

Ken Wilber on Meditation: A Baffling Babbling of Unending Nonsense

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“People think that being awakened means you understand everything, but it really means the opposite. It means you don't understand anything. It is, all of it, a total Mystery, a baffling babbling of unending nonsense.” *One Taste* (page 142)

Abstract.

Ken Wilber (KW) regularly claims that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness. However, as this essay argues, his key claims are unsubstantiated.

Here are the nine Concerns to be discussed in this critique:

1. KW asserts that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness, yet he typically provides no supporting evidence
2. KW suggests that 20 to 25 years of meditation can yield full enlightenment, yet he admits that he has not achieved this state nor met anyone who has
3. KW states that only meditation has been demonstrated to accelerate the development of human consciousness, yet he also recommends other spiritual practices
4. KW praises the research of Skip Alexander and his colleagues, yet he also acknowledges that their studies are subject to “valid criticisms”
5. KW claims that meditators can advance two levels in only three or four years, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms”
6. KW reports that 38% of meditators advanced to the highest levels on Jane Loevinger’s scale of ego development, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms”
7. KW advocates the use of meditation and community verification to establish spiritual truths, yet this recommendation is not “good science”
8. KW asserts that even skeptics acknowledge that “the Maharishi effect” is authentic, yet skeptics have repeatedly rejected “the Maharishi effect”
9. KW is aware that meditation can have “negative effects on practioners,” yet he provides only a very few warnings of the potential hazards

Purpose and Methodology.

The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the quality and integrity of KW’s advocacy of meditation, not to evaluate the efficacy of meditation.

The methodology employed in this essay is to explore each Concern by:

- first listing quotations from KW’s books and audio program; thirty-one new KW quotations are indicated by an asterisk at the end of the parenthetical citation. I have included KW quotes to avoid the accusation that I am among the alleged 85% of critics who have “criticized [KW] for things [KW] never actually said. In other words, 85% of

the reviews misrepresented [KW's] work.” (Unidentified interviewer in “On Critics...”)

- then offering my critical evaluation.

Sources cited in this essay are listed in the References section.

Concern 1. KW asserts that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness, yet he typically provides no supporting evidence. In each of the following quotations, KW asserts that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness:

- “One of the main conclusions is that meditation is not primarily a way to dig back into, or uncover, prerational impulses, but rather a way to carry development or evolution forward into transrational and superconscious states.” (Introduction to *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber: Volume Three**)
- “The whole point of authentic contemplation is simply to accelerate the growth, development, or evolution from the subconscious to the self-conscious to the superconscious dimensions of your own Being. *We now have abundant evidence that meditation does not alter or change the basic stages of the development of consciousness, but it does remarkably accelerate that development.* Meditation speeds up evolution. It accelerates the remembering and the re-discovery of the Spirit that you eternally are. Meditation quickens the rate that acorns grow into oaks, that humans grow into God.” (*One Taste*, page 263, emphasis in original)
- “For spiritual development, I have always been a strong advocate of meditation, in any of its numerous forms. Thus, the second major point I wanted to get across in *One Taste* is the importance of meditation or contemplation as part of an integral practice. Fortunately, by far the most common feedback I received about *One Taste* was: ‘I started to meditate,’ or ‘After reading the book I went on an intensive meditation retreat,’ or ‘I vowed to strengthen my meditation practice.’ That is the single effect I hoped the book would have. Truly, adopting a new holistic philosophy, believing in Gaia, or even thinking in integral terms--however important those might be, they are the least important when it comes to spiritual transformation. Finding out *who* believes in all those things: There is the doorway to God.” (*A Theory of Everything*, page 137, emphasis in original)
- “[M]editation (or spiritual practice in general) can accelerate--but not alter the form or sequence--of this developmental unfolding.” (*The Eye of the Spirit*, page 219)
- “*Meditation can profoundly accelerate the unfolding of a given line of development, but it does not significantly alter the sequence or the form of the basic stages in that developmental line.* Streams flow faster, but through the same waves.” (*The Eye of the Spirit*, page 221, emphasis in the original)
- “[M]editation *accelerates but does not alter the sequence or form of these various lines.*” (*The Eye of the Spirit*, page 223, emphasis in the original)
- “The self finds its own higher and deeper engagements accelerated by the meditative stance, which is most profoundly nothing but an opening to one’s own deepest possibilities.” (*The Eye of the Spirit*, page 223)
- “[M]editation moves you to the highest levels of that spectrum [of consciousness].” (“Jonathan” in *Boomeritis*, page 114*)
- “[M]ost of them [the Integral Center crowd] meditate, so they can speed up this evolution in their own cases.” (“Kim” in *Boomeritis*, page 293)

- “Well, the time-honored spiritual exercise is of course meditation, and it is still our number-one recommendation. Moreover, empirical research has consistently demonstrated *that meditation can induce vertical transformation in adults*--a shift upward of two or three levels of consciousness.... So yes, we recommend meditation or contemplation as a key spiritual exercise.” (“Carla Fuentes” in *Boomeritis*, page 415, emphasis in original)
- “And so as Aurobindo said and as a lot of laboratory research has shown, what meditation does--it doesn’t skip stages because you can’t skip real stages--but it accelerates movement through those stages. (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 4, Track 4, 6:38*)
- “[M]editation is] very, very powerful in terms of moving people vertically in terms of growth or development or evolution.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 4:01*)
- “[M]editation has to be counted as one of the most moral imperatives for human beings to do. It’s the only thing that’s been demonstrated to move them into higher moral stages. Not as a belief, but as an actual concrete realization.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 4:42)

KW cites no research to support of any of these 13 assertions.

Concern 2. KW suggests that 20 to 25 years of meditation can yield full enlightenment, yet he admits that he has not achieved this state nor met anyone who has. In his recorded *Kosmic Consciousness* audio program, KW repeatedly claims that people who contentiously meditate for 20 to 25 years (or a lifetime) can achieve “the equivalent of enlightenment in this lifetime...a permanent, ever-present, nondual awareness:”

- “I suspect that in several significant developmental lines, including the developmental line of cognition, and the developmental line of self, and the developmental line of moral development, that it is conceivable you could get the equivalent of enlightenment in this lifetime. [...] Let’s just use the same simple 7-stage model that we have. That if you start at Stage 4 and you meditate contentiously for 20 or more years, you could conceivably end up more or less at Stage 7 which is, again, not the highest in all time, but the highest for this era. And that would be the equivalent of a permanent, ever-present, nondual awareness.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 7:13*)
- “But if you have a precious human body, and a favorable circumstance [that is conducive to growth], and all those factors sort of fall into place, it’s quite conceivable that 25 years of meditation would move you right to the top of whatever line you’re looking at.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 8:40*)
- “And maybe if you keep doing [meditation], like we said, in a lifetime [...] you could hit the seventh chakra, you know, with a good lifetime of [meditating] in the right way.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 7, 13:05*)

However, despite his decades of meditation, KW denies having achieved full enlightenment (i.e., “a permanent, ever-present, nondual awareness”):

“My sense is that, in my own case, and I’m not claiming a full enlightenment, I think that 11-day period [of constant, 24 hour per day Witness and nondual awareness] was as full an experience as one can have. But I think that has to continue unbroken, is my own opinion, and it did not in my case. Although I get into that, in a sense, I mean, the actual

physiology of it. So there are times when I remain aware 24 hours a day during waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, and then times when I won't. But I never forget that state; I mean that state is ever-present with me. But that actual current is not always ever-present...." (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 7, 16:59*)

In this quote, KW admits four times that he has not achieved full, permanent enlightenment:

- "...I'm not claiming a full enlightenment"
- "...[the 11-day period of constant, 24 hour per day Witness and nondual awareness] did not [continue unbroken] in my case"
- "...then times when I won't [remain aware 24 hours a day]"
- "...that actual current [of constant, 24 hour per day Witness and nondual awareness] is not always ever-present...."

KW also acknowledges that he has not met anyone who has achieved full enlightenment:

- Interviewer: "Have you ever met anybody who you think is in a 24/7 constant nondual current?" KW: "No." [Long pause.] Interviewer: "Thank you." [KW chuckles.] (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 7, 15:08*)
- "I think that some of [the people who have claimed an absolute enlightenment] have a great deal of this current going, but I don't think it's permanent, as far as I can tell, 24 hours per day, unending. (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 7, 17:35*)

KW made a remarkable claim about the benefit of meditation--people who contentiously meditate for 20 to 25 years can achieve "the equivalent of enlightenment in this lifetime...a permanent, ever-present, nondual awareness"--yet he provided no supporting evidence.

Concern 3. KW states that only meditation has been demonstrated to accelerate the development of human consciousness, yet he also recommends other spiritual practices.

In his *Kosmic Consciousness* audio program, KW repeatedly asserted that only meditation has been proven to accelerate the development of human consciousness:

- [M]editation moves an adult human being an average of two full stages on any of these scales. Nothing else has been empirically demonstrated to do that except meditation. And I'm not saying other things can't, I'm just saying that's the only one we actually have really solid proof that it does." (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 2, Track 7, 8:52*)
- "Meditation is the only thing that's been empirically demonstrated to vertically move people [two stages in four years]." (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 2:37*)
- "The only empirically demonstrated thing to [accelerate vertical growth or development] is meditation." (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 3:25*)
- "[M]editation is the only thing that's been demonstrated to move them into higher moral stages. Not as a belief, but as an actual concrete realization." (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 4:49)
- "[In the future] we'll find other things that help vertical growth, not just meditation. I'm sure there are other things, although a lot of things have been tried and haven't been demonstrated [KW interrupted]." *Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, Track 4, 5:39*)

However, in the very same interview (that was recorded during a four-day session in the Spring of 2003), KW also recommends various other spiritual practices, claiming that they each can also accelerate development through the stages/levels of human consciousness:

- “You really have to find small communities or sanghas or gatherings of people who are practicing techniques to bring in these higher states and stages of being. That’s generally where meditation, contemplation, yoga, integral psychotherapy comes into play.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 3, Track 6, 7:01*)
- “But the simplest, shortest answer is: whatever your stage of development on the self line, by practicing meditation, or shamanic voyaging, or altered states, or non-ordinary states, or centering prayer, you going to move up and accelerate your development through that line, moving several stages over a period of just a few years actually.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 3, Track 7, 11:49*)
- “The more you practice getting into these non-ordinary states through whatever means--yoga, meditation, contemplation, and so on--then the quicker you develop through the stages.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 4, Track 4, 1:45*)
- “Sometimes they get in the presence of somebody who’s realized [one taste, or nondual awareness] which is why people sit with spiritual teachers who seem to have realized that. You get kind of a--it’s contagious. It gives it’s own, sort of, energy in a sense. And if you’re in that field, you can tend to resonate with it and have that experience. You can have that experience whatever stage you’re at. What that experience is going to do is accelerate your growth through the stages. It’s going to help move you through the stages.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 6, Track 4, 3:21*)
- “If somebody is really plugged into casual and nondual states, as either a plateau experience or just a very, very strong presence, there’s a kind of very subtle energetic transmission that seems to go with that. Under those circumstances, *satsang* (which means in the presence of the enlightened one; being in the presence of someone who is transmitting) is obviously something that’s going to help quicken your own realization because it’s going to resonate with these subtler and more profound energies in your own being and help bring them forth.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 2, 2:13*)
- “With a spiritual teacher, if it works well, you’re going to transform, you’re going to go through major transformations in consciousness--vertical, evolutionary, quantum leaps of one stage or two or more in your own development.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 7, 16:35*)
- Interviewer: “So it’s possible that [contemplative] prayer could move you up two levels in a similar way as meditation?” KW: “Yes, I believe, I absolutely believe that.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 9, 2:08*)

In these quotes, KW asserts that contemplation, yoga, integral psychotherapy, shamanic voyaging, altered states, non-ordinary states, centering prayer, sitting with teachers, working with teachers, and contemplative prayer can accelerate development through the stages/levels. However, the only evidence he provides for these rather astonishing claims is his mere say-so.

Nor does KW attempt to explain the contradiction between his claim that only meditation has been demonstrated to accelerate the development of human consciousness and his many recommendations for other purportedly consciousness-accelerating spiritual practices.

Concern 4. KW praises the research of Skip Alexander and his colleagues, yet he also acknowledges that their studies are subject to “valid criticisms.” KW repeatedly touts Charles N. “Skip” Alexander and his colleagues for having conducted research supporting his claim that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness:

- “Charles Alexander [1950-1998] has been an important voice in transpersonal developmental psychology for many years, beginning with his doctoral dissertation at Harvard (1982) on ego development and personality changes in prison inmates practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM). I have always appreciated his work, and I especially appreciate the wealth of research and empirical findings he always brings to the task.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 207)
- “Moreover, unlike most of the meditation teachers in this country, Alexander and his colleagues have been taking standard tests of the various developmental lines (including Loevinger's ego development, Kohlberg's moral development, tests of capacity for intimacy, altruism, and so on) and applying them to populations of meditators, with extremely significant and telling results. The importance of this line of research is simply incalculable.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 208)
- “So far, much of the work in this area [the effect of meditation on the lines of development] has been done by Alexander and his associates, yet another reason that I find their contributions so significant;....” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 221)
- “Alexander's work has been instrumental in gathering a great deal of research data that unequivocally supports this conclusion, and I urge those interested to consult his published accounts.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 222)
- “[A]nd I mention Skip Alexander who was a real genius and a real pioneer in this, and I still recommend looking into his work.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, track 4, 0:23)

But in an endnote that is associated with the first quotation, KW warns that:

“[T]his is not to overlook what appear to be some valid criticisms of some of the TM research [performed by Skip Alexander and his colleagues], including occasional bias in the researchers, inadequate methodology, and obliviousness to negative effects on practitioners. But even when those inadequacies are taken into account, what's left of the research is still quite impressive.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 354)

Why are such damning comments reserved for (or more accurately, buried in) an endnote? Why wasn't this information featured prominently in the text? How can KW be cognizant of these “inadequacies” yet continue to consider the research as “still quite impressive”? Aren't these “valid criticisms” (“occasional bias in the researchers, inadequate methodology, and obliviousness to negative effects on practitioners”) sufficiently disturbing to reject Alexander's TM research? By the way, “what's left of the research” after subtracting “occasional bias in the researchers, inadequate methodology, and obliviousness to negative effects on practitioners”? How many more “inadequacies” would KW tolerate before he finally rejects the TM research performed by Skip Alexander and his colleagues?

Also, did KW deliberately avoid identifying Skip Alexander as having been Professor and Associate Chairman of the Department of Psychology at Maharishi International University (MIU, now Maharishi University of Management)? Was KW concerned that Alexander's affiliation with MIU might cause his readers and listeners to suspect that Alexander's studies

were tainted TM advocacy research that could not be trusted?

British psychologist Susan Blackmore has identified:

“a persistent problem in meditation research. Much of the research is now done by members of the TM organization, often at their own Maharishi International University (MIU) [now Maharishi University of Management] in Fairfield, Iowa. Most of it is published in their own publications, where it is not subject to the normal peer review system of scientific journals. A strong motivation to ‘prove’ the efficacy of TM could bias the findings.” (“Is Meditation Good For You?,” pages 31-32)

There is evidence that KW’s enthusiasm for the research of Skip Alexander may have waned. The *Kosmic Consciousness* CD and audio cassette programs that are sold by Sounds True include the 7-second endorsement cited above: “...and I mention Skip Alexander who was a real genius and a real pioneer in this, and I still recommend looking into his work.” However, this brief phrase has been skillfully deleted from the lengthy online audio sample on the Sounds True website.

Concern 5. KW claims that meditators can advance two levels in only three or four years, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms.” On five occasions during his *Kosmic Consciousness* interview, KW claims that meditation can accelerate the evolution of human consciousness two (or several) levels in just three or four (or few or several) years:

- “[M]editation moves an adult human being an average of two full stages on any of these scales. [...] I mean you can take the Jane Loevinger scale, 8 levels on that one, and if somebody’s at stage four and they meditate for three or four years, they’ll be at stage six. It’s really, really impressive actually. (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 2, Track 7, 8:52*)
- “Remember, we gave an earlier experimental result using Jane Loevinger’s test of self development with meditators over a four year period moved an average of two levels up that line. So if you start at level 4 and you meditate for several years, it’s very likely that you’ll end up around level 6. If you start at level 5, you might end up as far as level 7. So that’s a good thing.” Interviewer: “Thank God!” KW: “And we’re in favor of that.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 3, track 7, 10:39*)
- “But the simplest, shortest answer is: whatever your stage of development on the self line, by practicing meditation [...], you going to move up and accelerate your development through that line, moving several stages over a period of just a few years actually.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 3, Track 7, 11:49*)
- “But if you take people that are doing what you just said [raising kids and making money], and they meditate about an hour a day, then about four years later, they’re two stages higher on any scale we give them. Meditation is the only thing that’s been empirically demonstrated to vertically move people to that degree.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, track 4, 2:25)
- “Whereas in meditation, hopefully if it’s going right, as we talked about earlier, you’re going to shift a couple of levels--we said, on average, two stages every four years.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 7, 12:56*)

KW cites the following research as the “really solid proof” supporting these claims:

“[T]he original research on that meditation moving two stages was done by Skip

Alexander with people who are doing Transcendental Meditation, and Transcendental Meditation done correctly is a very powerful form of meditation. And for what it does, I recommend it.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 8, Track 9, 2:15*)

In the absence of an explicit citation, I presume that KW is referencing Skip Alexander’s Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard University that KW cited in *The Eye of Spirit*, page 207 (which is the first quotation listed Concern 4); here is a summary of Alexander’s thesis:

“In two samples (total $n = 90$) of maximum security prisoners followed over a one-year period, both long-term and new TM subjects significantly improved by one step on ego development in comparison to wait-list controls, dropouts, and those not interested in learning TM....” (Alexander and Langer, page 331)

While this study may be the source of KW’s assertion that meditation will advance people two levels in three or four years, the actual results were one level in one year, not two levels in three or four years. Alexander’s claim of two levels in less than three years was an explicit assumption generated by his imagination, not a conclusion derived from his research:

“Assuming that the advanced TM subjects started at a comparable ego level to the new TM group, they advanced a mean of two steps during less than three years.” (Alexander and Langer, page 332)

Here are other cautions about Alexander’s dissertation that are consistent with KW’s warning concerning “valid criticisms of some of the TM research,” especially “occasional bias in the researchers” and “inadequate methodology”:

- Was there a possibility of selection bias since subjects were not randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups?
- Was there a risk of rater bias since progress was measured by the subjective interpretation of Sentence Completion Tests by just one rater rather than multiple raters with demonstrated reliability?
- Was a sample size of 90 total subjects in four programs adequate?
- How could Alexander’s abstract claim that the study was double-blind when subjects were assigned to TM, Counseling, Drug Rehabilitation, fundamentalist Christian, and fundamentalist Muslim programs?
- Is it reasonable to generalize from maximum security prisoners (many of whom may have been violent sociopaths) to the general population?
- Is it appropriate to extrapolate the prisoners’ one-year, one-step growth (from conformist to self-aware, or from self-aware to conscientious) to growth to higher, post-conscientious (individualistic, autonomous, and integrated) stages?

KW’s claim that meditators can advance two levels of development in three or four years is dubious--it is based on a study that is subject to what he admits are “valid criticisms.”

Concern 6. KW reports that 38% of meditators advanced to the highest levels on Jane Loevinger’s scale of ego development, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms.” On five occasions, KW cites research allegedly demonstrating that 38% of meditators advanced to the highest levels of ego development:

- “[L]ess than 2% of the adult population scores at Jane Loevinger's highest two stages of self development (autonomous and integrated). *No practice...has been shown to substantially increase that percentage.* With one exception: studies have shown that consistent meditation practice over a several-year period increases that percentage from 2% to an astonishing 38%....” (“Announcing the Formation of Integral Institute,” emphasis in the original*)
- “As only one example, researchers have found that in America today, about 2% of the population reaches Jane Loevinger's highest stages of self development, stages which involve an autonomous and integrated self. [...] However, one study showed that, among individuals who meditated for several years, an astonishing 38% reached those higher stages.” (“Ken Wilber’s Response to John Heron,” item 13*)
- “It has been shown, for example, that meditation increases the percentage of the population who are second tier from less than 2 percent to an astonishing 38 percent (see *The Eye of Spirit*, chap. 10). Thus, meditation is an important part of a truly integral practice.” (*A Theory of Everything*, page 139)
- “For example, 1 percent of a college control sample scored at Loevinger's highest two stages (autonomous and integrated), whereas in a similar sample of regular meditators, 38 percent reached those stages. [...] That 38 percent broke through this ceiling with meditation is quite extraordinary.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 354)
- “Another way to measure [the value of meditation in accelerating the development of human consciousness] is to take the number of people that are at a particular stage of development in a particular developmental line like Jane Loevinger. And in her case, what she would call our level 6, our integral level on our 7-level generic scale, she finds about 2% of the population reaches that stage. And after four years of meditation, 38% of people doing it reach that stage. That's another way of measuring what meditation can do. So it's very, very powerful in terms of moving people vertically in terms of growth and development and evolution.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 7, track 4, 3:37)

Here’s a summary of this study:

“A longitudinal study...compared change in ego development over an 11-year period in graduates of Maharishi International University (MIU), where the TM program is incorporated into the college curriculum, to change in graduates from three well-known control universities offering standard curricula.... Where at pretest 9 percent of the MIU sample scored at Loevinger’s highest ‘autonomous’ and ‘integrated’ stages, at posttest 38 percent reached these two highest stages. In contrast, only 1 percent of the control college samples scored at these two highest stages at both pretest and posttest.” (Alexander and Langer, pages 331-32)

While KW has written that there are “valid criticisms of some of the TM research,” he did not identify any of the many “valid criticisms” of this study; e.g., KW did not:

- indicate that the duration of the study was 11 years, not the “several years” he claimed in “Announcing the Formation of Integral Institute” and “Ken Wilber’s Response to John Heron,” or the “four years” he claimed in *Kosmic Consciousness*
- specify that this research studied practitioners of TM
- identify likely problems in the experimental design:

- selection bias as subjects were not randomly assigned to groups
 - expectation bias as those aspiring to develop may have chosen to enroll at MIU
 - rater bias as only a single rater was used, not multiple raters
 - small sample size as the study had just 136 subjects in four groups
- question the controls since “most control subjects also indicated that they currently practiced some form of self-development, stress-management, or exercise program.” Is just a mere “exercise program” an adequate control condition for comparison?
 - explain that since 9% of the meditators were already at the highest (autonomous and integrated) levels at the beginning of the study, only 32% of those not already at the highest levels advanced to these levels
 - caution that if just a very few subjects in the control samples had advanced to the highest levels, it would have produced a growth from 1% to 4%, comparable to the meditators’ four-fold growth from 9% to 38%

A more accurate summary of this research might read something like the following:

One small, poorly designed, poorly controlled study that was subject to “some valid criticisms...including occasional bias in the researchers” and “inadequate methodology” concluded the following: A single rater interpreting Sentence Completion Tests judged that less than one-third (only 32%) of the meditators not already at the highest (autonomous and integrated) levels of ego development advanced to these highest levels after 11 years of Transcendental Meditation. Said another way, over two-thirds (68%) of the meditators did not advance to the highest levels of ego development despite practicing TM for over a decade. The low rate of development of the meditators (just 32%) may be greater than the rate of development of the control groups (some of whom merely engaged in exercise), or maybe not (due to likely problems with selection, expectation, and rater bias). Because of the researchers’ “obliviousness to negative effects on practitioners,” we don’t know how many meditators suffered from the “negative effects” of meditation (see Concern 9).

KW’s claim that 38% of meditators advanced to the highest levels of ego development is specious--it is based on a study that is subject to what he admits are “valid criticisms.”

Concern 7. KW advocates the use of meditation and communal verification to establish spiritual truths, yet this recommendation is not “good science.” KW claims that meditation and communal verification can be used to establish spiritual truths:

- “Thus: take up the injunction or paradigm of meditation; practice and polish that cognitive tool until awareness learns to discern the incredibly subtle phenomena of spiritual data; check your observations with others who have done so...; and thus confirm or reject your results.” (*Marriage of Sense and Soul*, page 173)
- “The mystics ask you to take nothing on mere belief. Rather, they give you a set of experiments to test in your own awareness and experience. The laboratory is your own mind, the experiment is meditation. You yourself try it, and compare your test results with others who have also performed the experiment. Out of this consensually validated pool of experiential knowledge, you arrive at certain laws of the spirit--at certain ‘profound truths,’ if you will. And the first is: God is.” (*Grace and Grit*, page 83)
- “[M]editative knowledge is internal knowledge, but knowledge that can be publicly

validated by a community of trained meditators, those who know the internal logic of contemplative experience.” (*Grace and Grit*, page 177)

- “These deep-spiritual investigations follow the three strands of good science (not narrow science, good science). They rely on specific social *practices* or injunctions (such as contemplation); they rest their claims on data and *experiential* evidence; and they constantly refine and *check* these data in a community of the adequate....” (*A Theory of Everything*, page 77, emphasis in original)
- “And thus: take up the injunction or paradigm of meditation; practice and polish that cognitive tool until awareness learns to discern the incredibly subtle phenomena of transcendelia; check your observations with others...who have completed the injunctions; and thus confirm or reject your results.” (*Eye of Spirit*, page 83)

However, KW’s recommendation is subject to the following challenges:

- Religious fundamentalists have made much the same appeal and been quite successful. They’ve made amazing promises about divine beings, inspired prophets, incarnating saviors, sacred scriptures, holy priests, indwelling spirits, answered prayers, etc. Then they’ve challenged nonbelievers to test these claims in their own lives and to discuss their progress with their community of the convinced. Lo and behold, many doubters become ardent converts. Does consensual belief make things true? I think not.
- *Grace and Grit* indicates that meditators will discover that “God is.” Which God is this: a theistic, deistic, pantheistic, or panentheistic deity? An Abrahamic monotheistic deity, e.g. Yahweh or Allah? Or a fundamentalist Christian Risen and Living Jesus?
- Have spiritual traditions with the injunction of meditation produced a “consensually validated pool of experiential knowledge”? How much similarity is there among the various meditation-based Buddhist traditions: Zen, Theraveda, Mahayana, and Vajrayana? Maybe a slender common thread, but also many differences.
- Where are the controls that “good science” demands in experimentation? How about presenting a group with the following simple instructions: sit quietly, tune your awareness, discover what you can, then come back in a couple of years and tell us what “subtle phenomena of transcendelia” you have discovered? The meditators are to receive no other teachings, trainings, or readings in spirituality, psychology, philosophy, etc., and only non-directive facilitators are to help them refine their understandings. Would there be any commonality among the subjects? I doubt it.
- I admit that the prior thought experiment omits community verification (“compare your test results with others who have also performed the experiment”). So, how about conducting an experiment where subjects are randomly divided into groups, and when they begin meditating, each group is assigned to a “community of trained meditators” from a different spiritual tradition. Would self-fulfilling prophecy prevail? Would new meditators begin to experience then report “profound truths” that are consistent with the spiritual tradition of their “community of trained meditators”? Would new meditators begin to experience what they believe that they should experience, then view that as a confirmation of what they’ve learned? I suspect that they would.
- How about the influences of social pressure and conformity? During the verification phase, would novice meditators defer to the judgment of senior meditators “who have completed the injunctions”? Would neophytes begin to experience what they believe that they should experience in order to be commended for their progress? Again, I suspect

that they would.

- Finally, what about meditation's possible "negative effects on practitioners"? How much human wreckage will be tolerated in this effort to discover "certain laws of the spirit"? (The potential "negative effects" of meditation are discussed in Concern 9.)

KW's suggestion that meditation and community verification be used to establish spiritual truths is unsupported; he has presented no solid evidence for this questionable claim other than his reliance on his belief and mere say-so, which is not "good science."

Concern 8. KW asserts that even skeptics acknowledge that "the Maharishi effect" is authentic, yet skeptics have repeatedly rejected "the Maharishi effect." KW's only endorsement of "the Maharishi effect" (the claim that mass meditators can promote collective peace and cooperation, thereby reducing crime) is as follows:

"There is a very large body of empirical evidence showing that when 1% of the population of a town, say, begins to meditate, then crime statistics all go down sharply. Murder, rape, theft, they all go down. It's called 'the Maharishi effect,' and even skeptics admit that it's a real phenomenon." ("Jonathan" in *Boomeritis*, page 433)

I attempted to identify evidence supporting KW's assertion that "even skeptics admit that ['the Maharishi effect' is] a real phenomenon," but my research revealed the following:

- KW fails to identifying any skeptics who support "the Maharishi effect" in his voluminous "Endnotes to *Boomeritis*" at his publisher's website.
- The Institute of Science, Technology and Public Policy (ISTPP) at Maharishi University of Management claims that groups practicing the Transcendental Meditation program can lower violent crime levels (see "Preventing Crime Through the Maharishi Effect"). However, none of the many references to "the Maharishi effect" at the ISTPP website boast of any believing skeptics (pardon my oxymoron!).
- TM advocate David W. Orme-Johnson, Ph.D. has a posted a presumably best case list consisting of the "Personal Views" of seven "scholars who have reviewed the research on the Maharishi effect [and have offered] some positive reviews." However, none of the seven are identified as skeptics, and none explicitly "admit that it's a real phenomenon."

On the contrary, "the Maharishi effect" has been repeatedly discredited by skeptics:

- James Randi in *Flim-Flam! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions* (1982)
- Martin Gardner in "Doug Henning and the Giggling Guru - Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" [Skeptical Inquirer](#) (1995)
- Evan Fales and Barry Markovsky in "Social Action at a Distance? Evaluating Heterodox Theories" [Social Forces](#) (1997)
- Robert L. Park in *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud* (2000)
- Robert Todd Carroll in *The Skeptics Dictionary: A Collection of Strange Beliefs, Amusing Deceptions, and Dangerous Delusions* (Wiley, 2003)

Since the only endorsement of "the Maharishi effect" occurs in *Boomeritis*, can KW claim that Jonathan's advocacy of "the Maharishi effect" is part of the fictional element of the

novel? At first blush, KW may have plausible deniability since the second of his seven characteristics of the “perfect post-modern novel” permits him to “[i]nclude real references, make some of them up, mix and match, what the hell” (page 325). However, “the Maharishi effect” is not something that KW has fabricated--it has been a widely publicized claim for decades of the Maharishi and the ISTPP at Maharishi University of Management.

I have been unable to identify any evidence supporting KW’s assertion that “even skeptics admit that [‘the Maharishi effect’ is] a real phenomena.”

Concern 9. KW is aware that meditation can have “negative effects on practioners,” yet he provides only a very few warnings of the potential hazards. KW cautions about the “negative effects [of meditation] on practitioners” on just a very few occasions:

- “[N]egative effects [of meditation] on practitioners.” (*The Eye of Spirit*, page 354)
- “[Meditation involves] a whole series of deaths and rebirths; extraordinary conflicts and stresses [...] some very rough and frightening times.” (*Yoga Journal*, September/October 1987, page 43*)
- “A lot of people get into meditation, meditative states, and start neglecting everything on the exterior world. They can neglect action in the world, they can neglect environmental concerns, they can neglect their family--their spouse, their sons, their daughters, and so on. It’s a notorious pitfall of the meditative path because part of what you’re doing is you are following this thread to the Self Supreme, and so there’s an enormous pull, there’s a magnet, there’s an attraction there that’s just sublime, exquisite. But until that ultimate realization which will then embrace all of these other domains, you can end up excluding them in a very, very rigid way. And if that happens, basically so much of your life falls apart that you can hardly pursue meditation either. [...] Most frequently it’s relationships and secondarily probably actual work in the world, jobs for example. So all of these have to be kept in mind. It’s a real problem.” (*Kosmic Consciousness*, CD 4, Track 5, 1:13*)

What is KW’s source for information on meditation’s “negative effects on practioners”? Could it be the discussion of “Negative Experiences” in *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation* (1997) which KW cited in an essay posted in 1999? KW referenced *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation* as a resource providing an:

“...absolutely staggering amount of research into [the value of ‘traditional meditation methods’] (cf. Michael Murphy et al, *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation*).” (“Ken Wilber’s Response to John Heron,” item 16*)

Here is the discussion of “Negative Experiences” from Chapter 4 of that book:

“Otis (1984) described a study done at Stanford Research Institute in 1971 to determine the negative effects of Transcendental Meditation. SRI mailed a survey to every twentieth person on the Students International Meditation Society (TM’s parent organization) mailing list of 40,000 individuals. Approximately 47% of the 1,900 people surveyed responded. The survey included a self-concept word list (the Descriptive Personality List) and a checklist of physical and behavioral symptoms (the Physical and Behavioral Inventory). It was found that dropouts reported fewer complaints than experienced meditators, to a statistically significant degree. Furthermore, adverse effects were positively correlated with the length of time in

meditation. Long-term meditators reported the following percentages of adverse effects: antisocial behavior, 13.5%; anxiety, 9.0%; confusion, 7.2%; depression, 8.1%; emotional stability, 4.5%; frustration, 9.0%; physical and mental tension, 8.1%; procrastination, 7.2%; restlessness, 9.0%; suspiciousness, 6.3%; tolerance of others, 4.5%; and withdrawal, 7.2%. The author concluded that the longer a person stays in TM and the more committed a person becomes to TM as a way of life, the greater is the likelihood that he or she will experience adverse effects. This contrasts sharply with the promotional statements of the various TM organizations.

“Ellis (1984) stated that meditation's greatest danger was its common connection with spirituality and antiscience. He said that it might encourage some individuals to become even more obsessive-compulsive than they had been and to dwell in a ruminative manner on trivia or nonessentials. He also noted that some of his clients had gone into ‘dissociative semi-trance states and upset themselves considerably by meditating.’ Ellis views meditation and other therapy procedures as often diverting people from doing that which overcomes their disturbance to focusing on the highly palliative technique itself. Therefore, although individuals might feel better, their chances of acquiring a basically healthy, nonmasturbatory outlook are sabotaged.

“Walsh (1979) reported a number of disturbing experiences during meditation, such as anxiety, tension, and anger. Walsh and Rauche (1979) stated that meditation may precipitate a psychotic episode in individuals with a history of schizophrenia. Kornfield (1979 and 1983) reported that body pain is a frequent occurrence during meditation, and that meditators develop new ways to relate to their pain as a result of meditation. Hassett (1978) reported that meditation can be harmful. Carrington (1977) observed that extensive meditation may induce symptoms that range in severity from insomnia to psychotic manifestations with hallucinatory behavior. Lazarus (1976) reported that psychiatric problems such as severe depression and schizophrenic breakdown may be precipitated by TM. French et al. (1975) reported that anxiety, tension, anger, and other disturbing experiences sometimes occur during TM. Carrington and Ephron (1975c) reported a number of complaints from TM meditators who felt themselves overwhelmed by negative and unpleasant thoughts during meditation. Glueck and Stroebel (1975) reported that two experimental subjects made independent suicide attempts in the first two days after beginning the TM program. Kannellakos and Lukas (1974) reported complaints from TM meditators. Otis (1974) reported that five patients suffered a reoccurrence of serious psychosomatic symptoms after commencing meditation. Maupin (1969) stated that the deepest objection to meditation has been its tendency to produce withdrawn, serene people who are not accessible to what is actually going on in their lives. He said that with meditation it is easy to overvalue the internal at the expense of the external.”

The potential hazards of meditation reported in these studies are very disturbing; behind these statistics are thousands of damaged and devastated lives. More sources concerning the possible detrimental effects of meditation can be found in the References section.

Shouldn't KW have cautioned his readers and listeners of the possible “negative effects” of meditation each time that he recommends meditation? If the guiding principle of human subject experimentation is voluntary informed consent, shouldn't an ethical, worldcentric scholar who advocates meditation have consistently warned his readers and listeners about the potential “negative effects on practitioners” so they can make fully informed decisions?

Summary.

Here again are the nine Concerns that have been presented in this essay:

1. KW asserts that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness, yet he typically provides no supporting evidence
2. KW suggests that 20 to 25 years of meditation can yield full enlightenment, yet he admits that he has not achieved this state nor met anyone who has
3. KW states that only meditation has been demonstrated to accelerate the development of human consciousness, yet he also recommends other spiritual practices
4. KW praises the research of Skip Alexander and his colleagues, yet he also acknowledges that their studies are subject to “valid criticisms”
5. KW claims that meditators can advance two levels in only three or four years, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms”
6. KW reports that 38% of meditators advanced to the highest levels on Jane Loevinger’s scale of ego development, yet the cited study is subject to “valid criticisms”
7. KW advocates the use of meditation and community verification to establish spiritual truths, yet this recommendation is not “good science”
8. KW asserts that even skeptics acknowledge that “the Maharishi effect” is authentic, yet skeptics have repeatedly rejected “the Maharishi effect”
9. KW is aware that meditation can have “negative effects on practioners,” yet he provides only a very few warnings of the potential hazards

Conclusion.

KW has proposed principles of validity, so it is important to ask: Has KW’s advocacy of meditation been consistent with his principles of validity?

In *A Brief History of Everything* (page 96), KW defines validity claims as:

- “[v]arious ways to see if we are in touch with truth or lost in falsity. Whether we are honoring the good or obscuring it. Whether we are moved by the beautiful or promoting degradation.”
- “tests that can help us determine if we are in touch with the real, if we are adequately attuned to the Kosmos in all of its rich diversity.”
- “the ways that we connect to Spirit itself, ways that we attune ourselves to the Kosmos. The validity claims force us to confront reality; they curb our egoic fantasies and self-centered ways; they demand evidence from the rest of the Kosmos; they force us outside of ourselves!”

Has KW’s advocacy of meditation been consistent with these principles of validity? You can determine whether KW has followed or violated his own principles of validity by formulating your own answers to the following questions:

- Have KW’s claims that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness been “in touch with truth” or “lost in falsity”?

- By touting TM research despite his own admission that the studies have been subject to “valid criticisms,” has KW been “honoring the good” or “obscuring it”?
- When KW endorsed the use of meditation and community verification to establish spiritual truths, and when he claimed that even skeptics acknowledge that “the Maharishi effect” is real, was he “adequately attuned to the Kosmos” or was he driven by “egoic fantasies and self-centered ways”?
- By failing to provide consistent warnings of the potential psychological harm from meditation, has KW been “moved by the beautiful” or “promoting degradation”?

It is my opinion that KW’s advocacy of meditation consistently violates his principles of validity, yet he continues to promote meditation; KW makes still another now-and-forever-true-for-everyone-everywhere endorsement of meditation in a posted draft book:

“The second major role for religion in the modern and postmodern world...[is to] make contemplative **states** [meditation, contemplation, or centering prayer] the core of their training, or at least an offering.” (*Integral Spirituality, First Draft* page 98, emphasis in the original)

Will KW reconsider his position on meditation? In the future, will he:

- either discontinue asserting that meditation accelerates the development of human consciousness, or provide solid, compelling evidence to support his claims?
- admit that the research on meditation that he has cited is subject to “valid criticisms”?
- acknowledge that the use of meditation and community verification to establish spiritual truths is not “good science”?
- renounce his claim that even skeptics admit that “the Maharishi effect” is authentic?
- provide consistent warnings that meditation can have “negative effects on practioners”?

I hope so, but I am troubled that he may continue his unfounded, misleading, and potentially harmful pronouncements concerning the benefits of meditation, claims that I consider to be, as the subtitle if this essay indicates, “a baffling babbling of unending nonsense.”

Jim Andrews

My e-mail address is Deep Trout as one word (with no space) at msn.com. Please write me if you’ve detected any errors in this essay.

Acknowledgment.

Special thanks to Geoffrey D. Falk (www.geoffreyfalk.com/) for:

- authoring his provocative “Chapter XXI: Norman Einstein (Ken Wilber)” (<http://www.strippingthegurus.com/stgsamplechapters/wilber.asp>) notably his critique of KW’s advocacy of experiments in consciousness with community verification which I’ve utilized in my discussion of Concern 7
- paraphrasing (with elaboration and gusto!) my e-mailed concerns about KW’s advocacy of meditation in his blogs (<http://www.geoffreyfalk.com/blog/blog.asp>) of July 13, 19, &

23, 2005

- performing a superb analysis of TM research in his blog of August 7, 2005 which I've utilized in my discussions of Concerns 4, 5, and 6
- alerting me to KW's citation of [The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation](#) in his blog of January 9, 2006 which I've utilized in my discussions of Concern 9

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- *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion* (Broadway Books, 1998)
- “Ken Wilber's Response to John Heron” (1999) at: <http://www.integralworld.net/index.html?heron.html>
- *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber: Volume Three* (Shambhala, 1999). “Introduction” at: http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/cowokev3_intro.cfm/
- *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber, Second Edition* (Shambhala, 2000)
- *A Brief History of Everything, Second Edition* (Shambhala, 2000)
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- *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad, Third Edition* (Shambhala, 2001)
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- *Kosmic Consciousness* (Sounds True, 2003) Online audio sample at: <http://store.yahoo.com/soundstruestore/af00758d.html>
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- Ingram, Catherine. "Ken Wilber: The Pundit of Transpersonal Psychology" Yoga Journal, September/October 1987 (Note: This citation is problematic. I cited this article as the source for a KW quotation in Concern 9 to demonstrate that KW has occasionally warned about the hazards of meditation: "...[Meditation involves] a whole series of deaths and rebirths; extraordinary conflicts and stresses...some very rough and frightening times." While searching online, I discovered this quotation in essays that cited a 1998 book (*Occult Invasion* by Dave Hunt) as a secondary source for this quotation. I have not yet been able to secure a copy of the September/October 1987 issue of Yoga Journal so I can personally verify this KW quotation as none of my community or state-wide university libraries have this issue in their collections; I have recently requested an inter-library loan which may take several weeks or months. I decided to include this questionable quotation since I was favorable to KW, but if I discover that it is inaccurate or bogus, I'll promptly correct or delete it. If you have the September/October 1987 issue of Yoga Journal, please contact me.)
- Murphy, Michael and Donovan, Steven. *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Review of Contemporary Research* (Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1997). See "Negative Experiences" in Chapter 4: "Subjective Reports" at: <http://www.noetic.org/research/medbiblio/ch4.htm>
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Notes Concerning Version 3.0

This version supercedes Version 2.0 dated June 14, 2006 (which was a quick fix to delete references to two citations in Concern 9 described below) and features the following changes:

- incorporation of various minor editing changes to text and References
- revision of Abstract to state the Nine Concerns
- creation of a Purpose and Methodology section near the beginning of the essay to clarify that this is a critique of KW’s scholarship, and not a critique of the efficacy of meditation
- addition of thirty-one new KW quotes, most of which were discovered while researching “Twenty *Boomeritis* Blunders: Shoddy Scholarship, Salacious Sex, and Sham Spirituality”
<http://www.strippingthegurus.com/stgsamplechapters/twentyboomeritisblunders.asp>; these new KW quotations are indicated by an asterisk at the end of the parenthetical citation
- addition of time markers to the *Kosmic Consciousness* citations
- creation of new Concern 2 to evaluate KW’s claim that 20 to 25 years of meditation can result in full, permanent enlightenment
- creation of new Concern 3 to expose the contradiction between KW’s claim that only meditation has been demonstrated to accelerate the development of consciousness and his many recommendations for other purportedly consciousness-accelerating practices
- creation of new Concern 5 to address KW’s claim that meditators can advance two levels of development in three or four years; this issue had been part of Concern 4
- revision of Concern 8 to focus on KW’s unsupported claim that “even skeptics admit that [‘the Maharishi effect’ is] a real phenomenon,” rather than critique the purported efficacy of “the Maharishi effect” to promote peace/cooperation and reduce crime
- deletion of two citations in Concern 9. A reader notified me of a serious problem with The Report of Germany's Institute for Youth and Society on TM (1980)--the investigators relied solely on a bias, non-random sample of complainants (just ex-meditators and their relatives) with no control group. Concern 9 now exclusively references the “Negative Experiences” reported in The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Review of Contemporary Research (1997) which KW cited in an essay posted in 1999.
- addition of a Summary prior to the Conclusion
- addition of a request that readers “Please write me if you’ve detected any errors in this essay” that I’d included in my second KW critique “Twenty *Boomeritis* Blunders”
<http://www.strippingthegurus.com/stgsamplechapters/twentyboomeritisblunders.asp>
- incorporation in this section of two (now three) shamefully self-promoting references to my second KW critique “Twenty *Boomeritis* Blunders” :~)
<http://www.strippingthegurus.com/stgsamplechapters/twentyboomeritisblunders.asp>