



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

## “The Fourth Turning of Buddhism”

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Ken Wilber (1949-) is a contemporary American philosopher who has written a host of books related to what he calls his Integral Theory. And in general I find many of his frameworks for thinking about the world both helpful personally as well as particularly relevant for contemporary Unitarian Universalism. As the name “**Integral Theory**” implies, Wilber seeks to ***integrate the best of all available sources of knowledge and experience related to any given field.***

This postmodern approach is related to our “big tent” approach as Unitarian Universalists. As UUs, we have not one source — or even two or three sources — but six broad sources. We UUs insist that we are stronger because of our diversity: we challenge one another to take into account multiple perspectives we might otherwise neglect. We celebrate that mystics and social justice advocates; Jews, Christians, and Muslims; Hindus, Buddhists, and Daoists; Humanists and scientists; Pagans and representatives of Indigenous Spiritualities are all invited to be together in the same congregation, working to build the Beloved Community.

And for me, Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory has been one among many helpful ways of thinking about how all those different perspectives relate and potentially integrate together. If you are interested in learning more, back in 2007 he released a short introduction to his perspective called The Integral Vision, which is a good starting point. If you want to go deeper particularly in the area of religion, on the theory-side, I recommend his book Integral Spirituality.

On the more practical side of cultivating firsthand religious experience in our contemporary world, I recommend his book Integral Life Practice.

And while I have no intention of trying to read everything Wilber has written, there is one book by him that I haven't read, but hope to find time for soon. It is called Grace and Grit — and is about his journey with his wife, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1983, ten days after their wedding. She died of the disease six years later in 1989.

For this morning, I would like to invite us to explore some of the insights in Wilber's newest book The Fourth Turning: Imagining the Evolution of an Integral Buddhism. (It's currently only available in an abbreviated e-book form, but will eventually be released as a full book.) I appreciate his interest in tracing the turning points in the history of Buddhism. For those who are interested Phyllis Tickle in her book The Great Emergence has traced a similar evolution of turning points in Christianity: the way radical shifts happened in the wake of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, then in Middle Ages, and again in the Reformation, and once again today religions are shifting in our age in which it is said that "Google is the new Gutenberg."

Wilber and other scholars have traced similar paradigm shifts in the history of Buddhism. The first turning is the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who lived and taught in India sometime around the 5th century B.C.E. in (about 500 years before the life of the historical Jesus). This manifestation of the tradition is probably best represented today by Theravādan Buddhism. (3)

The second major turning of the Buddhist wheel of dharma is often traced to the teachings of the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150 – c. 250 C.E.) about emptiness from within the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism. A Third Great Turning from around the same time is known as the Yogācāra school (3).

All of these turnings represent major paradigm shifts that led to new innovations and insights. And depending on how you want to count — since Tantric (or Esoteric) Buddhism is sometimes called the Fourth Turning in Buddhism — Ken Wilber is inviting us to consider that we are in the midst of a major new Fourth (or potentially Fifth) Turning on the Buddhist Wheel of Dharma (viii). Regardless, here's the most important point: irrespective of how many previous

turnings one counts, Wilber is proposing that our invitation today — in an age in which “Google is the new Gutenberg” — is to take all the previous wisdom from the 2,500 hundred years of Buddhist traditions and combine those with the best insights of modern science and everything we know as postmodern citizens of the early twenty-first century. Wilber’s phrase for this (which to me is deeply resonant with our Six Sources) is to “**transcend and include**” (vi). In other words, the challenge is to *transcend* the limitations of previous paradigms (so that you are no longer constrained by obsolete teachings), but also to *include* all the parts of the tradition that remain valuable. The desire to “transcend and include” is precisely what we have tried to do with our UU Six Sources: we are striving to include the best parts of the traditions we have inherited from the past, while also transcending their limitations to create a new integral whole that is worthy of all we know to be true in light of twenty-first century knowledge. Said differently, when you join a UU congregation, you are invited to bring everything with you from your past that is still relevant, while letting go of what is obsolete.

And as I’ve been reflecting on what it means to cultivate a twenty-first century, pragmatic Buddhism, there are at least three touchstones that come to mind that can guide our way forward. The first is to realize that the **Buddhist tradition has many of the same promises and perils of all the other world religions**. What I mean is that in the West, we are for the most part, familiar with all the shadow sides of the Christian tradition (such as the Crusades or the Inquisition) or all the shadow sides of the Islamic tradition (such as Islamist terrorism). But Buddhism — just as with any religion or secular philosophy — can also be perverted and used as an excuse for violence, division, and oppression. To name only three examples from our world today, as reported in [The Washington Post](#):

- In Sri Lanka, where about 70 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist, a group of monks formed the Bodu Bala Sena or the Buddhist Power Force in 2012 to “protect” the country’s Buddhist culture. The force, nicknamed BBS, carried out at least 241 attacks against Muslims and 61 attacks against Christians in 2013....
- In Myanmar, at least 300 Rohingya Muslims, whose ancestors were migrants from Bangladesh, have been killed and up to 300,000 displaced [by nationalistic Buddhists].

Ashin Wirathu, a monk who describes himself as the Burmese “bin Laden,” is encouraging the violence by viewing the Rohingya presence as a Muslim “invasion.”

- And in Buddhist-majority Thailand, at least 5,000 people have died in Muslim-Buddhist violence in the country’s South. The country’s Knowing Buddha Foundation is not a violent group, but it advocates for a blasphemy law to punish anyone who offends the faith [according to their orthodoxy]. It wants Buddhism declared the state religion and portrays popular culture as a threat to believers.

So much depends on what an individual or community brings to a tradition, as far as whether any given tradition becomes a means of liberation or oppression. A perspective from the Fourth Turning in Buddhism challenges us to take responsibility for *letting go* of obsolete parts of religions that are oppressive and anachronistic and *emphasizing* the parts that continue to be of great value — in the case of Buddhism, for example, for increasing compassion, clarity, concentration, and equanimity.

So that is my first touchstone: be aware that the Buddhist tradition has many of the same promises and perils of all the other world religions. The second touchstone, if you do feel drawn (as I am) toward Buddhist practices, is to be wary of what is sometimes called **Spiritual Materialism**: the ways that spiritual traditions like Buddhism can be co-opted and commodified to support oppressive systems instead of transforming them.

To name only the most recent example that comes to mind, are any of you fans of the television show *Mad Men*? If so, the final two minutes of the series finale from last Sunday night is a prime example of what I’m referring to. (Fair warning: I am about to spoil the last scene of the show, but if you are a big fan of the show, you’ve already seen it.) That being said the final scene has the protagonist, the advertising man Don Draper having a spiritual awakening during an oceanfront, outdoor sunrise meditation class at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (which was a huge part of the human potential movement in the 1960s). That scene closes with the class, including Don, sitting in a meditation posture, closing their eyes, and chanting “Om.”

As the camera zooms in on the blissed out face of Don Draper, you begin to hear the voiceover of the famous 1971 Coca-cola ad “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.” The ad shows

young people from all over the world gathered on a beautiful hilltop. They are all holding open Coke bottles as they sing together:

I'd like to buy the world a home /  
And furnish it with love  
Grow apple trees and honey bees /  
And snow white turtle doves

I'd like to teach the world to sing / In perfect harmony  
I'd like to buy the world a Coke / And keep it company  
That's the real thing  
What the world wants today / Is the real thing

For what it's worth, I think it was a great ending to the show — confronting us with a strong example of the manipulative power of advertising (in which you can't help yourself from having positive associations with the Coca-Cola brand reinforced even as you perhaps realize you are being manipulated).

The jingle is such an earworm, the harmony is beautiful, and the mountain top scene with young people is moving. And it starts out with an admirable sentiment: “I'd like to buy the world a home / And furnish it with love.” That would change the world. As Habitat for Humanity challenges us, everyone deserves a “simple, decent place to live.” But then the commodification comes in as if equally important to buying the world a home is buying the world a Coke: “I'd like to buy the world a Coke...That's the real thing. What the world wants today / Is the real thing.” When you take half a step back, **could anything be less of the “real thing” than a high-fructose corn syrup, artificially caramel-colored soda?** (Other than the real thing for contributing to obesity and Type 2 Diabetes?!) But Don — or really a real life ad man — has taken the beauty of human compassion and of joining together harmoniously across traditional divisions and strongly associated it with Coca-Cola through the power of a catchy jingle. And my point for this morning is that just as Buddhism and other spiritual traditions can be subject to various fundamentalisms, they can also be commodified in ways that support broken,

exploitative systems instead of fulfilling their potential for transforming ourselves and our world for the better.

I would relatedly invite you to consider that the secularized “Mindful Based Stress Reduction” movement — which as a whole is doing a lot of good in the world — is also being manipulated in many ways. For example, it has also been used cynically by some to communicate the message of “keep overworking”... just add 30 minutes of meditation at the beginning of your day so that you can lower your blood pressure and handle stress better (and overwork more efficiently and for longer!). In contrast, **the deeper promise of the Buddhist tradition is a much more radical transformation of cultivating insight into the impermanent nature of reality (and of our “self”), our relationship to unsatisfactoriness/suffering, and of how deeply interconnected we are to one another and all of reality.**

As I move toward my conclusion, allow me to offer a third and final touchstone that points to the actual ‘real thing’ of Buddhism. Related to “Spiritual Materialism” is what is sometimes called **Spiritual Bypass**, the “**hope that Buddhism will be a way to live without vulnerability and risky, deep, empathetic connections,**” which is the opposite of what authentic Buddhist practices leads one toward — that is, toward connection, compassion, and interdependence. The Buddhist teacher Stephen Levine says it this way:

If prayer would do it

I’d pray.

If reading esteemed thinkers would do it

I’d be halfway through the Patriarchs.

If discourse would do it

I’d be sitting with His Holiness

every moment he was free.

If contemplation would do it

I’d have translated the Periodic Table

to hermit poems, converting  
matter to spirit.

If even fighting would do it  
I'd already be a black belt.

**If anything other than love could do it  
I'd have done it already  
and left the hardest for last.**

And following The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we often talk about our goal as creating the Beloved Community (which through love and compassion seeks to bring people together who previously considered themselves enemies).

And to consider what it means to talk about the Beloved Community from a Buddhist perspective there is a powerful quote from the contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. (Of note, a year before his assassination, Dr. King wrote to the Nobel Committee, "As the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1964, I now have the pleasure of proposing to you the name of Thich Nhat Hanh for that award in 1967. I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.") Hanh has written:

"The Buddha predicted that the next Buddha would be...the Buddha of love.... It is possible that the next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. **The next Buddha may take the form of a community [*sangha*], a community practicing understanding and loving kindness, a community practicing mindful living.** And the practice can be carried out as a group, as a city, as a nation, [as a world, as a cosmos]."

May we here at UUCF be part of creating such Beloved Communities.

We can't control the vicissitudes of the world, but we can learn to respond to whatever comes our way with greater mindfulness, insight, and compassion. And for this morning, I leave you with this Buddhist blessing for the coming days and weeks:

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you be whole.