

## **Wisdom and Wisdom Practices: The Most Hopeful And Useful Platform Toward The Emergence of Integral Consciousness Within The Christian Tradition**

The focus of the First Pilot Wisdom School for Spanish speaking people in Colombian centered on the Introduction of Wisdom Practices to the participants and our conversation with Cynthia gave us the opportunity to learn about the following points:

- **Why Wisdom is so important to bring to our lives.**
- **The need for a deeper awareness of mental awareness, the so-called spiritual awareness, as the foundation of our deepest being and as a building block of the new integral structure of consciousness.**
- **The new integral consciousness will rise on three-centered awareness.**
- **Love, faith, and hope, we must perceive them with all our presence and our body.**
- **Mercy, the great exchange word, we receive through grace, we give back to the quality of our gratitude and our conscious work at transformation.**
- **Conversation about the quality of the transformed life.**

The interview with Cynthia began with this question:

### **A. Why is wisdom so important to bring today to our lives?**

Wisdom is very important for our planet at this particular age, almost you would say crucial for the planet, crucial for the survival, and the reason for this is not even about any theology but about the anatomy, the vision of the body, and how the body works in spiritual work to support it.

So, the Wisdom tradition ever since Saint Benedict and the Desert Fathers before it, added in a powerful dimension of embodiment to the practice. For Saint Benedict it was prayer and work, *Ora et Labora*, and this was not just a necessity, but this was a wisdom practice.

Many years, centuries later the Russian Armenian teacher, G.I Gurdjieff, would explain this paradox a bit further. He said that our human brain is actually three brains. We have three centered awareness. The first brain is the intellectual center, the thinking. The second one is the feeling or emotional center. And the third is the moving center, how the body understands to move through time and space. In the modern West, we have come so heavily to rely on that one, the thinking center, that we don't even understand the necessary function of the other two centers. So, when we get trapped in the intellectual center, our thinking mind, we become angry, separated, fearful, and divided. That is how the mind works. The other two centers bring balance so they allow the mind to rest, like a camera that sits on three legs can stand up and it is only in this configuration that we can move from what Thomas Keating calls our ordinary

awareness into something deeper, called our spiritual awareness, our awareness of the help that is always coming to us from God and from the cosmos itself, but at a level deeper than the thinking mind.

Now, Thomas Keating learned this automatically in his long life as a Trappist monk. The life there was very hard, but the Benedictine form of monasticisms sets things up so that you learn three brained awareness. You get up, you rise early in the morning, you work very hard all day at physical tasks, and you sing for hours in the Divine Office, the choir, which awakens the heart to the beauty of music and the beauty of devotion. So, in the cultivation of all these centers, a person balances and is ready for contemplation, for really being able to sit in the divine presence, with a more balanced and deeper kind of intelligence. So, even though the theology of the Catholic church of that era sort of distrusted the body and taught that we were trying to get away from it to be spiritual, in actual practice, the more we lived in it and through it, the more spiritual we became.

So, one analysis of the Western civilization right now is that we are trapped in our minds, and we are dying for this reason. We do not have the body and the natural rhythms of work to balance our emotions and so even more than usual we get trapped in the stories of ourselves and we feel scarcity and fragility and threat everywhere. And I am not just speaking here out of personal prejudice. One of the great thinkers of our time, the person who started the whole evolution of consciousness movement, named Jean Gebser, said the same thing very much.

In a very important volume, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 500 and some pages long, very small print, in German, Gebster argues that the West is at the dying edge of what he calls the mental structure of consciousness. The edge where everything comes apart at its seams. There has not been another era in the history of consciousness so trapped in the mind and the ego and so separated from the body, the emotions, and the natural fullness of things. Now there is good news here and bad news and then more good news. The first good news is that this mental structure of consciousness was a great evolutionary leap forward for humankind. When it began, 2500 years ago, we saw the great Greek philosophers, we saw the beginnings of profound intellectual thought and technology. It was wonderful, a Western Civilization rose on its back with all its marvels. But now we are at the end of this structure of consciousness and when the mental structure of consciousness ends it ends in a very ugly way, in division, polarization, isolation, and violence as our pictures of reality get threatened and our identity with our own positions become stronger and stronger. Now we see this in the world today, the Western Civilization is disintegrating, and it is disintegrating in wars, violence, suspicion, and mass collective psychosis.

But now the good news, part two. And that is that each structure of consciousness gives way to something that emerges from it that includes it and expresses it yet more powerfully and beautifully. So, while we stand with leg in the demise ending of the mental structure of consciousness, we stand with the other in the beginning of the rising integral structure of consciousness and that for me, explains wisdom practice as we come to know it right here at the threshold on which we are standing. Now Thomas Keating knew this intuitively and when

he began his work on the whole map of the Human Condition, the spiritual journey, he turned to evolutionary models to explain human development. He relied on the work of his friend Ken Wilber, who was in turn the primary interpreter of Gebser in North America. Wilber gave him the map he uses in all his teaching; if you have studied Thomas Keating's Spiritual Journey teachings you know how he uses the stages of consciousness, you know about the magical, the mythic membership and the mental. These all come from Gebser. And what Gebser called integral, we call by other names, non-dual, unitive, unity. But it is pointing in the same direction. Something is coming. The new integral will rise on three-centered awareness, holding in the best of what we have known in ancient civilizations and moving forward into the future with more resources for understanding. Thomas Keating intuitively knew that the start was with Contemplative Prayer, with Centering Prayer and with getting people to stop, "take a vacation from yourself," as he said, to learn to experience a different kind of consciousness. And that is the threshold, the foundation.

It is important to mention, that Gebser presented in his work, structures of consciousness and Ken Wilber put it back into hierarchy, levels, stages. That was a misinterpretation. Gebser talks about these more like rooms in a museum. You go into each one and it still has its character, its fragrance, its aliveness; so, they don't just blend like a cake batter that you stir; they are each uniquely individual precious and what happens is our growing consciousness just learns how to hold them all, like a mother with ten children, each one different, beautiful, precious. That is the oneness that this new kind of consciousness brings, it does not cancel out particularity but pulls that particularity into a greater unity.

I see Wisdom (Wisdom practices) as the most hopeful and useful platform on which to begin to work toward the emergence of this new kind of consciousness within the Christian tradition. It is deeper work. It is to prepare us, to return to the three-centered awareness so that we can begin to live out of a different kind of self. No longer the hypertrophied ego as Gebser calls it, the impacted prison, strong, defended of an ego that we call ourselves today but something more flowing and fluid that can blend with the fragrances of other selves to build higher and more beautiful units of divine love.

My friend the modern Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski, has a lovely saying for this, "two stones cannot occupy the same space, but two fragrances can". So, we are learning to become a new kind of fragrance that can interpenetrate and support and form these larger mystical units without losing our own identity. That is the work of Wisdom in our own time and the reason it is so important. At the end of this era, 2500-year-old era, of cultural domination by the mind and with technology way beyond our own human wisdom at our access, we are at more than little risk of destroying our planet and of destroying the deep human relationships that hold us together and mediate goodness into our world. The mind alone cannot save us, we need this deeper awareness, the spiritual awareness as Thomas Keating called it, as the foundation of our own deepest selfhood and as the building block of this new Integral structure of consciousness.

The other thing that this kind of awareness can do is to reach out and perceive help coming to us from worlds beyond our own. The mind itself is cynical, skeptical, wary, and untrusting. This

deeper Self understands and can absorb the gestures of faith, hope and love that reach out to us from worlds more subtle than our own. In this deeper place, we feel the touch of God and we reach out and act out of it. We trust it. We lose our self-protectiveness. We begin to know that whether I live or die, I am the Lord's. And out of this comes a courage, and a charity, a generosity of heart that allows us to act in this world as healers rather than victims. The world needs to hear this message, to drink in the sacrament of this message but it cannot be conveyed by our words, but only by the quality of our transformed lives. And so, we come together to form wisdom schools, to encourage each other, have patience with each other, hold the mirror up to one another, and finally, to collect our energy at this deeper level and learn how to transmit it to the world which is in desperate need of this nutrient. Wisdom is collective and prophetic.

**B. Cynthia has spoken to us about the need for a deeper awareness of mental awareness, the so-called spiritual awareness, as the foundation of our deepest being and as a building block of this new integral structure of consciousness. This deeper Self understands and can absorb the gestures of faith, hope and love that come to us from more subtle worlds than ours. Tell us how these substances, love, faith, hope, are not that they come from other worlds, they are not mental ideas, they are something that we must perceive with all our presence and our body.**

Well, for example faith, hope and love are known as the theological virtues. Thomas Keating used to like to talk about them that way, the theological virtues and for us in our usual mind, to the thinking mind, a virtue is an admirable quality. But if you look back in the history of alchemy and even the dictionary, you discover something else, and that is that a virtue has agency it, it is a power or a potency to act, you could almost call it an enzyme, a nutrient, or a protein that just as clearly though more subtly nurtures the soil of this planet. The great Jesuit, scientist and theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, was among the first to notice this. In his book *The Divine Milieu*, year back in 1926, he wrote about faith in this way. He said faith, without changing the outside appearance of things has the capacity to make things more supple, more tractable, more alive, more relational. It softens the ground so that new life can appear. And he said sometimes this works dramatically like an outside big miracle, sometimes there is healing, sometimes there is change but usually it works more quietly but no less miraculously by allowing us to come into meaningful relationship with what is happening, so that we are not angry or alienated or frightened but can open ourselves curiously to the hand of Truth at work in all this.

So that is what we mean by subtle energy and receiving subtle help from other worlds. It does not mean 30,000 angels riding in from heaven changing the nature of our planet. It means the addition of a small amount of extra help that let us see that our world is compassionate and coherent, and allows us to act out of that seeing, or in other words, to act out of conscience because that is what conscience is. Conscience is seeing that the world is fundamentally compassionate, coherent, and governed by a higher intelligence and a willingness to submit to that intelligence at all costs. So, again Wisdom is about helping us to till the soil of the inner ground so that we can receive this help that is always available to us.

**C. So, here you are talking about one way, we are being fed from above. How do we feed the above because it is planetary? We receive all these foods. But talk about why it is necessary also to feed once we feed down, but we also feed up.**

Well of course the maps and the ways of looking at this are all metaphors. And one of the classic maps is called the Great Chain of Being and it pictures realms flowing out from the heart of God, the Divine unmanifest, with different physical conditions and requirements. It pictures worlds upon worlds; Jesus called them mini mansions flowing out from the mystical sources of God into form, each one with different worlds, different energies, different conventions governing its operation. But these are simply maps which can torment our minds. There are ways of picturing the unpicturable. They are, as Thomas Keating calls it in "Reflections on the Unknowable" and we have to be very careful not to get tangled up in the map. That is another reason why we need to develop senses beyond our mind because the map is only helpful at the start to help us imagine possibilities, we might not otherwise imagine. It is not a rule book or a guidebook or a schematic diagram to our salvation. The Buddhists say we do not need it at all. And this is true beyond a certain point.

But the problem is, I find that without a beginning map, we stop being able to dream. We cannot picture a reality bigger than our own ego self, our own tribal and political institutions, and the cosmos of the Divine Heart is so vast, so many Realms that we cannot pick it up with just our minds, and yet it exists. And everything depends in this world on our ability to live placing ourselves in that huge whole cosmos, the Divine Heart.

So, the most important thing at stake in this Great Chain of Being map and this was a point that Gurdjieff made, and it is very important, that it is a map about giving and receiving, it is a map about the feeding, the exchange of blessing, of nutrients between two realms. The old Great Chain of Being maps were what scientists would call Redshift maps, the energy winds down, it gets lower and coarser and heavier as you go down the Great Chain of Being. What did Gurdjieff add to this map which was revolutionary. It was that energy moves in two directions, and as human beings by the quality of our conscious work, we give back into the visible universe, an upward energy that allows the whole thing to live in dynamic equilibrium.

This is what we call mercy. The great exchange word means that we receive through grace, we give back to the quality of our gratitude and our conscious work at transformation, and it is in the whole dance both the giving and receiving that the glory of God is revealed and our own human purpose comes clear at last. So again, you do not need a detailed map. You do not need to know Gurdjieff to get the gist of it.

The Sufi dervishes got this instantly, you receive, and you give, and they turn and turn and turn. (Demonstration: You know I have desk chair; they have legs. Swirling for paraplegics.) You get the point, it is intense and both the giving and receiving and that collectively helps to generate and maintain the field in which God can share with the created order, God's greatest gift, the Heart of Love.

Now I think it is very important to put more emphasis on this giving back part back of the equation for human beings. For the most recent centuries we have thought almost exclusively in terms of Human Rights, and this is good and right and proper, but it is also incomplete because the highest qualities in a human being are brought forth when we think in terms of human obligations. What do we owe to the planet that holds us and bears us, to our parents who gave us birth, to future generations? We do not even know yet.

As the great English mystic, Charles Williams once said, “we may not yet be able to live for others, but we clearly live from others” and it is in willingly taking this on not out of coercion but out of gratitude that the freedom and the beauty of the human heart shines most bright. It is in understanding that we belong to a chain of other lives linked from the very beginning right back to the heart of God that our real dignity begins to emerge, and our sense of belonging is restored.

I am thinking right now of the story of Ety Hillesum who had many Jewish friends during World War II. While not Jewish herself, she loved her friends, and their lives became her life, and she helped as she could with the hiding from the Nazis and she too was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. There was a point at which she could still have escaped but she chose not to. The deep bonds of love with her friends were a more important path to her of being a human being than the temptation to save her own skin. Nowadays, we call this quality sanctity and attribute it to special people. But my own teacher at Saint Benedict’s monastery, brother Raphael used to say, sainthood is simply the normal maturation of every human life. We grow beyond the fear of our own death into the joy in the larger life, and that dear friend seems to be the only way it ever works. Counterintuitive but real.

#### **D. Talking about the quality of the transformed life.**

I could say that when contemplative practice began to re-emerge in the 1980’s, it had a personal and private spirit to it. We all came on retreats to enter our own work to dismantle our own false selves to find a personal self-realization that was the big term then. But the problem with that thinking is there is no such thing as personal self-realization, if by that you mean my own and not yours too. We live in a relational field and in fact, Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton both said that being a person begins when you know you live in a relational field. Before that you are just an individual, you live for yourself alone, and of course, this is a description of the mental structure of consciousness, it lives for itself alone. So, part of entering and midwifing this new integral structure of consciousness is realizing our personhood, knowing that we live from, for and toward others and this is the new shape of contemplative work. The old metaphors were mainly psychotherapy metaphors doing your own work. Now we are learning more that we can only do our own work together, and this is not a funky codependent fellowship because we are afraid to be alone, it is rather because giving and receiving is the very nature of the transformational path, so a different flavor to community not for clinging but for bestowing.

## E. How would you articulate the prophetic call to action of the contemplative?

It is tricky. We have been talking about that the whole time but there are ways and ways of looking at it, and much of our prophetic action today is based in anger and judgment and division. You see this so much in the liberal progressive spirituality of the West. We act because we think our ways are right. We act out of urgency and self-importance. We act out of identification with a role or inner image, a good person, a righteous person, a spiritual person. All of that is like putting poison into our action. There is only one way to align that will bring about the desired results and that is simply through conscience. It does not judge others. It does not claim the moral high ground. It has no sense of urgency, that would make it rushed or violent. It simply acts by aligning with what the heart knows is true. And doing it with the simple sweetness humility and gratitude like Etty Hillesum with her friends in the concentration camp. No attention called to herself, simply compassionate action for its own sake. That kind of action leaves no backlash.

So, there is one point that I always disagreed with Thomas Keating, and we used to laugh and have fun about it, but I never convinced him. He always used the word identification in a positive sense to mean solidarity. God identifies with humanity, he liked to say but in the spiritual esoteric training that I have learned, identification is always a negative, it means doing something with your sense of self caught up in it, so that it finally becomes all about you. And one of the great problems with political actions as it is playing out in liberal progressive circles today is that it is metastatically identified. We do things out of this strong and often unconscious sense of our own ego investment in them. It is a trap and unless you spot it in yourself, you not only trap yourself but everyone else in the circle around you. So, Thomas Keating was quite aware of this possibility, but he tried to deal with it in his phrase "over identification". He used to talk about over identification with your group or tribe or spiritual group like identification is okay but over identification is not okay. It is a question of quantity not quality.

The real issue is that action based on identification is already fatally flawed and the real challenge is to learn how to work compassionately from a non-identified place. As Gerald May, the American psychologist, once said in his beautiful book *Will and Spirit* as identification with self-image ceases to be your motivation, your actions become reflections of compassion absolute. In other words, if we can just get ourselves out of the way and trust in the objective goodness of God to act, then action can proceed rightly, it will not lose its ground in compassion, it will not divide, polarize, or judge and in that, it will heal. But until we have the courage to face identification in our own self, to acknowledge how hungry we are, how much our false-self emotional programs for happiness still rule the show, until we can actually see the hidden agendas of esteem/ affection, security/ survival, and power/control at work in our worthy causes, we will wind up sabotaging the very causes we are so passionate about it. It is a hard teaching. Very few have gotten it, perhaps Gandhi, perhaps the Quakers. And I think that Contemplative Outreach because of Thomas Keating's ambivalent use of the word identification still has not gone far enough in teaching that identified action even for worthy causes is going to wind up hurting somebody.

---

The interview with Cynthia Bourgeault was carried out by video conference during the First School of Wisdom in Colombia from February 3 to 6, 2023. The interview was led by Cornelia Serna and the parallel translation from English to Spanish by Marcela Huepe.

[\(Original Interview link\)](#)

The material presented here, has been extracted from the video. All the material presented by Cynthia was transcribed and then translated into Spanish. We thank Claudia Botero and Josefina Fernández for this work, so the teachings of Cynthia may be available in both languages to achieve greater dissemination of her message.

.