard going. He or she may well be aware of Wilber's reputation but will often not be familiar with his main ideas, to say nothing of the way in which Wilber's vision has developed over the course of more than two decades. Thus while many may have read his book *No Boundary* published in 1979, they may not know that Wilber no longer fully subscribes to the ideas presented in this early work. (However, since even the faux pas of a genius are interesting, a separate chapter covers Wilber's earliest work in some detail.) And even though in another book, *The Holographic Paradigm*, Wilber criticizes the currently fashionable line of thinking which contends that the findings of modern physics support the worldview expounded by the mystics, rumor has it that Wilber also subscribes to the idea that modern physics and mysticism amount to the same thing.

Added to all this is the fact that Wilber's oeuvre is by no means complete.⁶ Almost like clockwork, thus far Wilber has come up with a new book virtually every year. This in itself is likely to make it difficult for the average reader to maintain an overview of his work. Even those who are extremely impressed with his work can be heard to sigh that a concise summary of his vision would be most welcome. And the many thousands of people who have read the odd book without studying Wilber's work in any depth, yet who are interested in the essence of his vision, may well find the summary presented in this book to be of interest. In particular, this book has been written for the large group of readers in the latter category.

One of Wilber's fundamental postulates—and in this respect Wilber is close to the postmodernists—is that everything exists within a context and that nothing can be understood independently of its context. And naturally, this is also true of Wilber's way of thinking. Thus in addition to presenting a brief overview of Wilber's work as a whole, this book also attempts to view his oeuvre from the point of view of a broader perspective. After the first six chapters have examined Ken Wilber and his work in some depth, the last chapter adopts a more distant stance with a view to providing for this wider context. What were and are Wilber's greatest sources of inspiration? And where does his own originality lie? Given that Wilber cites so many other writers both in positive and in negative senses,

this is a question that needs to be asked. Does Wilber do anything more than present the common denominators in the works of the greatest thinkers of East and West? Would the world be any different if Wilber had never put pen to paper? Who is it that year in and year out tirelessly persists in writing difficult, and occasionally somewhat less difficult but always intractable, books about science and spirituality? Besides giving an account of Wilber's books, this book also reveals the story *behind* his books—his career to date, the motives behind his choice of subjects, his theoretical and personal struggles, his philosophical vision, and, not least of all, his own spiritual experiences. As such this book is based not only on my own thorough study of Wilber's works—two of which I have translated into Dutch⁷—but also on the few details that Wilber has revealed in this respect, on the odd interview that he has given over the years,⁸ and, above all, on hours of conversation I had with him at his home in 1997.⁹

For the last ten years Ken Wilber has been living and working virtually in isolation high in the Rocky Mountains in Boulder, Colorado. He doesn't attend conferences on principle—not even those devoted entirely to his own work. He rarely, if ever, grants interviews, though there does seem to have been a change in this respect in recent years. All of this has led to the creation of a remarkable vacuum that leaves people free rein to form their own opinions of the man behind the books.¹⁰ Thus Wilber is accused of shutting himself off from criticism, of feeling himself to be literally and figuratively above the world, and of avoiding any confrontation beyond that of the written word. In this respect Ken Wilber clearly has an image problem. Yet the few people who have come to know him personally present a completely different picture. Wilber emerges as an engaging, even jovial individual and also as a highly impassioned thinker, committed to seeking truth above all else—and writing about it.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Anyone who attempts to convey the ideological world of someone like Ken Wilber in an intelligible way is rapidly faced with a dilemma. Which is likely to be more appropriate, a thematic approach or a chronological approach? From an intellectual point of view a description which confines itself to the theoretical system as such might well prove to be more satisfying, yet this is offset by the fact that in focusing solely on the theoretical system, we lose sight of the person who elaborated the system. The chronological method offers the advantage that the

events of the author's life can be readily interwoven with descriptions of the books as they were written and published over the years—though this approach runs the risk of becoming somewhat monotonous as we review one book after another. Bearing this in mind, I hope to have reduced any such monotony to a minimum by occasionally deviating from the chronological to recount an episode in Wilber's life or to offer my own reflections on the material discussed.

Actually, in Wilber's case there is another reason why a strictly thematic approach is virtually impossible. During the course of his intellectual development Wilber has evolved through a series of phases, occasionally confusing his critics in the process. In a recent book, *The Eye of Spirit* published in 1997, Wilber divides his oeuvre, which now stretches back some twenty years, into four different periods. For the sake of brevity he refers to these periods as Wilber 1, Wilber 2, Wilber 3, and Wilber 4 (and Wilber 4 is highly unlikely to be the last).¹¹ These four phases in Wilber's intellectual development deserve to be described in some detail. This being the case, I have deliberately devoted a separate chapter to each of these phases, and these four chapters form the basic framework around which this book is structured. Besides creating a context for Wilber's present vision, this approach also reveals how Wilber actually arrived at it.

Though I have made no attempt to hide my enthusiasm for Ken Wilber's work, this book is certainly not intended to be a hagiography. It might best be described as an intellectual biography or a personalized bibliography—if such a genre exists. In other words, while it centers primarily on the essential content and development of Wilber's work, the book also pays due respect to the person behind it. Given the quality and extent of Wilber's oeuvre, it is quite remarkable that there has not been a single monograph published on Wilber during the past two decades. Apparently no one has yet dared to hazard a summary and assessment of his work in book form. And it is easy to speculate why. It would virtually require a second Wilber to be able to fathom Wilber's work in its totality. Having broached so many different academic subjects in so many books, Wilber presents a sizeable challenge for anyone who hopes to present a comprehensive and comprehensible overview of his work. The many quotes included in this book will help to give the reader a clear impression of Wilber's characteristic style, which is both abstract and passionate at the same time. I am certainly not under any illusion that I can surpass or even equal Wilber in this respect. My aim in writing this book is of a far more modest nature. If, after having read this book, the reader has a clearer idea

of Wilber's thought and is able to form his or her own opinion of Wilber's work, my efforts will have been amply rewarded.

Chapter 1 introduces Ken Wilber as a person. How did Wilber spend his youth? What were his school years like? How was it that he came to abandon his college studies in order to be able to devote himself to his own self-devised program of study? How did he learn to deal with the fame that came his way at such an early age? Why has he opted for the relatively lonely existence of a writer, when deep down he might have preferred to live in a seething city like San Francisco? Is he really the otherworldly hermit that many take him to be? Is his wisdom derived mainly from books (he claims to read three books a day), or do his own experiences within the realms of meditation also play a part? And how does he see his function as a writer within a broader cultural and religious context? Wilber has often compared himself with the Indian figure of the pandit, who in Indian culture performs the function of a 'spiritual intellectual'—a person who is able to express and defend the truths of the spiritual traditions in a contemporary idiom and a person for whom there seems to be no equivalent in the West.

Chapter 2 looks at the period of Wilber 1. Wilber became a famous author with his debut work *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. Like many other authors in the field of spiritual psychology, in his first book Wilber subscribes very largely to the principles of depth psychology—an approach he now describes as "romantic Jungian."¹² Given that many of Wilber's opponents choose to adopt a similar standpoint, a detailed examination of Wilber's thinking during this period helps to clarify the debate currently raging within the field of transpersonal psychology. In this chapter we see Wilber as he first attempts to integrate not only the worlds of Western and Eastern psychology and philosophy, but also the numerous schools that come under the heading of Western psychology and psychotherapy. In its essential concern with the theory of human consciousness, Eastern philosophy also includes a great deal of psychology, though the language it uses differs from the language evolved by Western psychology. What Wilber tries to do in his first two books is to *translate* the insights that have emerged from the East into scientific psychological terminology with a view to revealing what Eastern philosophy can actually contribute to Western science. In doing so, rather than simply ushering Eastern knowledge into the horizon of Western psychology, he sought to *expand* this horizon so that the world of mystical experience mapped out by Eastern philosophy was also included within the domain of psychology. This field of tension between psychology and spirituality—with

all of the promises and pitfalls that it entails—is the territory of the relatively new discipline of transpersonal psychology.

In Chapter 3, which covers Wilber 2, a particularly important period in the development of Wilber's vision, we look at the radical reversal Wilber underwent in his thinking—a fundamental change that has escaped a good many of his readers. After he had written his debut work *The Spectrum of Consciousness* and a popularized version entitled *No Boundary*, despite the fact that his colleagues had attempted to outdo one another in thinking up superlatives to describe these books ("the Einstein of consciousness research" being the most expressive), Wilber was haunted by the uncomfortable feeling that there was something definitely wrong with what he had written. It testifies to Wilber's integrity that even after his first two books had been so successful, he had no qualms about revising the system he had elaborated. On closer examination, Wilber started to doubt the line of thinking expounded by depth psychology, that during the first half of life the individual wrests himself from the unconscious (read "spiritual dimension") only to have to turn around and reenter the unconscious in the second half of life in order to be able to regain the spiritual dimension. Wilbur grew to believe that line of thinking, also referred to as the "spiral model," was untenable. He found a new basis for his vision in developmental psychology, concluding that in growing up and becoming an adult, rather than distancing ourselves from God, we actually move closer and closer to It. The way Wilber now saw it, the entire process of human development was a fundamentally spiritual process in which consciousness becomes clearer and more expanded until ultimately—but by no means in all cases—it unites with the spiritual dimension. Seen from this point of view, spirituality is not something that is lost and has to be regained, but something that is continually approached step by step. For this reason Wilber's model is also known as the "ladder model." And Wilber also came to the same conclusion from an evolutionary point of view. Rather than having *fallen* out of paradise, as many authors in the field of mythology are inclined to claim, though we may not always realize it, we are actually on our way *towards* paradise. Thus Wilber had the effrontery not to reject the idea of the progress of humanity out of hand as an absurd idea. And while his critics might claim otherwise, far from implying that Wilber is a naive progressionist, the fact that he endorses the idea of progress simply indicates that he considers the concept of development to be all-inclusive. And though as far as Wilber is concerned we pay a high price for this individual and cultural development, as we shall see, the pay-off is always greater because there

is absolutely no call to indulge in nostalgic dreams of a lost paradise or an idyllic childhood.

Chapter 4 looks at the period of Wilber 3. At this point Wilber further elaborates his view of development, adding a number of important distinctions. Initially he had assumed that human development was a relatively uniform process—the self evolves through a number of different stages, each of which is characterized by its own vision of reality. The world of the magical man of antiquity was very different from the world of today's rational man—as most cultural philosophers and religious scholars will agree. However, an in-depth study of the various schools of thought within the field of developmental psychology led Wilber to see that this approach was too simplistic. As has been well documented, a person may have a highly developed intellect, for example, yet be emotionally or morally naive. Thus there appear to be different dimension or lines of development which operate more or less independently of one another. And if this is really the case, how are we to understand development? How important is cognitive (or intellectual) development within the context of development as a whole? Is intellectual development a basic prerequisite for development in other social, emotional, moral, or spiritual dimensions, as orthodox developmental psychologists have always claimed, or is intellectual development more properly to be regarded as one of many possible lines of development? In other words, is it possible for someone to become spiritually mature without ever displaying any appreciable intellectual capacities? In this respect Eastern philosophy is helpful in view of the fact that it has always acknowledged that there are several different forms of yoga or paths to God—such as the intellectual path or jnana yoga, the emotional path or bhakti yoga, and the path of action or karma yoga. Thus Chapter 4 touches upon the core questions addressed by developmental psychology and attempts to identify Wilber's contribution in this respect. (Wilber has recently returned to these same questions.¹³)

In a certain sense Wilber's model of human development reached completion during this period. By the middle of the eighties he had charted in detail a vision of development consisting of a conventional phase (the development from child to adult as described by Western cognitive and psychoanalytical psychology) and a contemplative phase (the development from adulthood to enlightenment, as described in the psychological systems of Buddhism and Hinduism). Thus, in essence, Wilber can be said to regard spirituality as a process of continued development.

In Chapter 5 we enter a period of Wilber's life in which his challenges were not so much intellectual as personal and emotional. In 1983

Wilber met the woman who was to become his second wife, Terry Killam, and within a few weeks he had proposed to her. Just before the couple got married, a routine medical examination revealed that Terry had a highly aggressive form of breast cancer. From one day to the next Wilber gave up his writing in order to be able to support his wife in her battle against cancer—a battle that would go on for some years. Understandably enough, during this emotionally charged period Wilber was unable to write and his views were put to the test in no uncertain terms. Was the vision he had evolved able to withstand the challenges of love, illness, and death? Because this period also influenced Wilber's subsequent thinking with regard to spirituality, particularly in terms of the question as to whether there are male and female variants of spirituality (it turns out that Wilber's thinking up until this point had been almost exclusively male), I have chosen to cover this period in Wilber's life, albeit with some reluctance. Although this chapter is very different in tone from the preceding chapters, Wilber's more recent work can only really be understood in the light of this phase in his life. After Terry died in 1989, it was several years before Wilber was able to pick up the thread of his theoretical work. In 1991 he published *Grace and Grit*, a very personal work based on the diaries Terry—who just before she died changed her name to Treya—wrote during her illness. These diary entries are interwoven with Wilber's thoughts on illness, death, and rebirth. In publishing *Grace and Grit*, Wilber succeeded in attracting an entirely new group of readers.

Chapter 6 discusses the period of Wilber 4, the period during which Wilber's most recent works have been written. These works differ considerably from his previous work in that he now refers to two basic forms of spirituality—the ascending or masculine, and the descending or feminine. He also places his model of individual development within the context of culture and society far more clearly than ever before. Admittedly, this was a theme he had covered earlier in his book *Up from Eden*, published in 1981, which examined the evolutionary journey of humanity, but this time the socio-cultural dimension is far more prominent. He is also more concerned with how bodily processes affect the functioning of human consciousness. Yet, while his model allows for the discoveries in the field of neurology, Wilber certainly does not go so far as to reduce human subjectivity to the mechanics of neurology, as most of those currently concerned with the study of human consciousness are inclined to do. As far as Wilber is concerned, the interior (subjective experience) and the exterior (the human brain) are two separate spheres, and while they might be closely correlated with one another, they can never be reduced to one

and the same thing. In addition, Wilber also makes a distinction in terms of the individual and the collective in each of these spheres, thus arriving at four quadrants: (1) the interior-individual (subjective perception), (2) the exterior-individual (cerebral processes), (3) the interior-collective (culture), and (4) the exterior-collective (society). These four quadrants, so he is convinced, need to be recognized as the four essential elements of any integral theory of human consciousness. And this model effectively exposes any attempt to interpret one of these quadrants in terms of the other three as a form of reductionism. Thus in his recent work Wilber counters materialist reductionism (which seeks to explain human consciousness in terms of biochemical processes within the brain), cultural reductionism (which contends that culture is all-determining while the individual counts for nothing), and social reductionism (which regards social structures as being of overriding importance), while being fully aware of the very real influence that these three spheres exert on individual human consciousness.

Wilber's vision of human consciousness has matured in his recent works. Thus it is relevant to ask whether Wilber's system as a whole is able to stand up to criticism. Although over the years Wilber's ideas have been subjected to occasional criticism, it is only in the last few years that his work has been systematically assessed. For instance, in 1997 a conference held in San Francisco was devoted specifically to Wilber's work. At this conference his colleagues in the transpersonal field commented on same aspects of his work. Yet in my opinion a complete assessment of Wilber's work needs to adopt a far wider perspective than that of transpersonal psychology. His vision broadly encompasses four fields of knowledge (not to be confused with the four quadrants mentioned above), and these four fields form the framework of Chapter 7, which attempts to assess Wilber's work from—or at least to situate it within—a broader perspective.

The first field of knowledge reviewed is the materialist philosophy of consciousness, which currently holds a great deal of sway within academic circles and relentlessly reduces human consciousness to neural processes within the brain, or to material processes in general. In this world academics are busy speculating as to the extent to which a computer is a workable metaphor for human consciousness (the weak version), if not the extent to which a computer itself can be said to be conscious (the strong version). Wilber has addressed this dominant viewpoint in only a few places in his work. In my opinion this is an oversight on Wilber's part. If he wishes to attract the attention of the world of academia or to

enter into a discussion with the academics, he will need to engage in the discussion in a far more explicit way. It is important to consider the arguments put forward in defense of a totally materialist explanation of human consciousness since there is, in fact, no longer any serious discussion in this field. Many scientists automatically consider a non-materialist explanation of consciousness to be a prescientific aberration—certainly not anything to be taken seriously. Anyone who still believes in a soul—and Wilber happens to be one of those who do—is cast out of the scientific establishment. But has anyone actually succeeded in coming up with an entirely satisfactory materialist explanation of human consciousness, or are we simply witnessing what is essentially religious conviction? And if the materialist establishment has not yet succeeded in coming up with a satisfactory explanation, is it likely to appear at some point in the future (when science is further advanced), or is such an explanation fundamentally impossible? What arguments has Wilber put forward in support of the existence of an independent interior dimension? Do these arguments carry any weight in the current debate regarding individual human consciousness? Surely, if ever there is to be a plausible theory concerning interior subjective experience, this formidable horde of materialists will first have to be taken on.

Secondly, Wilber and his colleagues in the transpersonal field will have to face the criticism that the orthodox psychological community has leveled at transpersonal psychology as a whole. If the phenomena of spirituality and mysticism cannot be accounted for by 'normal' psychological processes such as upbringing, projection, conditioning, learning processes, frames of reference, and the like, what arguments have those who subscribe to the tenets of transpersonal psychology advanced in support of the existence of a transpersonal dimension? The rationale of transpersonal psychology as such hinges on the answer to this question. In view of the fact that, thus far, transpersonal psychology has not really been acknowledged by the academic world (any more than Jungian psychology has seriously been acknowledged), an objective analysis of the situation is hardly an unnecessary indulgence. What is the current status of the thinking regarding human development within the world of academia? The line of thinking which postulates the existence of a series of qualitatively distinct stages that the individual proceeds through step by step during the course of his or her life has been discredited by psychologists in recent decades. This is partly because today's postmodern climate is fiercely opposed to the introduction of qualitative distinctions ('nothing is higher or better than anything else'), and there seems to be precious little em-

pirical evidence of the existence of these stages. Or if evidence does exist, it is not widely accepted. Given that the theme of development is central to Wilber's way of thinking, it is imperative that the arguments for and against should be reexamined. What are Wilber's arguments in support of the existence of qualitatively distinct stages of development during the course of a human life? Anyone who has dared to postulate as many seventeen stages of development, as Wilber does in *The Atman Project* published in 1980, has a lot of explaining to do. While Wilber has certainly touched upon this question in his work since then, in my opinion he needs to consider it further.

The third field of knowledge examined in this last chapter is transpersonal psychology itself. As will be clear by this stage, Wilber is one of the foremost theorists in this field, yet he chooses to adopt a different standpoint from the majority of his colleagues. Whereas most of his colleagues work within the framework presented by depth psychology, the assumption on which Wilber's work is based is very different. Much of the current debate concerning the transpersonal is inevitably obscure because this basic difference of approach has not been explicitly identified. Transpersonal psychology, therefore, finds itself at a crossroads in this respect. Does the framework provided by depth psychology, which is subscribed to by the majority of transpersonal psychologists, allow for further progress? Or would it be better to look for a different context from which to explore the phenomenon of human consciousness, as Wilber has done? I hope to be able to contribute to the debate concerning the basic principles by analyzing the fundamental differences between Wilber's vision and the vision adopted by many of his colleagues in the transpersonal field.

Finally, any assessment of Wilber's vision also needs to consider the metaphysical sources on which his thinking is based. In his very first article published in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1975 under the title of "Psychologia Perennis" (or "Perennial Psychology") Wilber was clear about his objective: he wanted to translate the perennial philosophy into psychological terms. The phrase *perennial philosophy*, popularized by Aldous Huxley, speaks of the understanding of reality which is said—by those who endorse this view—to underlie all of the great religions and philosophical systems. Yet as Wilber himself says at the outset, just as few philosophers are interested in the idea of a perennial philosophy, few psychologists are open to the idea of a perennial psychology. Wilber says this fully convinced that for a vision of humanity to be valid, it must do justice to the whole wealth of human experience, and for this reason it can

be said to be scientific (while the so-called scientific materialist vision of man is fundamentally unscientific in that it refuses to acknowledge the undeniable empirical fact of human subjectivity).

Esoteric philosophy, which is also referred to as the perennial philosophy, identifies a number of different planes of existence—usually seven worlds or spheres—extending from the world of matter to the world of Spirit. Between these two extremes are a number of intermediate levels which correspond to human consciousness. Wilber adopted this idea of a layered reality as a guiding principle on which to base his vision of human development. From this point of view development can be conceived of as proceeding step by step through each of these spheres. Individual development begins in the lowest, material field (i.e., in the physical body) and subsequently expands to encompass the psychic or personal levels of existence (which are of an emotional and mental nature). At a later stage it may then move into the spiritual or transpersonal realms. In view of the fact that this profound idea is such a central premise in Wilber's oeuvre, it is important and even essential to reexamine this teaching of the spheres of existence as a teaching in its own right, independent of any correlations with psychology that have since been suggested. Having done so, we are then in a position to question whether, for example, the correlation between the spheres of existence and the stages of development is actually as cogent as Wilber suggests. Do all of the stages of human development postulated by Wilber correspond to the levels of existence described by esoteric philosophy, or is this only true of certain stages? And if this is the case—as we will argue—would it not be more appropriate to make a distinction between primary stages, which have an ontological basis in reality, and secondary stages, which are of a more transitional nature? I hope to be able to contribute to the discussion with regard to this point.

There can also be said to be opposing schools within the field of esoteric philosophy. Many authors in this field, including René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and Huston Smith, are wary of, if not outspokenly opposed to, modern and postmodern culture. These authors regard the history of Western culture as the decline of a deeply rooted spiritual culture—seen to have existed in the Middle Ages—and the emergence of a culture which is superficial and materialistic. On these grounds they call for spiritual values since lost to be restored. Wilber, who subscribes to the idea of cultural evolution, is diametrically opposed to this way of thinking, however much he might criticize modern materialist culture, which he graphically describes as “flatland.” For this reason Wilber has occasionally described his vision as “neo-perennial philosophy,” a vision which centers

on the notion of evolution.¹⁴ Thus even though he endorses the basic principles of the perennial philosophy which postulates the existence of a layered reality supported by the ground of being, which each person can contact in himself, Wilber chooses to adopt a different standpoint from other authors in the field when it comes to the question of evolution. Thus also in this case it is relevant to ask what arguments have been advanced for and against the actual existence of cultural evolution. Where should the spiritual dimension be situated in this respect—in the past or in the future?

As mentioned earlier, some of Wilber's books were published by a theosophical publishing house.¹⁵ Theosophy can be seen as a nineteenth-century attempt to translate the insights of the perennial philosophy into contemporary Western culture. The principles expounded by Theosophy are also relevant to an assessment of Wilber's vision for two reasons. Firstly, Theosophy also adheres to the idea of evolution and thus readily endorses Wilber's neo-perennialist view. And secondly, Theosophical literature presents a wealth of information regarding the different levels of existence, which sheds light on the basic principle of Wilber's philosophy, that development is essentially a process of expanding from one level of existence to the next and of passing through different closely related stages and spheres. Thus in my opinion the teachings of Theosophy also serve to enrich any discussion about the validity of Wilber's vision.¹⁶

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WHO IS KEN WILBER?

"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.¹ 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."²

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