

Integral Insights on the Path of Centering Prayer

by Bill Epperly PhD / Originally published in Spirit Journal September 2016

Ken Wilber's model of the spiritual path invites us to 1) "wake up," or move toward non-duality, 2) "grow up," or move towards psychological maturity, and 3) "show up" as a transformed person in the world.

I've been reading and learning from Thomas Keating's work since the late 1980's. I was very interested in contemplative prayer even back then, and remember being impressed by transcripts of some of his talks that I read. It must have been around the same time that I discovered the work of one of his longtime friends and collaborators, the American "integral" thinker Ken Wilber. I first learned of Wilber's work while on my way to a five-day Korean Zen retreat in 1989.

So much time has passed since those days that both integral theory and Centering Prayer now feel like old friends. In many ways, I feel that the map of human consciousness that Wilber has created is one of the most helpful guides I've had along my journey. And so, I consider Ken Wilber one of my truly great teachers. By "great," I mean that he's had a profound influence, and one that's stood the test of time.

I was graced to attend a 10-day Centering Prayer retreat in May of 2000, and my companion at the dinner table the first night of that retreat was Fr. Thomas Keating, another of my great teachers. I remember noticing, as we sat down to eat, that he'd taken two chicken thighs for dinner (I was scrutinizing everything that this Trappist monk did, trying to learn what made him tick), but mostly I remember our conversation about Wilber's work and its connection to monastic life. Even back then, I was very interested in the idea of making spiritual practice so integral to life that all of one's life might be practice, lived in communion with God. Talking with Fr. Thomas, I learned that he felt this was also the aim of monastic life.

Wilber's integral map of consciousness describes the path to Divine Union as it's experienced in Centering Prayer. This is what Wilber calls the path of "Waking Up" to constant nondual awareness. There's an interrelated path Wilber calls "Growing Up." If Waking Up has to do with increasing your awareness, Growing Up is about developing a more complex, mature understanding of the world. And while Waking Up is well described in the religious literature, the path of Growing Up, which was developed by 20th century psychologists, is still not widely known within religious circles. In Wilber's view, we need to Wake Up and Grow Up so that we can fully "Show Up" in the world as transformative agents of grace.