In Search of a New Moral Compass
The Guru and the Pandit
Ken Wilber and Andrew Cohen in Dialogue

Introduction
The leading edge of evolution can be a pretty lonely place. How many are willing to step out where the crowds thin, reaching for potentials barely forming on the brink of the future? How many have the courage to ask the kind of questions that open doors to tomorrow? Pioneers of consciousness have always been few—that just seems to be the way it works. But if the past has anything to teach us, perhaps it is that those few have made all the difference. "This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists," Martin Luther King, Jr., declared almost half a century ago.

And the same undoubtedly holds true today. Radical shifts happen, as he understood, "not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority." This is the spiritual challenge to each one of us, the gauntlet thrown down by a future that really does depend on individuals changing—and changing fast. And this is why What Is Enlightenment? is dedicated to finding those voices on the edge, asking them the questions that matter and bringing them together.

In our last few issues, the potential inherent in such an inquiry has come alive most vividly in the ongoing series of dialogues between "the guru and the pandit"—Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber. Cohen, founder of WIE, is also, as many of our readers may know, a spiritual teacher deeply committed to and engaged with the hands-on business of transformation. Wilber could perhaps most simply be described as the definitive integral philosopher-architect of an elegant and ever-expanding "theory of everything" that provides an unparalleled synthesis of the world’s wisdom. United in a passion for the possible and sharing a refreshing intolerance for sacred cows, these two independent thinkers take spiritual and philosophical discourse into new dimensions each time they meet. In this, their fourth dialogue, guru and pandit explore the moral predicament of our time, illuminating the pitfalls of the postmodern landscape in which we find ourselves and challenging us to engage in the creation of a new morality for a new world.

*In Sanskrit, a scholar who is deeply proficient and immersed in spiritual wisdom.

ANDREW COHEN: What I want to explore with you today is the moral predicament of our time, and how that relates to our spiritual aspirations.

KEN WILBER: That sounds great.

COHEN: Here in the West, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a profound lack of moral context, not only for us boomers, but also for the X and Y generations. And I think this is perhaps the biggest issue that all of us who are interested in development, transformation, and enlightenment need to come to terms with.

We have all emerged in this world in the postmodern cultural context—a time when there is no traditional moral, ethical, philosophical, or spiritual...
framework for our own existence. Indeed, we entered the picture when the old structures were being rejected. And to a large degree, we have set ourselves free from them, but as of yet, we haven't really found anything to replace them. Our generation and those that have followed have experienced more freedom—personal, philosophical, political, religious—than any group of people ever, anywhere. There have never been so many who have had this incredible liberty to experiment—to think in whatever way they want, to do anything they want, to say anything they want. But the significant issue here, I think, is that a human being has to have reached an unusually high degree of maturity to actually be able to handle the kind of freedom that so many of us were given simply because of the time in which we were born. And most of us haven't handled it very well because we haven't had enough maturity. So we're in an incredible time when the largest group of individuals at the highest level of development is in a transitional phase. The old has been rejected, but as yet, we haven't really found a new narrative, a new moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual context in which to live our lives—one that will enable us to handle the freedom that we've been given and help us to make sense of our own experience.

Now, there have been many of us who responded to this lack of context in our own lives by pursuing Eastern philosophy and its promise of higher consciousness. And as a result, many have tasted higher states, glimpsed nondual awareness, experienced moments of enlightenment. As you yourself have said many times, dramatic spiritual episodes like these have a very profound impact on a soul level, especially if the experience is a deep one. But, as we have discussed in the past, pure experience in and of itself is not what's most important. What matters is how we interpret these experiences.

WILBER: Yes, that's right—what's important is the interpretive context in which the experiences are occurring.

COHEN: So here we are in postmodern America, up to our necks in a culture of narcissism, devoid of an authentic moral framework for making value distinctions. What happens when an individual has an enlightenment experience in this context? Let's say they taste nonduality, glimpse emptiness, are overwhelmed by fullness, see that all is One and One is all. They experience the truth beyond good and evil, beyond opposites. But how is that extraordinary experience going to help them navigate this complex, ever-evolving, ever-changing world system that we are all a part of?

WILBER: In other words, if the ultimate truth is beyond good and evil, how do we navigate in the world of good and evil?

COHEN: Exactly. Now, this is what has happened for so many of us, and I think it's obviously going to happen to the younger generations if something doesn't begin to change: When we had these enlightenment experiences, when we experienced the nondual state, we concluded, "Oh, the ultimate truth is beyond differences, is beyond good and evil." That's what our most profound spiritual experiences reveal to us. But because they occur in the context of a culture that is having a lot of difficulty making value distinctions anyway, these experiences end up lacking any kind of moral weight and, therefore, lack the power to create a real moral framework for our lives.

WILBER: They end up reinforcing the postmodern cultural narcissism that I call "boomeritis"—bizarrely.

COHEN: That's the whole point. In the past, when these experiences were being pursued in a premodern, traditional context, there was already a very strong moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual framework in place that told us how to interpret them. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, because we have not created new maps, it's confusing as to what the moral, ethical, and philosophical context for the highest spiritual experiences actually is. Because of this, as you said yourself, enlightenment experiences inadvertently reinforce the plague of boomeritis.
WILBER: Yes. Rampant relativism, rampant pluralism, inability to make choices—all of that gets reinforced for all the wrong reasons, and it appears to have the sanction of Buddha dharma!

COHEN: I think this is one of the reasons why a lot of people are very confused about higher-state experiences.

WILBER: Yes, I agree. And I agree very strongly with what you said earlier, that, to put it crudely, there's satori [awakening] and there's how you interpret satori, or your experiences. What interpretive context do you have to hold this experience? Because after all, you might feel that you're one with everything, and that's fine—in a very profound sense that's your always-given condition, and a satori, a kensho, an awakening is a recognition of that ever-present state—but once you recognize that, how do you carry it? Charles Manson said, "If all is one, nothing is wrong." Now, is that how we are going to carry our satori?

COHEN: Some teachers do say that kind of thing.

WILBER: That's exactly the problem. So the general approach that I take, and that you and I share a similar view on, is that we want realization plus an integral interpretation of it. Almost every time you and I talk, we come back to this—the extraordinary importance of the context, the interpretation, that you frame these experiences in. Because as rare and precious as the experiences are, if you don't have an adequate unfolding of them, they can lead to just as much harm as they can good on many occasions.

COHEN: Yes. So we have to recognize that spiritual experience alone is not enough. Because the context for personal experience for our generation is narcissism, a personal psychological context in which there simply is no moral imperative. And most of the people who are teaching this stuff are products of our own generation and so are stuck in this position themselves. Or, if they are Easterners, they usually represent a premodern cultural context with a moral worldview that has almost nothing to do with the postmodern, twenty-first-century world we're living in.

WILBER: And they're often a little naive—they assume we're going to share the same moral background and then they're shocked when things fall apart.

A BROKEN MORAL COMPASS

WILBER: Another important thing to talk about is: What does moral judgment mean, especially in this postmodern era—the era of what I call "aperspectival madness," of rampant pluralism and relativism, where nothing can be said to be better or worse than anything else. The traditions are pretty straightforward. There are three pillars of spiritual growth and development, and they're sila, dhyana, and prajna. Sila is moral foundation, ethical foundation, that's number one; then dhyana, meditation; and then prajna, awakening or realization. It's the calamity you've discussed, the calamity of our generation, that we've come to think that you're morally good if you don't make judgments. But that's exactly wrong. You're morally good if you make the right kind of judgments. And you have to learn how to make wise judgments in order to make moral decisions. But what we do, because we understandably don't want to marginalize anyone or unfairly judge, is to say, therefore, don't judge at all. And so we stand back without a moral compass, no judgments, no discriminating wisdom, and basically the whole show goes to hell because of that. So in the midst of saying that nothing is better or worse than anything else, even on a relative plane, if you then have an experience of satori or kensho or oneness, it reinforces your broken moral compass. And this broken moral compass, combined with your realization, is what you call spirituality.

COHEN: It's a profound point.

WILBER: Oh, it's a nightmare.
COHEN: This is a point I’ve been trying to make for years—that satori can be an anti-evolutionary event unless it takes place in an appropriate ethical, moral, and philosophical context. It can literally retard or stunt development and growth.

WILBER: Yes, it tends to—unless it’s part of an ongoing transformative practice, and that means an integral practice. Because without a decent interpretation, context, or understanding, it sort of cements you at wherever you are.

COHEN: Precisely.

WILBER: So you have to be very careful about that. And we have a lot of semi-enlightened schmucks running around because they got sealed in their schmuckiness when they got this sense of oneness. A great deal of certainty comes with that experience, a kind of unshakable foundation—all of which is just great! It’s an opening to understanding this ever-present, literally absolute condition. But there’s a relative condition as well, and human beings are a mixture of both radical emptiness and relative form. And the traditions are really clear that you have absolute truth and you have relative truth and you have to honor both of those.

COHEN: Right.

WILBER: And so absolute truth is beyond good and evil, but relative truth has good and evil. And in the relative world, you’re supposed to choose good and avoid evil—Buddha was very clear on that one. In the absolute world, you transcend both of them. Now, what we’ve done is to confuse the two, and we think that because the absolute is beyond good and evil, therefore in the relative world, we should make no judgments at all. And that is already to capitulate to an immoral action in the relative world. You’re already reinforcing immoral action when you do that.

COHEN: That’s true. And that’s occurring in a consciousness where the degree of narcissism—self-obsession and self-concern—is probably unprecedented in human history.

WILBER: The narcissism is the scary part. It might be the worst part because as we’ve discussed before, when people say, “You shall make no judgments whatsoever,” what it really means is, “Nobody’s allowed to judge my egoic self-contracted activities as being bad or wrong or inadequate.” And so that gives the ego the ultimate safe haven against spiritual realization.

COHEN: Right. And that extreme narcissism is too often the only compass by which we are actually making judgments.

WILBER: Yes. Because “what’s true is what’s true for me.” And that’s unchallengeable.

COHEN: It’s the last stand of the narcissist.

WILBER: We can take a simple scheme of human moral development from the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg found through very extensive research that human beings go through three broad stages of moral development or moral evolutionary unfolding. And they’re called preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, or egocentric, ethnocentric, and worldcentric. For example, an infant doesn’t have the capacity to make moral decisions in any articulate way—so it’s egocentric. “What’s right is what’s right for me, and to hell with everybody else.” That’s the classic narcissistic stance. Then the child grows and enters a peer group, so now “what’s right is what’s right for my group”—that’s ethnocentric. Now, ethnocentric, of course, has become a dirty word, but it’s actually a move up from “what I say is right” to “what my group says is right.” As individuals continue to grow and develop, they move from ethnocentric to worldcentric. They try to judge people regardless of race, color, creed, sex, and so on.
They try to make their moral judgments more evenhandedly, more fairly, and more compassionately. And these stages emerge in an order that can't be reversed and each one is higher than its predecessor. Each one is a wider sphere of care and concern and responsibility.

Now the problem is, as we were saying earlier, that even if you're at a worldcentric stage of development but you're caught up in the postmodern pluralistic misunderstanding that nothing is better or worse than anything else, it leaves you open to egocentric invasion. In other words, if nothing is higher or lower, then anything I do is right. There can be no challenge to what I'm doing. That leaves us without any traction whatsoever. That is a broken moral compass in the worst possible sense, and that's kind of what we have in this cultural creative, rampant pluralistic, rampant relativistic orientation. And it's even inherently self-contradictory, because when people apply this pluralism, which claims there are no hierarchies, they're making a hierarchical judgment—they're claiming that their judgment is better than others'. So that's the sort of rampant self-deception that is called morality in our culture.

COHEN: It's called higher morality!

WILBER: It is called higher morality. So what we're trying to do, in a sense, is to say, "Yes, lower forms of judgments, judging people based on ethnocentric criteria—is wrong. We should strive for this higher, postconventional, or worldcentric stage of development." That lends itself to an evolutionary, integral moral understanding. And that, I think you and I would agree, is the sila, the moral foundation, upon which both meditation and realization rest.

COHEN: Right.

WILBER: And without that moral foundation, you're not going to get true meditation and true awakening. You could have a quick satori, but it's going to degenerate into an egocentric or narcissistic self-promotional expressive truth. That's the absolute catastrophe that passes for spirituality in so much of our present age, which is just what we've been saying—an experience of the absolute can reinforce your narcissistic inclinations if you don't have this moral context in which to hold it.

*Characterized by its "strange mixture of high intelligence and self-absorbed narcissism," boomeritis is Wilber's term for the cultural and psychological disease typified by the baby-boom generation. As the first generation to implement a multicultural, egalitarian worldview, the boomers created a postmodern context in which the beliefs and freedoms of the individual were given utmost respect, often indiscriminately—making it a welcome home for egotism and self-indulgence.

THE BIG PICTURE

COHEN: In our culture of narcissism, the majority of the individual's attention is focused on the emotional or feeling state of the egoic self-sense. And when that's the case, it's almost impossible to authentically relate to the idea of a larger moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual context that exists outside of the individual's subjective field of experience. If someone is intellectually sophisticated or cognitively developed, they have the capacity to recognize these larger truths, but because of where they are developmentally, they will probably find it difficult to have a direct emotional connection to them. And without the emotional connection, these truths won't really carry much moral weight. I've found out the hard way that unless a truth—whether it's absolute or relative—has a moral weight to it, its
power to actually evoke any permanent transformation or evolutionary
development is going to be severely limited.

WILBER: I’m with you all the way.

COHEN: We have to be emotionally connected to truth, whether it is absolute or relative truth. And the lack of this kind of development is like an illness in our generation—I can see it in many of my own students. It is this emotional capacity that I’m trying to help them to develop. Maybe they had a deep experience or recognition of truth on an absolute level, but because of a big investment in narcissism, emotionally they’re not really connected to it. And I’ve found that until they are, an individual is never going to change in the most important way.

WILBER: How do you handle that in students?

COHEN: Oh my God!

WILBER: Sorry to bring up such a thrilling, fun topic for you, but how do you handle this reluctance; how do you handle this lack of connection?

COHEN: Well, through confronting the individual with the BIG picture. And trying to get them to face their own refusal to take responsibility for the larger truth that they have recognized for themselves—which, when acknowledged, becomes the moral context for the spiritual experience.

You see, the big picture that I’m talking about is the evolutionary context, which I am convinced is the most important factor in awakening to a new moral framework for our own time. When we discover this evolutionary context and recognize what a big part our individual and collective transformation could potentially play in the larger scheme of things, a higher conscience awakens in our own consciousness. And if we have the courage and audacity to face this larger picture, suddenly what we’re doing and why we’re doing it has big moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual implications. Now there’s a very real and ultimately demanding context for our own presence here. The choices we make and our reasons for making them suddenly take on incredible significance, and not just for ourselves.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO KARMA?

COHEN: You know, times sure have changed. In the old days, in the premodern era, the context for the search for enlightenment was the understanding that our own presence and participation in the world system, however big or small that looked, was part of a karmic scheme.

WILBER: Yes. That seems to have somehow evaporated!

COHEN: It really has. In premodern times there was a healthy fear of immorality or sin. In the East that meant bad karma and having to suffer through a terrible rebirth, and in the West that meant going to hell. The karmic context was the Eastern version of, “If you’re a good girl or boy, you go to heaven; if you’re a bad girl or boy, you go to hell.” But in our postmodern context, we’ve outgrown the traditional narratives, and because we have yet to invent new ones, we lack such a moral imperative. We’re not afraid of going to hell, and we’re not concerned about the unwholesome karmic consequences of our own present choices.

WILBER: Right. It used to be hard to get rid of karma. Now all you have to do is be born a boomer. We don’t have karma—we don’t believe in it.

COHEN: If only it were that easy! But the fact is, once someone has seen the big picture for themselves, and acknowledged it, there is a natural obligation to make the effort to live at a higher level, to manifest, at least to some degree, what one has seen. And if one refuses to make that effort, in light of one’s own realization—if one insists, for whatever egoic reasons, on avoiding the implications of the experience of one’s own higher potential—one does begin to create an enormous amount of karma. Karma, in the way
I understand it, is the accumulated emotional and psychological weight of fear, doubt, inertia, and self-concern, which keeps us endlessly stuck in the mud of delusion and semiconsciousness. You see, there's an evolutionary or moral imperative connected to spiritual realization. It's not a free ride. But when we find the courage to begin to embrace the totality of our own karmic predicament, real evolution occurs in real time. And even more importantly, when we make the effort to see our individual karmic predicament in light of the big picture, the evolutionary context, we begin to create a moral fabric for postmodern spiritual development.

WILBER: Well, yes. But if people will listen.

AN EVOLUTIONARY OBLIGATION

COHEN: As we were saying earlier, one can have developed a cognitive capacity to appreciate a truly integral perspective and intellectually recognize the need for an evolutionary moral context but emotionally still not have moved beyond the postmodern pluralistic, narcissistic stance. And I personally think that this is what a lot of thinkers at the cutting edge, including people who are enthusiastic about your own work, really need to get. When one authentically awakens to the evolutionary context, one discovers a sense of urgency. Often, when you and I speak together, underneath your clarity I feel this kind of urgency coming through you—a passion that just screams: We've got to wake up!

WILBER: Yes.

COHEN: This urgency is an emotionally felt one. It creates a kind of imperative, almost like a "should," God forbid!

WILBER: Well, if you have a moral compass, you're allowed to have a should; that's the thing. And you're allowed to have it in a conscious way. Even the pluralists have a should; they just don't admit it.

COHEN: Well, one "should" that emerges when we awaken to the evolutionary context is the moral imperative of development itself. In other words, the recognition that our own evolution as an awakening human is a moral obligation rather than a luxury. And that obligation is to use our God-given power of personal choice to consistently catalyze ongoing transformation, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the evolution of consciousness itself.

WILBER: Yes, absolutely. And you said that people who are using my work need to understand that as well, and I totally agree. I think you and I would agree that people are misusing my work if they don't get the sense of moral and evolutionary developmental unfolding.

COHEN: Definitely.

WILBER: And as you were saying, a lot of people cognitively get the worldcentric integral view, but because they have come from this sort of pluralistic mushy boomer background, their cognitive understanding is really infected with egocentric remnants. So they're not living up to their own cognitive understanding. And even as they talk about it, they're really sabotaging the integral view.

COHEN: Or their potential to manifest it.

WILBER: Exactly. And that's become a real problem because we have a lot of people talking about this, but they're not really acting on it. Their moral center is not as high as their cognitive center, so there isn't the urgency that you're talking about. There's none of that passion coming out of them. They're actually afraid of passion because passion for a view means you're making a judgment that one thing is better than another. And of course the "sensitive self" says, "Oh, no. I can't make a judgment." So that basically jams the entire process of their own growth and development because you
can't get passionate unless you can believe in a certain direction—

COHEN: And in its rightness.

WILBER: And this is where people also get confused. In the relative world, you're making these judgments and they're always judgments of increasing holism or wholeness. So the reason worldcentric is better, is more right than ethnocentric, is that it's bigger, it's more encompassing, it includes more—it's bigger care, it's bigger consciousness, it's bigger compassion. Ethnocentric is better than egocentric for the same reason. So there's a gradient of better, of more right, in the manifest world, and that is what you have to engage passionately. But you can do that, as you well know, in the context of the vast emptiness or vast impartiality in which all of this arises moment to moment. So you're holding both the nondual one taste of equality where everything that arises is a perfect manifestation of the great perfection and the fact that among those things that arise, some are better than others. So therefore you get passionately involved in that directionality but as a manifestation of the absolute in the world of form.

COHEN: Which is real nonduality.

WILBER: Absolutely. All of that gets jammed when your moral compass is broken because you just sort of sit there spinning, going nowhere, and you think that that's one taste, you think that's saha/ or equality consciousness. But actually, it's just a meltdown. It's a complete paralysis of action in the relative world where you're supposed to be unfolding this higher and deeper understanding as a duty and dharma of your realization.