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Deep Understanding: Wisdom for an Integral Age

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Although Paul Ray's values survey (1996) revealed that some 20 to 45 million Americans are attracted to integral values, Ken Wilber recently pointed out (2000, Introduction) that this is not the same as possessing fully-developed integral consciousness. Citing "the extensive research of Graves, Beck and Cowan," Wilber said that only 1 percent of the population has developed "Integrative" and 0.1 percent "Holistic" thinking. Thus, although millions of us are now pointed in the direction of an integral society and culture, a much smaller number have developed their understanding to the degree that is needed for the most effective kinds of transformational activity.

Many of us who resonate with integral values and the integral agenda would like to become effective agents of transformational change and help actualize the vision of an integral society and culture. Yet, at some point, we begin to see that the quality of our doing can only reflect the quality of our understanding. We begin to see that to accomplish what we would like to accomplish we need to move toward those higher levels of psychological/spiritual development by broadening and deepening our understanding on many fronts.

My interest in the nature and development of wisdom (Macdonald, 1995; Macdonald, 1996 [1993], Macdonald 1995-2000) has led me to think about this movement toward integrative and holistic thinking in terms of wisdom and its further development. Wisdom, in all its varieties, strikes me as inherently integrative because it involves assessing the IT aspects of reality (the *exterior-individual* and *exterior-collective*) from especially helpful I-grounded (*interior-individual*) and WE-grounded (*interior-collective*) perspectives.² Wisdom also leads to an upleveling of the I, WE, and IT realms. This happens because the way that wise people see the world and process the data of life leads them to exhibit a whole array of better-than-ordinary ways of being, living, and dealing with the world. In this essay I will discuss a variation on the wisdom theme that seems especially important as we attempt to transform the institutions and practices of the industrial age into those of an integral age. I call it *deep understanding*.

The Several Kinds of Wisdom

Because wisdom is a widely misunderstood concept, it may be useful to begin with a few general observations about it. First of all, "words of wisdom" are not wisdom; they are words *about* wisdom, *pointers at* wisdom. Wisdom is internal, embodied by persons — and in a somewhat different sense, by cultures. Wise actions are external. Thus,

even wise actions are not wisdom; they are effects of wisdom. Wisdom is multifaceted, and because no two people develop all facets in the same way and to the same degree, there are many flavors of wisdom. That said, in all its modalities wisdom is a perspective-based, interpretation-based, evaluative mode of cognition. Wisdom is not about facts per se, it is about the context-linked meaning of facts. It is about the significance of facts and their implications.

I have written in the past about two general types of wisdom. In *Getting a Life* (Macdonald, 1995) I wrote about *practical* or *life-centered* wisdom — the kind of wisdom that Coleridge called “common sense in an uncommon degree.” Today, I see life-centered wisdom as an information-processing modality in which situations are evaluated from multiple perspectives, multiple contextual points of view. Common evaluative contexts include the pragmatic *will-this-work?* context; the *what-are-the-consequences?* context; the *does-this-fit-with-my-goals?* context; a variety of contexts related to ethics, morality and justice; the *is-this-part-of-the-problem-or-part-of-the-solution?* context; the *does-this-represent-excellence?* context; the *is-action-needed-or-not-needed?* context; and many others.

This type of wisdom is developed inductively from personal experience and the experience of others, and it incorporates insights derived from experience. In people skilled at observing life experience and making sense of it, their situation-evaluation process comes to discern and incorporate many of the laws, rules, and regularities which underlie everyday situations. By seeing clearly what is going on in a multitude of specific situations, the evaluation process acquires insight into how things usually work, and it develops a sense of relevant probabilities. Over time, experience enriches and “educates” this process, leading to more insights, greater wisdom, and wiser decisions.

Life-centered wisdom is applied deductively. When the wisdom process brings its context-linked perspectives to bear on novel data sets and life situations, its previously-cognized generalities illuminate the immediate particulars. The result is better-than-ordinary analysis of situations and more-appropriate responsive actions.

In *Toward Wisdom* (Macdonald, 1996 [1993]) I wrote about the *big-picture, existential, meaning-of-life* variety of wisdom. This is the kind of wisdom that Eastern spiritual practices help to develop. Rational/intellectual evaluation plays a subordinate role in this form of wisdom. Because the goal of Eastern practices is to develop insight into the non-informational aspect of reality (being, spirit, energy, awareness, Brahman) and its relationship to the informational (form, appearance,

maya), these practices focus on developing and harnessing the psychological modalities of *intuition* and *identification*. They do this in ways that allow the eternal/transient, Brahman/maya, carrier/information³ nature of existence to be more clearly seen and deeply internalized than is possible through rational investigation alone.

This essay focuses on the development of a third type of wisdom: *deep understanding*. Deep understanding's special "flavor" is a product of two components: 1.) Integral understanding of the general type exemplified in Beck and Cowan's second-tier Integrative and Holistic "waves" of consciousness and Wilber's "mature vision-logic." 2.) Additional intellectual knowledge that helps us understand and deal with the specifics of humanity's present situation. In the discussion that follows, the emphasis is not on the detailed nature of the end result. That will unfold in ways that we cannot now determine, and will, to some extent, be unique to each individual. Rather, the emphasis is on a practical strategy for developing this variety of wisdom.

The Challenge

When we think about transforming today's economic, political, social, cultural, and personal realities into the new realities needed for a sustainable, equitable, and highly enjoyable world, it is easy to get discouraged. The task seems overwhelming. Where do we begin?

Abraham Maslow told us where. We begin by understanding the reality that presently exists — very deeply, very completely. Maslow noted that for self-actualizing people (and others during self-actualizing moments) facts were value-laden. They had a certain "oughtness" and called for certain actions. As he put it:

When anything is clear enough or certain enough, true enough, real enough, beyond the point of doubt, than that something raises within itself its own requiredness, its own demand-character, its own suitabilities. It 'calls for' certain kinds of action rather than others. If we define ethics, morals, and values as guides to action, then the easiest and best guides to the most decisive actions are very facty facts; the more facty they are, the better guides to action they are. ...the facts themselves carry, within their own nature, suggestions about what *ought* to be done with them.

If we wish to permit the facts to tell us their oughtness we must learn to listen to them in a very specific way which

can be called Taoistic — silently, hushed, quietly, fully listening, noninterfering, receptive, patient, respectful of the matter-in-hand, courteous to the matter-in-hand. (Maslow, 1971, pp. 121, 124.)

Maslow is telling us three important things: 1.) When we understand the present reality with great clarity and depth, we will also sense the kind of action that is needed. 2.) In order to understand reality in that deep way, we need relevant, totally convincing facts. 3.) To receive the subtle value messages inherent in those facts, we must approach them with a quiet, receptive, patient mind.

To follow Maslow's prescription in the context of societal transformation, we face two serious problems. The first concerns a prior education that, for most of us, has not given us a sufficiently complete, sufficiently relevant set of "very facty facts." Some of us were educated in the sciences. Others were educated in the humanities. Those educated in either of these "two cultures" often know little about the other,⁴ and few in either one understand much about economic realities. (Unfortunately, the education of most economists appears even more narrowly focused.)

This is not a satisfactory situation. To be able to deal effectively with the major biospheric, social, and economic problems of our day, we need to become more holistic knowers. We must acquire a deep and comprehensive understanding of the context in which those problems are set. We need to develop a broadly-based intellectual understanding of systems and the system hierarchy that pervades cosmos; the evolutionary process in its most general sense; consciousness; human cultures; economic systems; and various key principles, laws, and regularities which underlie functioning in all of these areas. Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich summarized our task (1990, p. 12): "We need to be 'literate' in entirely new disciplines."

The second problem is that few of us encounter the reality around and within us with a quiet, receptive, patient mind. We don't listen to what *is* in that Taoistic, fully listening, non-interfering way. To correct this problem we need a very different kind of mental development — not intellectual this time, but intuitive — the kind of development facilitated by quiet-minded Eastern practices such as meditation. The exploration of one's own psyche in this way leads not only to a quiet, receptive mind, but also to an appreciation of the laws by which our inner, subjective lives operate; ethical understanding; moral behavior; and even insights into the nature of primal reality.

Each of the problems mentioned above has its rather obvious solution.

Each “calls for” the particular course of action just mentioned. Together, these courses of action constitute a two-element strategy for developing deep understanding: On the one hand, **go outward and acquire relevant intellectual knowledge**. On the other, **go inward and find self-knowledge and a quiet mind**. Some day, a future integral society/culture will have programs and institutions dedicated to helping people do this. Today, however, it is likely to happen only through self-motivation and self-direction.

Intellectual Development

Although acquiring either kind of knowledge is not trivially easy, for most people the acquisition of intellectual knowledge is the more familiar, more comfortable of the two processes. For many, the exploration of “new disciplines” will begin with the sciences of energy, complexity, and information; systems and the evolutionary process; consciousness and the workings of the human brain/mind system; human cultures; and economic systems. If, in addition, we want to actually change what needs to be changed, we also need to understand ethics and techniques for changing ethical perspectives; probability as a decision-making tool; the techniques of conflict resolution and effective persuasion; and what people are proposing — and already doing — to solve the problems that the world faces.

Fortunately, being literate in new areas of knowledge does not mean that we need to be experts in them. What is very much needed — and what we already have in some of these areas — are books, audio and video tapes, multimedia CD-ROMs, Internet sites, online courses, and other resources that can help people grasp a discipline’s key ideas with a reasonable expenditure of time and effort. We also need high-relevancy cross-disciplinary maps of reality that, by pulling together material from many disciplines, can help us deal with the overwhelming complexity of the human situation. Some potential aids to this kind of exploration are suggested online at <http://www.cop.com/outward.html>.

Psychological/Spiritual Development

Paul Ray’s “cultural creatives” espouse values which indicate development to the *early vision-logic* stage in Wilber’s schema and the *Sensitive Self* “wave” in the Beck and Cowan schema. This level of

personal development is characterized by egalitarianism, ecological sensitivity, emphasis on dialogue and relationship, affective warmth and sensitivity, the enrichment of human potential, and more (Wilber, 2000, Introduction). Wilber pointed out long ago (1977, 1981) that the psychological and the spiritual are just locations on one expansive spectrum of consciousness. Deficiencies at the less-developed end are addressed through psychological therapies. Deficiencies at the more-developed end are addressed through spiritual practices. Beck and Cowan identify eight locations on this spectrum: 1.) Archaic-Instinctual, 2.) Magical-Animistic, 3.) Power Gods, 4.) Conformist Rule, 5.) Scientific Achievement, 6.) The Sensitive Self, 7.) Integrative, and 8.) Holistic. Thus, the task faced by the typical cultural creative — who currently hovers around location six — is that of further developing Integrative and Holistic characteristics. And, since all three of these locations reside at the highly-developed end of the spectrum, the developmental tool of choice will be one or more spiritual practices. A variety of practices from Eastern and Western mystical traditions would be suitable. Here I mention two that have proven especially effective for Western practitioners. The first goes by the names *mindfulness*, *Vipassana*, and *Insight* meditation. The second is the Tibetan nondual practice called *Dzogchen*.

Mindfulness meditation is a practice devoted to the development of attentiveness and the exploration of mind content and function. Initially, one watches physical sensations in a narrowly-focused way — usually sensations connected with breathing. Attempting to pay continuous attention to these subtle sensations settles the mind and develops concentration. This practice is continued until attention is able to remain on the chosen object for a reasonable period. At that point, the focus of attention is widened to include other mental objects: physical sensations, feelings, sounds, incipient thoughts — and ultimately, whatever arises in the mind.

The benefits associated with this type of meditation are many: insight into how the human mind works; insight into our own values and behavior (seeing things that we may have previously denied or repressed); the development of our intuitive process; enhanced access to the subconscious; enhanced creativity; a quieting of the mind that can become quite profound in retreat situations and during long periods of solitude; skill at dealing with reactive emotions; and increased levels of patience, acceptance, and inner peace. I have gone into this in some detail in *Toward Wisdom* (Macdonald, 1996 [1993]), and there are many excellent books that deal exclusively with this type of meditation. You might wish to check out the list of books and other resources at <http://www.cop.com/inward.html>.

The farthest reaches of inner development involve internalization of the nondual view. Those who have developed attentiveness/mindfulness to a fairly advanced degree sometimes move on to practices that specifically promote cognizance of the absolute reality and identification with it: *nondual* practices. Ken Wilber's "favorite meditation on nondual awareness" — and one of mine — is Chapter 12 of his book *The Eye of Spirit*, entitled "Always Ready: The Brilliant Clarity of Ever-Present Awareness" (Wilber, 1997; and 2000, Introduction). Wilber's words give the reader an excellent sense of the goal of nondual practice, and can be a useful tool for developing it. Dzogchen is an effective nondual practice that today has a growing English language literature. As with Wilber's meditation, the aim of Dzogchen practice is to relax, just BE, become cognizant of Spirit (the ever-present absolute aspect of mind, the ever-present absolute aspect of everything), and realize that your deepest, truest self is nothing other than this primal sentient-active oneness. Again, check out the resource list at <http://www.cop.com/inward.html>.

In Summary

In line with Maslow's contention that deeply understanding what *is* reveals what needs to be done, this paper suggests a two-pronged developmental strategy: **Go outward and acquire relevant intellectual knowledge. Go inward and find self-knowledge and a quiet mind.** It is suggested that we intellectually acquire knowledge of the sciences of energy, complexity, and information; systems and the evolutionary process; consciousness and the workings of the human brain/mind system; human cultures; economic systems; ethics and techniques for changing ethical perspectives; probability as a decision-making tool; the techniques of conflict resolution and effective persuasion; and what people are proposing and doing to solve the problems that the world faces. Regarding self-knowledge and the development of a quiet, receptive, Taoistic approach, it is suggested that we involve ourselves with mindfulness meditation and, at some point, Dzogchen practice.

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² This terminology refers to Wilber’s four-quadrant perspective on reality presented in Wilber, 1995 and Wilber, 1996.

³ This perspective on reality is discussed in Macdonald, 1994 and Macdonald 1998.

⁴ Unfortunately, much of what C. P. Snow said about this situation more than forty years ago still applies. See Snow, 1959.