

# The Kosmos According to Ken Wilber

A Dialogue with Robin Kornman

Shambhala Sun — September 1996

Prepared in Latex by: mohsenmomeni@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** How does one classify Ken Wilbur? Philosopher, psychologist, contemplative, author, avid consumer of popular culture, Wilber is one of our era's grand syntheists, integrating many levels of knowledge from the most concrete to the most ethereal into a great unified view of the living universe. The reclusive thinker granted the Shambhala Sun a rare opportunity to discuss his ideas, and entered into the following dialogue via fax machine with Robin Kornman, Buddhist scholar and the Bradley assistant professor of world literature at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

## Robin Kornman:

*I read your ideas about the evolution of consciousness in a pair of your most recent books that seem to go together. Sex, Ecology, Spirituality is the big one, 800 pages. A Brief History of Everything seems to be a summary written for the common man and woman.*

## Ken Wilber:

Yes, Brief History is much shorter and more accessible. At least I hope it is. The common man and woman? Well, anybody reading this magazine is already very uncommon, wouldn't you say? I wrote the book for the same not-so-common people, I guess, nut cases like you and me who are interested in waking up and other silly notions like that. This book is not going to knock Deepak Chopra off the charts. I suppose it's more for anybody who is looking for something like an overall world philosophy, an approach to consciousness and history that takes the best of the East and the West into account, and attempts to honor them both.

*And what effect do you hope to have? What can knowing your philosophy do for the advancement of consciousness?*

Not very much, frankly. Each of us still has to find a genuine contemplative practice—maybe yoga, maybe Zen, maybe Shambhala Training, maybe contemplative prayer, or any number of authentic transformative practices. That is what advances consciousness, not my linguistic chitchat and book junk. But if you want to know how your particular practices fit with the other approaches to

truth that are out there, then these books will help you get started. They offer one map of how things fit together, that's all. But none of this will substitute for practice.

*As you note in Brief History, there are already plenty of progressive theories of history and theories of spiritual evolution. Sometimes your theory sounds like Hegel's dialectic, sometimes like Darwin, sometimes like various Asian views of world mind theory. What makes it different from these other systems?*

Well, that's sort of the point. It sounds like all of those theories because it takes all of them into account and attempts to synthesize the best of each of them. That's also what makes it different, in that none of those theories takes the others into account. I'm trying to pull these approaches together, which is something they are not interested in.

*You don't divide up your world into atoms, or elements, or psychological states, but rather into units you call "holons." These sound a lot like the "dharma" of Buddhist abhidharma, or psychology. How influential was Buddhist abhidharma in your theory?*

Well, I'm a longtime practicing Buddhist, and many of the key ideas in my approach are Buddhist or Buddhist inspired. First and foremost, Nagarjuna and Madhyamika philosophy: pure Emptiness and primordial purity is the "central philosophy" of my approach as well. Also Yogachara, Hwa Yen, a great deal of dzogchen and mahamudra, and yes, the fundamentals of abhidharma. The analysis of experience into dharmas is also quite similar to Whitehead's "actual occasions." My presentation of holons was influenced by all of those. Again, I'm trying to take the best from each of these traditions and bring them together in what I hope is a fruitful fashion.

*Since we're talking about influences, your system could also be regarded, if I were feeling unsympathetic, as a simple reconstruction of 19th century Romanticism. The notion that we are all evolving toward a realization of pure spirit is a Romantic notion of history. There are lots of reasons that these bright, sentimental, and spiritual approaches were abandoned, but here are three:*

- 1. Science made talk about spirit seem childish.*
- 2. The World Wars took away people's faith in the bright absolutisms of Romanticism.*
- 3. Romanticism spawned the fascists and, via the Hegelian dialectic, the Communists.*

*So how can you go back to this entirely exploded world view and make it the basis of a brave new millenium?*

Actually, I attack the Romantics on numerous occasions-I mention all the points you did-and I do so with such polemical force that all the present day Romantics are totally furious with me.

To the reasons you mention that Romanticism is "exploded," I add several more, the most grievous of which is that as a system it has absolutely no yoga, no actual contemplative methodology, no way to stabilize any sort of genuine spiritual awareness. This actually left the Romantics open to severe regression, which is why I usually refer to them as "retro-Romantics." I point out several present day trends in retro-Romanticism, none of which are pretty, and I say so in blunt terms, and this has not endeared me to these folks.

Nor, in fact, do I believe we are evolving to some sort of spiritual Omega. In both books I maintain that the whole point is to directly recognize Emptiness: "Rest in Emptiness, embrace all Form," is how I put it in those books, which is pretty basic Buddhism. I actually ridicule the Omega theorists a little bit, which has gotten them pretty mad at me as well.

*Your own world view is complicated enough. Meditators might just say, "Why do I need to have a global-historical view at all? Leave me alone to just meditate." What would you say to them?*

Just meditate.

*You have some interesting criticisms of conventional modernism and post-modernism. You seem to accept their positions and yet at the same time to transcend them, to put them in their place. Can you explain that?*

Yes, the idea is that all the various approaches and theories and practices have something important to tell us, but none of them probably has the whole truth in all its details. So each approach is true but partial, and the trick is then to figure out how all of these true but partial truths fit together. Not "Who's right and who's wrong?" but "How can they all be right?" How can they all fit together into one rainbow coalition? So that's why I both accept these positions but also attempt to transcend them, or "put them in their place," as you say. Whether or not I have succeeded remains to be seen.

*You use the word "Kosmos" instead of cosmos. Why?*

"Kosmos" is an old Pythagorean term, which means the entire universe in all its many dimensions-physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. "Cosmos" today usually means just the physical universe or physical dimension. So we might say the Kosmos includes the physiosphere, or cosmos; the biosphere, or life; the noosphere, or mind, all of which are radiant manifestations of pure Emptiness, and are not other to that Emptiness.

One of the catastrophes of modernity is that the Kosmos is no longer a fundamental reality to us; only the cosmos is. In other words, what is "real" is just

the world of scientific materialism, the world of "flatland," the flat and faded view of the modern and postmodern world, where the cosmos alone is real. And one of the things these two books try to do is rehabilitate the Kosmos as a believable concept.

*You write of the Kosmos as "the pattern that connects" all domains of existence. This reminds me of Gregory Bateson's Mind and Nature, A Necessary Unity. How did these modern, sort of New Age movements in the social sciences influence your thought?*

Not very much, I must say. I don't find Bateson a very useful theorist, although I know many bright people who do. But the book you mention is what I would call a very "flatland" book-monological, it-language, one-dimensional, not very good, frankly. But that's just my opinion.

*Do you think Foucault, Derrida, and company were getting at points that Asian absolutists had already articulated in some way? Or have their poststructuralist approaches been completely fresh?*

The poststructuralist approaches are both more novel or fresh, and much less profound. The great Eastern traditions are, in essence, profound techniques of transformation, of liberation, of release in radical Emptiness. The poststructuralists have none of that; they simply offer new ways of translation, not transformation. They are interesting twists on relative truth, not a yoga of absolute truth.

But within the relative truth, the poststructuralists have a few similarities with the relative aspects of some of the Eastern traditions, such as "nonfoundationalism," the contextuality of truth, the sliding nature of signification, the relativity of meaning, and so on.

These are interesting and important similarities, and I try to take them into account, but they are all quite secondary to the real issue, which is moksha, kensho, satori, rigpa, yeshe, shikan-taza: None of that will you find in Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and company.

*What if I am, say, a hardcore, born-again Buddhist, who doesn't use other systems of self-development or self-transformation. I get the idea from Brief History that I must be leaving something out of my self-culture. When I gain enlightenment, won't it be incomplete according to you?*

If by "enlightenment" you mean the direct and radical recognition of Emptiness, no, that won't leave anything out at all. Emptiness doesn't have any parts, so you can't leave some of it behind. But there is absolute bodhicitta [awakened mind] and there is relative bodhicitta, and although you might have direct recognition of the absolute, that does not mean you have mastered all the details of the relative. You can be fairly enlightened and still not be able to explain, say,

the mathematics of the Schroedinger wave equation. My books deal more with all these relative details, some of which are not covered by Buddhism, or any of the world's wisdom traditions for that matter. But for the direct recognition of radical Emptiness and spontaneous luminosity, Buddhism is right on the money, yes?

*Then why do I need your history of consciousness when I've got all the Buddhist teachings to play with?*

You don't. Unless you happen to find it interesting, or fun, or engaging. Then you'll do it just to do it. The Buddhist teachings don't specifically cover Mexican cooking either, but you still might like to take that up.

*We could also put it this way: What do you know that the Buddha doesn't?*

How to drive a Jeep.

*You want to integrate Freud with the Buddha, or, as you call them, "depth psychology" with "height psychology." Do you think that without this integration both systems are incomplete?*

Well, I think everything is incomplete, because the Kosmos keeps moving on. New truths emerge, new revelations unfold, new Buddhas keep popping up, it is endless, no? Freud and Buddha are just two examples of some very important truths that can benefit from a mutual dialogue. Emptiness does not depend on either of them; but the manifest world is a big place, plenty of room for both of these pioneers. And yes, I think they can each help the other's path proceed more rapidly.

*Do you think, indeed, that the ancient systems of spiritual transformation are inadequate in modern times, since they leave out so much of the material you include in your synthesis?*

Inadequate? Not in absolute truth, no; in relative manifestation, sure, simply because Emptiness keeps manifesting in different forms, doesn't it? You can't find instructions for operating a computer in any of the sutras or tantras. You can't find out about DNA or medical anesthesia or kidney transplants in those texts, either. Likewise, the West has contributed a thing or two in psychological and psychotherapeutic understanding, and these contributions are altogether beneficial and helpful, and they don't have many parallels in any of the ancient teachings. But it's not really a matter of inadequacy; it's a matter of making use of whatever is available. If your practice is working for you, excellent. If it seems to be stuck, maybe a little therapy might help. I myself don't think either side has to be threatened by this. It's a really big universe, very spacious, plenty of room for Freud and Buddha.

*While we're on this topic, what do you think of the inner tantras, such as kundalini yoga and what we Buddhists do with prana, nadi and bindu? The reality upon which they rely is not admitted by science and yet it occupies two higher levels in your system, the subtle and the causal. This is confusing, because a lot of spiritual practitioners never admit the existence of those levels and never do those practices. Yet you make them seem to be a necessity of higher development.*

I don't think they are a necessity. It's rather that, at those two higher stages you mentioned, the subtle and the causal, these types of processes may occur. Or they may not. It depends on the type of practice, among other things. It's just that, at a certain point in your own meditative practice, various gross processes tend to be replaced by subtle and then very subtle phenomena, and these sometimes include energy currents, prana, bindu, and so on. But in other cases it might simply be an increase in clarity and panoramic awareness. I was simply cataloging all the different types of meditative phenomena that can occur as meditation itself unfolds from gross to subtle to very subtle consciousness. Much of what I include here is pretty standard stuff in the traditions, especially the Tibetan.

*Why do some spiritual practitioners seem to make advances in some ways and still be primitive assholes in other ways?*

Well, one of the things I try to do with the developmental model of consciousness is outline two different things, which we can call streams and waves. The streams are the different developmental lines, such as cognitive development, emotional development, interpersonal development, spiritual development, and so on. Each of these streams goes through various stages or waves of its own development. What research indicates is that, one, these different streams can develop fairly independently of each other: you can be advanced in one stream, such as the spiritual, and retarded in others, such as emotional or interpersonal. And two, even though these streams develop independently, they all share the same basic stages or waves of development. For example, they all go from pre-conventional to conventional to postconventional forms.

So we have numerous different streams of development, yet each traverses the same general waves or stages of consciousness unfolding. And people can definitely be advanced in one stream and a "primitive asshole" in others. I summarize this research in an upcoming book called *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*.

But about your point, yes, development can be rather uneven. Most of the great wisdom traditions train people for higher or postconventional awareness and cognition, and for higher or postconventional affect, such as love and compassion. But they tend to neglect interpersonal and emotional development, especially in the conventional domains. We all know advanced meditators who are, well, unpleasant people. This, of course, is where Western psychotherapy excels-although it goes to the other extreme and almost completely neglects and

leaves out the higher or transpersonal waves, another reason we need to get Freud and Buddha together.

*Every old-timer in the contemplative game knows this is true-that growth is usually uneven. But some say the neurotic bits are actual regressions: a person made a real advance in meditation but then, seduced by samsara, abandoned it and got caught up in neurosis. Others say that meditation actually scoops up hidden, compacted neuroses in the advanced practitioner, making him or her suddenly and mysteriously become a jerk. Do you think there is any truth in such views?*

I think of each of those points you mentioned is sometimes true. People often do make real progress in meditation, only to abandon it because the demands are too great. And when they return to their "old" ways, their neurosis is even worse, because they have the same old problem but now their sensitivity is increased, so it simply hurts even more.

Your second scenario is also common. Particularly at advanced stages of meditation, the really deeply buried complexes start to become exposed to awareness. Advanced practitioners can become very exaggerated people, because they have already worked through all the smooth and easy problems, and all that is left are the karmas from when you murdered twenty nuns in your last lifetime. I'm sort of kidding, but you get the idea: some really deep-seated problems can rush to the surface in advanced practice, and this can confuse people, because this does not look like "progress." But it's sort of like frostbite: at first you don't feel anything, because you're frozen. You don't even think you have a problem. But then you start to warm up the frozen part, and it hurts like hell. The cure, the warming up, is horrible. Advanced meditation is especially a fast warming up, a waking up, and it usually hurts like hell.

*But you have some other scenarios as to why things can "go bad" in meditation.*

Yes, the idea is that, as we were saying, development consists of several different streams that develop through the basic stages or waves of consciousness unfolding. The great wisdom traditions tend to emphasize two or three of these streams, such as the cognitive (awareness), the spiritual (and moral), the higher affect (love and compassion). But they tend to neglect other streams, such as emotional, interpersonal, relationships, and conventional interactions.

Thus, as you tend to make progress in some of these streams-perhaps the meditative/cognitive-you can become a little "unbalanced" in your overall development. Other developmental lines become neglected, withered, atrophied. Your psyche is saddled with one giant and a dozen pygmies. And the more your meditation practice advances, the worse the imbalance becomes. You start to get very weird, and you are told to increase your meditative effort, and pretty soon you come apart at the seams like a cheap suit. Yes?

So one of the things that we might want to look at are ways to bring a more integral practice to bear on our lives, an integral practice that includes the best of ancient wisdom and modern knowledge, and blends the contemplative with the conventional. I don't have the answers here, but these books are, I hope, a way to begin this dialogue in good faith and good will.

*When you earlier said that meditators could "just meditate," was that being just a little glib? Because it doesn't seem that you really think that meditation alone is enough.*

Well, you didn't ask if I thought meditation alone is enough. You asked what I would tell somebody who said, "Leave me alone to just meditate." I'd say, "Just meditate." I have no desire to interfere with anybody's practice. But if you asked instead, "What other practices do you think meditators could use to facilitate their growth?" then I would answer more or less as I just did.

In other words, a judicious blend of Eastern contemplative approaches with Western psychodynamic approaches is an interesting and I think healthy way to proceed. And if you want a more comprehensive world view, including both absolute and relative truths, then certainly there are numerous items that the West will bring to the feast. Any of those approaches taken by themselves is demonstrably partial by comparison.

Incidentally, if you're put off by all this you don't have to come. But everybody has an invitation to this dance, I think. It's a real Shambhala Ball. Seriously. Chogyam Trungpa's Shambhala vision, as I understand it, was a secular and integral weaving of the dharma into the vast cultural currents in which it finds itself. A Brief History of Everything outlines many of those currents and suggests one way that the dharma can enrich-and be enriched by-those currents. This is very simple, I think.

*Fair enough. What I would like to do now is to ask a few very technical questions. One of the most confusing things about being a practitioner of Asian mystical traditions is the fact that before the Enlightenment the West had a thousand year tradition of civilization based on a highly mystical religion, Christianity. And yet in Sex, Ecology, Spirituality you characterize this thousand year period as one that promised but did not deliver genuine transcendence. Why do you say that? How could a whole civilization miss the point for so long when it had expressions of the idea in Plato, the Corpus Hermeticum, Neoplatonism, mystical Christianity, and so on?*

Imagine if, the very day Buddha attained his enlightenment, he was taken out and hanged precisely because of his realization. and if any of his followers claimed to have the same realization, they were also hanged. Speaking for myself, I would find this something of a disincentive to practice.

But that's exactly what happened with Jesus of Nazareth. "Why do you stone me?" he asks at one point. "Is it for good deeds?" And the crowd responds, "No,

it is because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God.” The individual Atman is not allowed to realize that it is one with Brahman. ”I and my Father are One”-among other complicated factors that realization got this gentleman crucified. The reasons for this are involved, but the fact remains: as soon as any spiritual practitioner began to get too close to the realization that Atman and Brahman are one-that one’s own mind is intrinsically one with primordial Spirit-then frighteningly severe repercussions usually followed.

Of course there were wonderful currents of Neoplatonic and other very high teachings operating in the background (and underground) in the West, but wherever the Church had political influence-and it dominated the Western scene for a thousand years-if you stepped over that line between Atman and Brahman, you were in very dangerous waters. St. John of the Cross and his friend St. Teresa of Avila stepped over the line, but couched their journeys in such careful and pious language they pulled it off, barely. Meister Eckhart stepped over the line, a little too boldly, and had his teachings officially condemned, which meant he wouldn’t fry in hell but his words apparently would. Giordano Bruno stepped way over the line, and was burned at the stake. This is a typical pattern.

*You say the reasons are complicated, and I’m sure they are, but could you briefly mention a few?*

Well, I’ll give you one, which is perhaps the most interesting. The early history of the Church was dominated by traveling ”pneumatics,” those in whom ”spirit was alive.” Their spirituality was based largely on direct experience, a type of Christ consciousness, we might suppose (”Let this consciousness be in you which was in Christ Jesus”). We might charitably say that the nirmanakaya [physical body] of each pneumatic realized the dharmakaya [absolute body] of Christ via the sambhogakaya [body of bliss] of the transformative fire of the Holy Ghost-not to put too fine a point on it. But they were clearly alive to some very real, very direct experiences.

But over a several hundred year span, with the codification of the Canon and the Apostle’s Creed, a series of necessary beliefs replaced actual experience. The Church slowly switched from the pneumatics to the ekklesia, the ecclesiastic assembly of Christ, and the governor of the ekklesia was the local bishop, who possessed ”right dogma,” and not the pneumatic or prophet, who might possess spirit but couldn’t be ”controlled.” The Church was no longer defined as the assembly of realizers but as the assembly of bishops.

With Tertullian the relationship becomes almost legal, and with Cyprian spirituality actually is bound to the legal office of the Church. You could become a priest merely by ordination, not by awakening. A priest was no longer holy (sanctus) if he was personally awakened or enlightened or sanctified, but if he held the office. Likewise, you could become ”saved” not by waking up yourself, but merely by taking the legal sacraments. As Cyprian put it, ”He who does not have the Church as Mother cannot have God as Father.”

Well, that puts a damper on it, what? Salvation now belonged to the lawyers. And the lawyers said, basically, we will allow that one megadude became fully one with God, but that's it! No more of that pure Oneness crap.

*But why?*

This part of it was simple, raw, political power. Because, you know, the unsettling thing about direct mystical experience is that it has a nasty habit of going straight from Spirit to you, thus bypassing the middleman, namely, the bishop, not to mention the middleman's collection plate. This is the same reason the oil companies do not like solar power, if you get my drift.

And so, anybody who had a direct pipeline to God was thus pronounced guilty not only of religious heresy, or the violation of the legal codes of the Church, for which you could have your heavenly soul eternally damned, but also of political treason, for which you could have your earthly body separated into several sections.

For all these reasons, the summum bonum of spiritual awareness—the supreme identity of Atman and Brahman, or ordinary mind and intrinsic spirit—was officially taboo in the West for a thousand years, more or less. All the wonderful currents that you mention, from Neoplatonism to Hermeticism, were definitely present but severely marginalized, to put it mildly. And thus the West produced an extraordinary number of subtle-level (or sambhogakaya) mystics, who only claimed that the soul and God can share a union; but very few causal (dharma-kaya) and very few nondual (svabhavikakaya) mystics, who went further and claimed not just a union but a supreme identity of soul and God in pure God-head, just that claim got you toasted.

*As for some of these more profound currents that became marginalized, what is the relationship between Plato's concept of "remembering" and enlightenment? Ever since I read the Meno I've thought there was one. But I couldn't quite figure out what it was.*

Yes, I think there is a very direct relationship. If we make the assumption, pretty safe with this crowd, that every sentient being has buddhamind, and if we agree that with enlightenment we are not attaining this mind but simply acknowledging or recognizing it, then it amounts to the same thing if we say that enlightenment is the remembering of buddhamind, or the direct recognition or re-cognition of pure Emptiness.

In other words, we can't attain buddhanature any more than we can attain our feet. We can simply look down and notice that we have feet; we can remember that we have them. It sometimes helps, if we think that we do not have feet, to have somebody come along and point to them. A Zen Master will be glad to help. When you earnestly say, "I don't have any feet," the Master, wearing these big Dr. Martens boots, will bring them stomping down on your feet and see who yells out loud, "No feet, eh?"

These "pointing out instructions" do not point to something that we do not have and need to acquire; they point to something that is fully, totally, completely present right now, but we have perhaps forgotten. Enlightenment in the most basic sense is this simple remembering, re-cognizing, or simply noticing our feet-that is, noticing that this simple, clear, everpresent awareness is primordial purity just as it is. In that sense, it is definitely a simple remembering.

*And you think Plato was actually involved in that type of recognition?*

Oh, I think so. It becomes extremely obvious in the succeeding Neoplatonic teachers; in these areas, the apples rarely fall far from the tree. Plato himself says that we were once whole, but a "failure to remember"-amnesia-allows us to fall from that wholeness. And we will "recover" from our fragmentation when we remember who and what we really are. Plato is very specific. I'll read this: "It is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning: only after long partnership in a [contemplative community] devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame kindled by a leaping spark." Sudden illumination. He then adds, and this is very important: "No treatise by me concerning it exists or ever will exist."

*Purely wordless.*

Yes, I think so. Very like, "A special transmission outside the scriptures; Not dependent upon words or letters; Direct pointing to the mind; Seeing into one's Nature and recognizing buddhahood." We have to be a little careful with quick and easy comparisons, but again, if all sentient beings possess buddhamind, and if you are not yet going to be crucified for remembering it, then it is likely enough that souls of such caliber as Parmenides and Plato and Plotinus would remember who and what they are in suchness. And yes, it very much is a simply remembering, like looking in the mirror and going "Oh!" As Philosophia said to Boethius in his distress, "You have forgotten who you are."

*I'd like to ask you a specific question about the connection about the ultimate and relative truth. You said that the Buddha's teachings are completely adequate for the realization of ultimate truth, but that relative manifestation keeps on changing because "Emptiness takes on different forms." But really in Buddhist teachings there is just one intelligence. The ati tantras call it rigpa, wisdom. It's basically supposed to be the same as vipashyana or prajna. I'm wondering if you agree about this one intelligence. Is this the same intelligence that understands calculus or discovers quantum physics? Is it the same intelligence that microbiologists use to map the human genome?*

And you ask because?

*They are supposed to be the same "one intelligence" but they don't look the same. These scientific and philosophical teachings of the West seem to be examples of relative truth that were not discovered in Asia. You obviously believe that the Asians were the world's experts on finding or identifying the mind that cognizes Emptiness. But how can we reconcile this if there is only one intelligence? Put succinctly, why didn't rigpa discover calculus or quantum physics or human DNA?*

Because there is not simply one intelligence, not the way you mean it. Remember, even in the Madhyamika, where we have the Two Truths doctrine, there is a corresponding Two Modes of Knowing-samvritti, which is responsible for the relative truths of science and philosophy, and paramartha, or the recognition of pure Emptiness.

It's true that the nondual tantras radically identified relative and absolute, but the point is, that identity is radical. Emptiness does not affect the phenomenal stream at all because it is the emptiness of everything in that stream. There is no part of Emptiness separate from the manifest world to push or pull it. Emptiness is not a phenomenon over there, which we grasp or understand, and which understanding changes other phenomenon.

Emptiness changes nothing whatsoever, for the simple reason that it is not one item among other items but the nature of all items, with no exceptions. Emptiness leaves everything exactly as it finds it, because it is already the suchness of everything exactly as it is.

So Emptiness will do no work at all. You cannot use it to agree with one position and disagree with another, because it is the suchness of all positions. It has no preferences. It is not one thing among others; it is simply the opening or clearing in which all things arise, equally. If calculus arises, it arises in Emptiness. If calculus doesn't arise, still Emptiness. Emptiness doesn't pick one or the other, and it has no hand in one or the other, because it is not here versus there.

Likewise, rigpa is a flashing (or seeing or recognizing) this primordial purity; if physics arises in that purity, then it arises; if it doesn't, it doesn't. Whatever relative manifestation there is, it is illumined or lit by rigpa, as the one intelligence in the entire universe, which is true enough. But within that absolute space of Emptiness/rigpa, there arise all sorts of relative truths and relative objects and relative knowledge, and Emptiness/rigpa lights them all equally. It does not choose sides, it doesn't "push" anything. It doesn't push against anything because nothing is outside it.

*So there is one intelligence or not?*

One intelligence that flashes in many different forms. As the Christian mystics put it, we have the eye of flesh, the eye of mind, and the eye of contemplation—all of which are ultimately lit by rigpa, or one intelligence, or Big Mind, but each of which nonetheless has its own domain, its own truths, its own knowing. And, most important, mastering one eye does not necessarily mean you master the

others. As we were saying, these are relatively independent streams.

*So the eye of contemplation is capable of disclosing absolute truth or Emptiness, whereas the eye of mind and the eye of flesh can disclose only relative truth and conventional realities.*

Yes, I think that is a fair summary of what are after all some very complex issues. The traditional analogy is the ocean and its waves, which is a really boring analogy, but bear with me. The wetness of the water is suchness. All waves are equally wet. One wave isn't wetter than another. And thus, if I discover the wetness of any wave, I have discovered the wetness of all. When I directly recognize Suchness or Emptiness, or the wetness of my own being, right here, right now, then I have discovered the ultimate truth of all other waves as well. Emptiness is not a Really Big Wave set apart from little waves, but is the wetness equally present in all waves, high or low, big or small, sacred or profane-which is why Emptiness cannot be used to prefer one wave over another.

Enlightenment is thus not catching a really big wave, but noticing the already present wetness of whatever wave I'm on. Moreover, I am then radically liberated from the narrow identification with this little wave called me, because I am fundamentally one with all other waves-no wetness is outside of me. I am literally one taste with the entire ocean and all its waves. And that taste is wetness, suchness, Emptiness, the utter transparency of the Great Perfection.

At the same time, I do not know all the details of all the other waves-their height, their weight, the number of them, and so on. These relative truths I will have to discover wave by wave, endlessly. No Sutra of Wetness will tell about that, nor could it. And no Tantra of the Soggy will clue me in on this.

That's why I earlier said that Buddhist contemplation is sufficient for ultimate truth: it will directly show you the wetness of all waves, the radical suchness of all phenomena, the Emptiness in the heart of the Kosmos itself, the primordial purity that is your own intrinsic awareness in this moment, and this moment, and this. But meditation will not, and really cannot, tell you about all the details of all the various waves that nevertheless arise as the ceaseless play of Emptiness and spontaneous luminosity. As you say, it will not automatically give you calculus, or the human genome, or quantum physics. And historically, it definitely did not, which should tell us something right there.

*I have a question about the Great Chain of Being, and it dawned on me that the Great Chain might be related to what you are saying about manifestation and relative truth.*

Yes, they are very similar notions. In other words, the Great Chain theorists-from Yogachara and Vedanta in the East to Neoplatonism and Kabbalah in the West-maintain that Emptiness (or the "One," meaning the nondual) manifests as a series of dimensions, or levels, or koshas, or vijnanas-or "waves"-a spectrum of being and consciousness. The spectrum of levels is the relative or manifest truth,

and the vast expanse in which the spectrum appears is Emptiness, or absolute truth. Ultimately the absolute and the relative are "not two" or nondual, because Emptiness is not a thing apart from other things but the suchness of all things, the wetness of all waves. And rigpa is the flash, the recognition, of that nondual isness, the simplicity of your present, clear, ordinary awareness-the opening or clearing in which the entire universe arises, just so.

But of course that is not merely an abstract concept. "One taste" is a simple, direct, clear recognition in which it becomes perfectly obvious that you do not see the sky, you are the sky. You do not touch the earth, you are the earth. The wind does not blow on you, it blows within you. In this simple one taste, you can drink the Pacific Ocean in a single gulp, and swallow the universe whole. Supernovas are born and die all within your heart, and galaxies swirling endlessly where you thought your head was, and it is all as simple as the sound of a robin singing on a crystal clear dawn.

*The different forms of Emptiness, the different waves of the Great Perfection.*

Yes, in the relative world, new truths are constantly emerging; they emerge within Emptiness, within this brilliantly clear opening that is your own awareness in this moment. And whether what arises in the vast expanse of your own primordial awareness is calculus, physics, pottery or how to make yak butter, will depend on a thousand relative truths and relative forces, none of which individually can be equated with Emptiness, and yet all of which arise as gestures of great perfection or Emptiness itself-that is, all of which arise in this simple, clear, everpresent awareness, the transparency of your very own being.

So within "one intelligence" or "Big Mind," all sort of small minds and stepped-down intelligences arise-that's the Great Chain-and those relative truths, like the clouds in the sky and the waves in the ocean, have an appointment with their own relative karmas and a date with their own destinies.

The West has its relative truths, the East has its relative truths. And mostly in the East we further get a clear understanding of absolute truth, because the toaster was not your fate for dabbling therein. And definitely, my theme is that a judicious blend of relative truths, East and West, set in the primordial context of radical Emptiness, is a very sane approach to the human situation.