

# Spiritual Growth and the Evolution of Consciousness: Complexity, Evolution, and the Farther Reaches of Human Nature

*Allan Combs*

University of North Carolina at Asheville,  
Saybrook Institute, San Francisco, USA

*Stanley Krippner*

Saybrook Institute  
San Francisco, USA

The question of whether evolutionary theories provide a useful approach to investigating the highest potentials of human consciousness and spiritual growth is addressed. Finding one-dimensional models overly simplistic, we have proposed a three-level model in which "states of mind" (level 1), "states of consciousness" (level 2), and "structures of consciousness" (level 3) share a hierarchical relationship. States of consciousness (waking states, dream states, etc.) contextualize various states of mind (e.g., sadness, joy, anticipation) and structures of consciousness (mythical, magical, etc.) contextualize states of consciousness. Our model draws upon the "grand evolutionary synthesis," a phrase used in some approaches to systems inquiry and complexity theory, and utilizes chaos theory terminology as well, rather than other evolutionary concepts (e.g., biological evolution or historical evolution).

THERE IS a romance to evolutionary thinking. The power, simplicity, and scope of Darwin's original theory has been a source of fascination for philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and economists alike. Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologists such as England's George Romanes, as well as Mark Baldwin and G. Stanley Hall in the United States, turned to evolutionary explanations of human behavior, especially of the psychological development of children, seeing the latter as a recapitulation of the evolution of the species (Richards, 1987). The famous phrase "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" suggested that individual development, psychological as well as biological, follows the track of species evolution.

Such notions fell out of favor during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were thought to be overly simplistic, though perhaps the reasons for their decline also include the rise of positivism and the increasing specialization of academic disciplines after the Second World War (Gunter, 1983). Yet there is some truth to the notion that

psychological development has something in common with biological evolution. As we will see in this paper, however, the similarity is one of principle, not of particulars. It is that both individual psychological development and species evolution involve similar tendencies toward increasing complexity and self-organization.

These issues can be confusing because the term *evolution* does not have a single meaning but is used in a variety of different ways. Moreover, any discussion of growth and evolution involves both a theory of growth and a theory of evolution. At this point let us pause briefly and consider exactly what is meant by evolution, then we will return to the question of its relationship to growth.

## • Evolution •

THE TERM *evolution* is commonly taken in at least three more or less distinct ways (Combs, 1996a), the first of which we will call *biological evolution*. It refers to the change and diversification of plant and animal species over significant

periods of time. The principles by which it operates have been the subject of intense discussion among biologists since the time of Darwin. By and large, contemporary biological evolutionary theory emphasizes the study of how genetic information of populations changes over time. Some writers (e.g., Ornstein, 1991) have discussed the evolution of consciousness from this perspective.

The second is an informal idea of *historical evolution* that usually carries an implicit suggestion of some kind of growth, maturation, or improvement. We speak offhandedly of the evolution of a civilization, or the evolution of an idea. Likewise, it is not uncommon to talk of psychological change or growth, say, in terms of one's accumulated life experience, as a kind of "personal evolution." In similar fashion, spiritual practices such as those found in Zen or yogic training are said to advance one's "spiritual evolution."

We will call the third, the *grand evolutionary synthesis*, a phrase originally suggested by the systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo (1987, 1996). This is a complex notion that derives from systems inquiry and complexity theory. It attempts to account for the self-organizing properties of complex systems. Its range is enormous, spanning the formation of matter in the early universe to the creation of the first molecules of life, and on upward to include increasingly complex hierarchical systems all the way through natural ecologies and human societies. This view tends to emphasize the intrinsic tendency of complex systems to self-organize toward increasing levels of complexity, adaptability, and creativity (e.g., Goerner, 1994).

### States of Consciousness

EFFORTS HAVE been made to bring together under a single conceptual roof the Darwinian notions at the root of biological evolution and the self-organizing systems ideas at the heart of the grand synthesis. Significant among these is Brian Goodwin's (1994) work described in his book *How the Leopard Got its Spots*. Perhaps most important from our perspective is his demonstration that processes in nature are pulled forward toward specific forms by their own internal dynamics. Moreover, there are limited numbers of such forms. This is seen, for instance, in the fact that

of more than 250,000 species of higher plants only three basic distributions of leaves around the stems are actually found. Moreover, a single form, the spiral, accounts for 80% of all these cases. Likewise, the bone structures of hands, paws, and fins have similar features in all vertebrate animals. Goodwin makes a compelling case that these likenesses are not due simply to common genetic histories, but to the presence of basic patterns, or attractors, in the growth processes which produce them. Only certain viable forms are available. From this view, the role of genetics is no more than to steer development into the right region of an extended morphological space, as it were, and natural self-organizing mechanisms then take over. It would seem that "there is an inherent rationality to life that makes it intelligible at a much deeper level than functional utility and historical accident" (Goodwin, 1994, p. 116). Here, functional utility and historical accident refer to the two well-worn hinges of Darwinian evolution.

Goodwin's ideas demonstrate that nature does not take on indefinitely large variations in form, but rather produces a limited number of discrete patterns. Now let us apply this insight to a topic that will be of importance as we continue, *states of consciousness*. States of consciousness can be understood as unique configurations of psychological functions such as thought, memory, emotion, body image, perception, and so on (Combs, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Combs & Krippner, 1998; Krippner, 1972). This, in fact, was Charles Tart's (1975) original formulation of the notion of states of consciousness. Here, however, we have added a friendly amendment to Tart's model, to the effect that these functions are in reality *processes* which interact in a mutually supportive fashion, so that each state of consciousness is a whole, self-organizing, event. This event is creative and organic, more like an ecology than a machine. It can be represented as a complex chaotic attractor in that it exhibits the requisite formal properties of being both unpredictable yet globally stable, and at the same time never exactly repeating itself.

Consistent with this line of thought, it is perhaps not surprising Tart observed that states of consciousness tend to be discrete rather than continuous. What we have from Goodwin is a further explanation of why such states of

consciousness do not take on indefinite variety. We might imagine a kind of *periodic table of consciousness*, representing a large but finite array of potential states. Chemically altering the excitable milieu of the brain with drugs, or employing technologies of consciousness such as meditation, or even listening to music or dancing, can evidently move us about in this table from one location, or state of consciousness, to another. With these ideas in mind, let us return to the question of whether the development of higher human capacities mirrors evolution.

### ✿ Spiritual Growth and Evolution ✿

IT IS no surprise that the history of ideas concerning evolution and consciousness is rife with confluences of the above notions. For example, Henri Bergson and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin considered the inner evolution of consciousness to be the counterpart if not a direct function of the evolution of complexity in the nervous system, which they believed to be the outcome of biological evolution (e.g., Bergson, 1907/1983; Teilhard de Chardin, 1959/1961). Their thinking leaned heavily on a philosophical predisposition to see evolution as a general principle of growth or ascendance—what we have termed *historical evolution*—common to many thinkers of their day. It is an idea rejected by most modern evolutionary biologists.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and yogi, Sri Aurobindo (1970), likewise saw in evolution a guiding principle for spiritual advancement. His conception of evolution also was of the historical variety. At bottom, his writings are founded almost entirely on classical Hindu notions of the progress of the spirit toward a progressive identification with the subtle Vedantic levels of being (or *vehicles*), a fact of which he makes no secret. How did Sri Aurobindo come to frame these ideas in the context of evolution? It is probable he recognized in traditional Indian thought something that looked very much like evolution as ascendance (e.g., Guenther, 1995). During his years as a student in England he may have read Hegel, finding there the concept of the Spirit unfolding through human history. His own works make it clear that he was familiar with Darwin's writings. All this in the background, it was natural

to think of individual development, particularly of the advanced yogic variety, as a kind of evolutionary pathfinding for the future development of humankind as a whole.

Questions of the growth or advancement of consciousness are today not only the concern of philosophers and yogis, but also of psychologists, and particularly of transpersonal psychologists. Although the origins of contemporary transpersonal psychology can be traced in the writings of William James and Carl Jung, theorist Ken Wilber has been among its best known modern legitimizers. He is notable in the present context because he approaches the study of consciousness from an evolutionary perspective. Like Sri Aurobindo, Wilber projects the evolution of consciousness as following a predetermined path upward toward identification with increasingly subtle levels of being (e.g., Wilber, 1979, 1980). It is a movement that maps a wide historical progression of human consciousness, while at the same time it posits a parallel development of individual consciousness from birth toward whatever level of development a lifetime achieves. For the person, thus, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

Like Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin before him, Wilber is very much concerned with the rise of complexity as a concomitant of growth. This is especially true in his recent work *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* which presents a massive resynthesis of his previous thought in the context of the historical evolution of complexity (Wilber, 1995, 1996). Unlike his predecessors, however, Wilber emphasizes psychological rather than biological complexity, plotting the evolutionary progression of consciousness beside Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental stages and Lawrence Kohlberg's levels of increasing moral sophistication (Wilber, 1980, 1981). (Incidentally, Wilber's notion of evolution has not gone uncriticized. Anthropologists have contended that his views are essentially Victorian, depicting primary cultures as simple and childlike, and moreover, that his evolutionary model sets the masculine value of solitary achievement above the feminine value of community; e.g., Stanford, 1982; Winkelman, 1990; cf. Rothberg & Kelly, 1998, for a recent account of criticisms of Wilber, and his replies.)

Since Wilber's views comprise an important part of the text of contemporary transpersonal psychology it is appropriate here to examine them more critically. Wilber's (1981) basic theory views consciousness as progressing through a series of stages essentially similar to Gebser's historical structures of consciousness (Gebser, 1949/1986). He refers to these as the *archaic-uroboric*, *magictyphonic*, *mythic-membership*, and *mental-egoic* stages, in each instance hyphenating his own term behind that of Gebser's original. Continuing up from the mental-egoic stage, however, Wilber leaves the Gebserian structures, proposing that growth progresses by a series of identifications with the inner planes of being, apparently adopted essentially from Vedanta, as seen in Table 1. This table shows Wilber's entire sequence of development from the four Gebserian stages, mentioned above, through the three Vedantic stages—four if Realization of the Self is counted as a stage. Taken together they form a unified evolutionary sequence. Let us note here that, recalling the three types of evolution we suggest above, Wilber's pivotal idea of a predetermined spiritual ascension puts his work in the category of *historical evolution*.

Table 1

Comparison of the Constructs from Vedanta,  
Ken Wilber, and Jean Gebser

| Vedanta<br>(sheaths/koshas) | Wilber<br>(epochs/stages)  | Wilber<br>(identities)     | Gebser<br>(structures)       |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| (Self, Atman) <sup>1</sup>  | (Self, Atman) <sup>1</sup> |                            | Origin/Integral <sup>1</sup> |
| Anandamaya                  | Causal                     | Formless Self-Realization  |                              |
| Vijnanamaya                 | Subtle<br>Psychic          | Overmind<br>Astral-Psychic |                              |
| Manomaya                    | Egoic                      | Mental-Egoic               | Mental                       |
|                             | Membership                 | Verbal Self-Membership     | Mythic                       |
| Pranamaya                   | Typhonic                   | Body Ego                   | Magic                        |
| Annamaya                    | Uroboric                   | Nature                     | Archaic                      |

<sup>1</sup>This is technically not a sheath, structure, or epic at all, but the original Source which they are said to shroud.

Now we come to the first of several difficulties the present writers find with Wilber's theory. To begin with, Gebser's structures of consciousness are one thing, essentially amounting to broad noetic *orders*, or modes, of experience by which humankind has understood its lifeworlds (Feuerstein, 1987/1995). Vedantic planes of being are something different, basically metaphysical levels of reality to which one may aspire experientially through meditation, yoga, and the like. To line them up on a continuum is to make a *type error*, or "category error" as it is sometimes called. Even if we view the Vedantic planes simply as experiential states and not metaphysical at all, as one of the authors suggests elsewhere (Combs, 1996a), this still does not make them full blown *structures* of consciousness.

A second difficulty with Wilber's model, and a serious one, is that he has individuals "jump" stages of development. For instance, certain paleolithic shamans are said to have entered trance states that carried them directly into the lower subtle realms where subtle energies could be manipulated to heal others. Wilber (1981) speaks very highly of these individuals:

And we can only stand in deepest awe and admiration for those isolated souls, perched on the mountaintops far away from their fellows, who were quiet enough in their own hearts to hear the call of the Beyond. (p. 70)

This is an inspiring but unlikely scenario, as shamans are very much involved in their communities and are not hermits (Heinze, 1991, p. 2; Krippner & Welch, 1992, pp. 27-29). Returning to Wilber, though, a few individuals of the mythic period, much later in history, are said to have reached the higher subtle realms where experience is characterized by a devotional sense first felt in the worship of the Goddess. Finally, during the early ascent of the mental structure, rare individuals are said to have achieved dramatic leaps into the causal realm, and even beyond to the original source of Being. The latter included spiritual masters such as Christ, the Buddha, and Lao Tzu.

As intriguing as all this is, it runs directly counter to two of the most fundamental tenets of any stage theory of psychological development. These are, first, that each person must pass through every stage as he or she progresses and,

second, that no stage can be omitted (e.g., Piaget, 1937/1954; Flavell, 1963; Kohlberg, 1981). Each stage is literally built upon the gains of earlier ones. To skip a stage is like trying to build the upper stories of a house without first constructing the ground floor. A developmental theory based on stages simply cannot claim that individuals, no matter how gifted, can skip or leap to higher levels of development. In this vein, it is worth noting that some wisdom traditions, Zen Buddhism for example, regularly seem to entirely omit certain of Wilber's stages, suggesting that these are not stages at all (e.g., Combs, 1996a; Da Free John, 1978; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). We might note that a "soft" version of Wilber's view could propose that gifted individuals do not actually leap ahead, but somehow achieve a rapid ascent up the evolutionary pathway.

Wilber is certainly right about one thing, people throughout history have experienced remarkable states of mind. Need we be reminded, however, that many states of consciousness can seem profoundly different from our ordinary business-as-usual reality while at the same time remaining curiously near? An inhalation of nitrous oxide (laughing gas), a moment of peace in the forest, a few chords of Beethoven's choral symphony, the scent of tea in the garden at sunrise. These and a thousand other events can trigger the collapse of mundane reality and send us gliding into states of experience we never before imagined. In the clumsy language of chaos science, the minutest alteration in one of the control variables of consciousness can send it through one or more bifurcations, carrying us into different realities in a manner reminiscent of Alice falling down the rabbit hole. In William James' (1981) often quoted words:

Our normal waking consciousness...is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness. (p. 378)

One contemporary theorist who emphasizes the large and fluid range of conscious experience is the neuropsychiatrist Gordon Globus (1986, 1995), who on the basis of a penetrating examination of

both neurological and psychological data argues that the brain is like a holonomic generator, able to produce a very rich variety of distinct experiences. He states that "the brain in its unsurpassed complexity generates its own holoplenum of *possibilia*—a virtual holoworld of possible worlds" (1986, p. 378). In other words, "human beings have the capacity to constitute *de novo* perfectly authentic worlds in the absence of input, worlds which have never previously been experienced" (p. 382). According to Globus, our capacity to actualize alternative states of experience is larger than we might have imagined. Indeed, how could we seriously question this? Our own lives speak for this idea with a wealth of evidence. It is not uncommon in a single day for someone to fall to the depths of depression and soar to exquisite emotional heights, being transfixed by a striking work of art or carried off to a world of nostalgia by a forgotten poem found discarded on a bookshelf. Abraham Maslow (1968) spent years studying *peak experiences* which he believed to be the basis of both mysticism and religion. Subsequent research has shown that, indeed, many ordinary people have had these experiences at one time or another during their lives (Greeley & McCready, 1975).

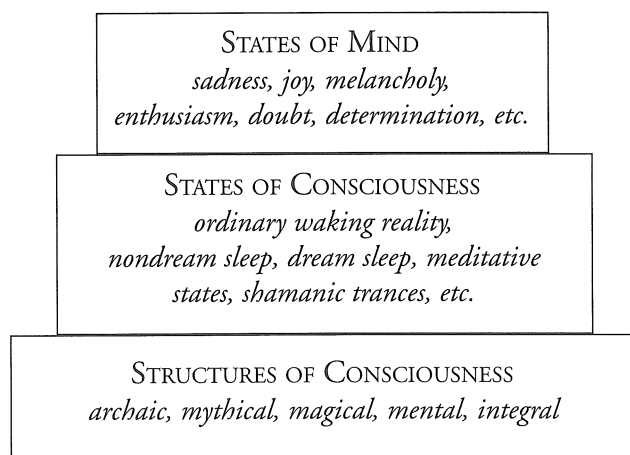
### ✿ A Mixed Verdict ✿

IF THE highest experiential states of past and present sages, to say nothing of ordinary folks, are not the fruit of evolutionary achievement, then from whence do they arise? Before facing this question directly it may be helpful to put some order onto the considerable welter of experiences of which the human mind is capable. To this end we suggest that our experiential lives can be mapped in at least three dimensions, or more precisely on three levels, which can be understood as sharing something like a hierarchical relationship to each other (Combs, 1993, 1996a; Combs & Krippner, 1998). This is shown in Figure 1. The first level is comprised of what we informally call *states of mind*. These include ordinary mental conditions such as sadness, joy, melancholy, fear, enthusiasm, apprehension, anticipation, and the like, including the many moods and dispositions that determine the quality of our everyday experience. Here we use the

phrase *states of mind* in much the same way as it is often used in philosophy.

Figure 1

Schematic representation of states of mind (level 1), states of consciousness (level 2), and structures of consciousness (level 3).



Supporting, or contextualizing, these states of mind are *states of consciousness*. We noted above, in Tart's (1975) tradition, that a state of consciousness is woven of a process fabric of psychological functions such as perception, memory, body sense, and so on. Familiar states include nondream and dream sleep (the latter, in fact, may be the gateway to several states, such as "lucid" dreaming, the "high" dream, etc.), and ordinary waking reality. States that are not of the garden variety include a vast range of meditative states, shamanic "trances," suggestibility states, and countless drug-induced states. Some states of consciousness support a wide variety of states of mind. This is the case, for instance, with ordinary dreams, where one can experience virtually any of the thoughts or feelings familiar to the waking state, as well as experiences rare or even absent in waking life. Other states of consciousness are much more limited, such as certain drug-induced states. The comparative study of the properties of states of consciousness would make an entire science in itself (e.g., Tart, 1985).

The third level of experience concerns *structures of consciousness*, first recognized by Jean Gebser (1949/1986). While states of consciousness contextualize states of mind, structures of consciousness in their turn contextualize states of consciousness. They

provide the noetic frame in which one's lifeworld is interpreted and understood. Gebser believed that human history bears witness to a sequence of these, beginning with the *archaic*, *magical*, and *mythical* structures, and proceeding to the *mental* structure dominant in the world today, and even proceeding on to the presently emerging *integral* structure. Each is an entire way of knowing and experiencing the world. For instance, magical consciousness sees natural events in terms of the operation of magical forces, while the mythical consciousness seeks explanations in grand images and stories that flow from the imagination. Mental consciousness searches for rational understandings, measuring, analyzing, and reasoning. Integral consciousness, on the other hand, allows the free expression of all these structures without being captured by any of them. It presents a fluid perspective of reality in which time escapes from the extended present of the magical experience, the cyclic time of the mythic, and the linear time of mental experience, becoming rather a poetic-like quality or essence. This is felt, for example, in the poetry of Rilke and T. S. Eliot. The self is no longer entrapped in perspectival space, but experience becomes capable of multiple perspectives, as seen in the art of Picasso and Klee, where multiple perspectives appear simultaneously as integral wholes. The richness of Gebser's structures of consciousness is explored in greater detail elsewhere (Combs, 1996a; Feuerstein, 1987/1995; Gebser, 1949/1986).

Gebser believed that these structures form an overlapping progression running through human history. Without rehashing the entire rationale for this sequence, which one of the authors has done elsewhere (Combs, 1996a), we note there is more than a little evidence to support Gebser's basic historical vision. We need to keep in mind, however, that working in Europe during and after WWII, his ideas reflect a somewhat "Eurocentric" perspective. This does not make them invalid, but simply frames them in a context which must be kept in mind when considering them in relation to questions about human nature in general. Indeed, the essential notion of *structures of consciousness* seems both cogent and intellectually appealing. Let us proceed, then, by recalling that these structures,

with the exception of integral consciousness, constitute the first four steps in Wilber's developmental ascension of consciousness.

Now, a pivotal observation which will come as no surprise at this point is that a considerable number of *states* of consciousness can be "launched" from each *structure of consciousness*. Our contention, then, is that we are not dealing with a one-dimensional map of human experience at all, but a two-dimensional topology in which the Gebserian *structures* represent something like a rough historical sequence, while the Vedantic levels represent *states* that to a greater or lesser degree are accessible from them. This point is pivotal, as it cuts between the evolutionary progression of *structures* and the immediate possibilities of *states*. Indeed, the evidence of history and the accumulated wisdom of the perennial traditions both seem to indicate that the Vedanta-like states are accessible to at least some degree from each of the structures, as represented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Evolutionary Stages, Levels of Being,  
and Possible Combinations<sup>1</sup>

| The Sheaths/Koshas<br>(Vedanta)                       |                      |                    |                       |                  |
|---|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Anandamaya<br>(causal)                                | X                    | X                  | X                     | ↑                |
| Vijnanamaya<br>(subtle)                               | X                    | X                  | ↑                     |                  |
| Manomaya<br>(mental)                                  | X                    | ↑                  | ↑                     |                  |
| Pranamaya<br>(pranic)                                 | X                    |                    |                       |                  |
| Evolutionary<br>Stages/Structures:<br>(Wilber-Gebser) | Archaic-<br>Uroboric | Magic-<br>Typhonic | Mythic-<br>Membership | Mental-<br>Egoic |

<sup>1</sup>Each X represents a potential state of consciousness achieved by moving into one of the sheaths as an attractor of consciousness from a grounding in one of the evolutionary structures. The arrows represent maximum ascensions achieved by rare individuals as suggested by Wilber's work. The latter also suggests that certain individuals have achieved unconditional realization starting from the mental-egoic structure.

In this vein, it is worth noting that none of the highest states in Wilber's system, those representing the Vedantic levels of being, have been achieved for extended periods of time by more than a few rare individuals, if indeed anyone has been able to maintain them more than temporarily. That is to say, they have been reached only by those who were able, in Wilber's system, to leap over the intermediate evolutionary stages to the highest levels. A simpler explanation, however, is that each of the dominant historical structures of consciousness holds possibilities which have been fully explored by only a few individuals—some of the shamans, saints, and sages of our past and present.

With all the above in mind, let us again return to our original question of whether spiritual growth follows an evolutionary course. It is now apparent that the answer depends a great deal on what is meant by spiritual growth. If it is simply experiencing or even identifying with the more subtle planes of being, then the answer is *no*. Contrary to Sri Aurobindo and Wilber, and in no way diminishing the remarkable elevation of some of these experiences, they are simply not evolutionary in and of themselves. This is true whether they are seen as metaphysical planes of being or solely as states of consciousness.

Indeed, it seems unlikely in this postmodern era that any univocal vision of transpersonal development, or "spiritual growth," can be taken to hold absolute sway. The present discussion, for example, like many others in the field of transpersonal psychology, gives little attention to moral or ethical matters, though Aldous Huxley (1944) pointed out their importance years ago. The reasons for this common omission go beyond the scope of our present objectives. The point is that there may be no single set of coordinates that can be held to define spirituality. This in mind, we nevertheless note that many of the characteristics of advanced spiritual achievement, as seen through Hindu yogic traditions and certain Buddhist ones, seem very similar to those that describe Gebser's integral structure of consciousness (Feuerstein, 1987/1995). These include its clarity, intensity, and creativity, and the fact that the world paradoxically becomes both concrete and at the same time translucent to the pervasive light of the spirit (Combs, 1996a).



Indeed, Gebser himself, after describing an intense episode of integral consciousness to Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, was told by the latter that he had experienced genuine satori (Feuerstein, 1987/1995).

It is quite possible that it is the noetic structure of consciousness itself that makes a spiritual genius, and not depth of penetration into the subtle realms. An individual's experiences, spiritual or otherwise, must be translated through the interpretive structures that he or she has available. We need only look around to see people translating spiritual experiences, and indeed reality as a whole, at virtually all of Gebser's levels. There are people still practicing various forms of magic, believing that they obtain concrete results. Many of the world's religions involve mythical concepts of gods and goddesses. At the same time theologians discourse in mental-rational terms about the nature of God. Only in the *integral* consciousness are all artificial categories thrown aside in favor of the concrete luminous reality of the moment, while still containing within itself all the previous structures. It is in the language of the latter structure of consciousness that the spiritual masters seem to speak most clearly. For example, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Shankara (1947) wrote:

There is a self-existent Reality which is...the witness of the three states of consciousness [waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep], and is distinct from the five bodily coverings [sheaths or subtle planes]. It is aware of the presence or absence of the mind and its functions. It is the Atman.

That Reality sees everything in its own light. No one sees it. It gives intelligence to the mind and the intellect, but no one gives it light.

That Reality pervades the universe, but no one penetrates it. It alone shines. The universe shines with its reflected light. (p. 52)

Is it meaningful to think of Gebser's overlapping historical sequence as evolutionary? Interestingly, Gebser himself objected to this idea, probably because he associated evolution with Darwinian competition and survival of the fittest. He did not consider any structure of consciousness superior to any other. Nor did he see their historical transformations as competitive, but rather as the unfolding or explication of the already inherent

potential of the *Origin*, his term for the Spirit. It is true, however, that each successive structure of consciousness represents an incremental jump in complexity over previous ones. Mental consciousness, with its analytic logic, for instance, approaches the world with greater sophistication than did the mythic structure with its stories, but itself is surpassed by the integral. Moreover, no structure is lost, but each remains nested in dominant newer structures, so that the mythic is not without the magic, and the mental is not without them both. And the integral structure allows the full play of them all.

From the above it would seem that the history of consciousness, as viewed through the model of the Gebserian structures, represents a loose kind of *historical evolution* from relatively simple to increasingly complex patterns. Only in this sense can integral consciousness, inasmuch as it represents a quickened spirituality, be considered evolutionary. Let us be cautious, however, not to conclude from this that those cultures which to their own enrichment continue to celebrate the magic and mythic modes of consciousness have somehow fallen back along the evolutionary wayside. We may at the present know more about the history of the Western mind than that of others, but this does not mean that each culture does not have its own unique history as well. One of the present writers, for example, visited and studied shamans throughout the world, many of whom live in primary cultures (Krippner, 1988; Krippner & Welch, 1992, pp. 31–37). His own experience, as well as that of other researchers, argues that like other practitioners of consciousness, shamans range in individual ability and accomplishment. Moreover, since they often use their skills primarily for the benefit of the community, they present quite a different figure than the contemplative monk of Buddhism, or the meditative yogin. It is easy to mistake their more community oriented activities for a less refined degree of achievement.

### ❖ The Grand Evolutionary Synthesis ❖

WHETHER GEBSER'S sequence of structures of consciousness can be systematically understood in terms of the organizing principles of the *grand evolutionary synthesis* is yet to be



determined. Wilber (1995) has made some progress in this general direction in his most recent work. These principles can, however, be profitably used to understand many of the growth techniques of wisdom traditions (Combs, 1996a). Here, the real connection between growth and evolution is found in principles and not details. These are the principles that govern the growth and elaboration of complex self-organizing systems—systems such as consciousness itself. They are the very principles that undergird the internal processes of the human being right down to the biochemical events that support life and sustain individual cells (e.g., Goerner, 1994; Goodwin, 1994; Kauffman, 1993; Laszlo, 1987).

Such principles can be seen operating, for instance, in Classical or Raja Yoga, as outlined in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* (e.g., Feuerstein, 1979/1989). Other examples could be given, but this type of yoga is relatively well known and accessible (Combs, 1996a). The basic idea is to begin by building up healthy resilient mind and body systems upon which higher order systems can later be constructed. This is undertaken, first, by laying a foundation of "restraints" and "observances" (*yamas* and *niyamas*) which on the surface appear to be moral directives, but essentially represent guidelines for establishing a frame of mind conducive to advanced yogic practice. These are the first two "limbs" of Classical Yoga. The restraints include the practice of nonviolence in thought and action, an attitude of honesty, an absence of possessiveness, and so on. The observances include striving for purity of mind and heart, contentment (but not complacent satisfaction) with one's life, self-study, and surrender to a higher principle. Like similar practices found in early schools of Buddhism such as among the Sthavira, Vaibhasika, and the Yogacara followers, they emphasize the cultivation of an attitude of trust and confidence while at the same time overcoming irritability and conceit. Studying three meditation traditions, including Classical Yoga, Brown (1986) notes that each promotes ethical practices that help set the stage for later work. In his words, these "practices affect a complete psycho-behavioral transformation in order to prepare the beginner for formal meditation at some later point" (p. 226).

The third limb of Classical Yoga is the practice of *asanas*, or postures, including meditative poses. This is directed at cultivating a supple and healthy body, important for the more advanced work. The fourth limb is the practice of breath control or *pranayama*. Prana is associated with the breath, and its practice brings the student into conscious contact with the subtle energies of the body. The last four limbs concern concentration, meditation, and then several levels of *samadhi*, or absorption, leading finally to pure spiritual absorption. Thus, in the entire process of following the path of Classical Yoga the practitioner is led to successively refined levels of practice and accomplishment. Failure to build an adequate foundation, however, can lead to consequences that range from the profound to the absurd. Justin Stone (1977), for instance, notes that stomach problems are common in some Zen monasteries where monks have the habit of sitting for long meditations shortly after eating. Wilber (1986, 1995) has catalogued a variety of pathologies—physical, mental, and emotional—reported by students of traditional disciplines that evidently result from less than adequate basic preparations.

Taken as a whole, the practice of Classical Yoga aims to build a healthy and flexible body which supports a quiet and supple mind. At the same time, practices such as meditation have a slow but continuously abrasive effect on mental agitations, gradually leading to a cleansing of the mental grit that impedes the smooth flow of consciousness (Combs, 1996a). This is the "infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid," to use William Blake's (1953, pp. 128-129) well-worn words.

All this leads the yogic practitioner to ever more subtle realms of awareness—but it is not the contact with these realms alone that is important. Even more it is the cultivation of a balanced and alert mind and body which can retain, or quickly recover, an attitude of "high indifference" (Merrell-Wolf, 1973) in the face of life's involvements.

Practice on ourselves, in the physical and spiritual sense, is always of two kinds. It involves both the pulling-down of everything

that stands in the way of our contact with Divine Being, and building-up of a "form" which...preserves this contact and affirms it in every activity.

—Karlfried Graf Dürckheim  
(1971/1988, p. 25)

IN CONCLUSION, our example of reframing Classical Yoga in terms of the grand evolutionary synthesis illustrates the utility of our three-level model. Here we understand Classical Yoga as leading in the direction of the integral structure of consciousness (Combs, 1996a; Feuerstein, 1974, 1989). Contextualized in that structure are such states of consciousness as sleep, wakefulness, and spiritual absorption, which in turn contextualize such states of mind as joy, sorrow, anticipation, reflection, and inner quietness. In this perspective, human consciousness is seen to self-organize as a complex system toward increasing levels of complexity, adaptability, and creativity, while always retaining nested within its process structure all the potentials of the earlier stages of its own evolution.

### Notes

We thank Paragon House and Floris Books for the use of portions of Combs' book, *The Radiance of Being: Complexity, Chaos, and the Evolution of Consciousness*, as a basis for the present discussion.

Since this paper was accepted for publication, Ken Wilber has addressed some of the issues it raises in a web-based discussion that can be found at: <http://goertzel.org/dynapsyc/dynacon.html>

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*The best way to study human nature  
is when nobody else is present.*

—Tom Masson

**ducks!**

by dave thorne ♡

