

The Guru and the Pandit

An excerpt from WIE's new feature "The Guru and the Pandit," a dialogue between Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber.

🔊 [Audio Clip: Thou Shalt Not Judge](#)

The Conspiracy of Mediocrity

Ken Wilber: Let me just say that in a student who's got a really bad case of boomeritis—which is to say, pretty much any cultural creative out there, all fifty million strong—the internal stance is, "I'm holding on to my position and *nobody* can tell me what to do. My state, just as it is, has the same worth as any other." And that stance effectively aborts any real transformation.

And so, for example, most of the people involved with what I call Boomeritis Buddhism even deny the importance of *satori* or Enlightenment or Awakening. Because that's saying some states *are* higher than others—and we shouldn't be judgmental. But guess what? Some states are higher. And so the entire *raison d'être* of Buddhism gets tossed out the door because it offends the pluralistic ego. Yikes!

Andrew Cohen: *So the whole point is that with boomeritis, real radical transformation is against the rules.*

KW: Yes. Well, it has to be.

AC: *To dare to even speak about radical transformation, let alone call other people to a higher level, is against the unstated rules. And of course, one's definitely going to be put in one's place for doing something like that. But unless the possibility of genuine transformation is actually declared, unless one is willing to demonstrate it publicly and to call other people to the same, no one is even going to know that it's possible. And then unknowingly, everybody's going to be participating in the conspiracy of mediocrity.*

KW: Yes, the conspiracy of mediocrity, which is basically the conspiracy to express your ego instead of transcending it or letting go of it. The idea is "If I can really emote and express my self-contraction with sincerity, I'm somehow spiritual." So then we have a convention of the self-contractions, and that's basically boomeritis spirituality. It's a problem, to put it mildly. And it's a concern to me that a lot of teachers actually embrace that kind of postmodern flatland pluralism.

AC: *Well, I think that part of the reason for that is that many people are teaching now who actually have had little if any enlightenment experience or satori themselves. And if one is a teacher and yet has little authentic experience on which to base one's teaching, one is going to end up being in the kind of position you described.*

KW: I think that's certainly part of the picture. Another part of the picture, which concerns me even more, is that I know some teachers who have had a very strong *satori*, but they still interpret it through the mental apparatus that they have in place. And so they interpret it through boomeritis, the mean green meme, pluralistic flatland. And that, frankly, is extremely unsettling.

AC: *You know, over the years that I have been working with students, I've seen repeatedly that people who are at different levels of development can have a similar or even identical spiritual experience but will interpret what the experience means in a completely different way. And therefore it has become clear to me that the way we interpret our experience is far more important than the actual experience that we have.*

KW: I think they're both very, very important. And certainly the interpretative component has an enormous hand in this. One of the things that I've tried to do in various writings, as you know, is develop a kind of matrix of various types of altered states. This matrix has two major components. There are levels or *stages* of consciousness, and there are also altered *states* of consciousness. And you may experience a gross, subtle, causal, or nondual *state* of consciousness, but it will



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inevitably be interpreted through whatever stage of development you're at. So developmentally, you can be at the traditionalist level, or the modernist level, or the postmodernist level, or the integral level, and you can have a subtle or even nondual experience, but you're going to interpret it through whatever apparatus you have. So if, developmentally, you're at the green meme, you can have a very profound *satori*, but you're going to interpret it in pluralistic, flatland terms.

AC: *Yes, and one will interpret it through one's self-infatuation or narcissism.*

KW: That's the downside of pluralism—narcissism—that's the boomeritis form, the unhealthy form. And that's how we end up with Boomeritis Buddhism, or it could be Boomeritis Shamanism or Boomeritis Vedanta, et cetera.

AC: *Because in whichever case, the satori or mystical breakthrough is being used to affirm one's own ego.*

KW: Yes, alas.

AC: *The spiritual experience, which ideally should be a stepping-stone to less ego and greater transparency, can in fact be the opposite, a catalytic event that empowers the ego, making it even more solid—and then we end up with real enlightened narcissism.*

KW: That part to me is very disturbing, actually. And that's why I think Boomeritis Buddhism is the biggest internal threat to the dharma in the West—that's my own personal opinion. And we might as well come clean ourselves—I don't think any of us escapes some degree of boomeritis. You know, I've got a dose of it, I think you've got a dose of it, every human being who comes out of this culture has a dose of it. The question is, how much, what can we do about it, can we at least spot it, and is there *some* portion of us that's bigger than it? And I think that's of course why the student-teacher relationship is so important. Hopefully teachers like you and me and others have to some extent recognized this problem and moved a bit beyond it, or else we are not going to be of much help to anybody, but are simply going to reproduce our own boomeritis and now call it "spiritual."

AC: *That's true. And don't you think the real issue here is dealing with ego? I mean, declaring ego to be the main issue in relationship to spiritual transformation is definitely not cool if you have boomeritis. In the East-meets-West spiritual marketplace, more often than not, self-acceptance seems to have replaced the goal of enlightenment, or real ego transcendence. The goal of the spiritual path has always been radical, and very demanding—an enormous leap beyond ego. And now suddenly it's about accepting ourselves the way we already are. And too often, powerful Buddhist and Vedantic enlightenment concepts are used as techniques to actually relieve the seeker of having to pay the price of transformation—to relieve them of the burden of having to really face themselves and change.*

KW: I think that's very true. It's part of our therapeutic culture, where we don't make any judgments because that would hurt egoic self-esteem, and so all we do is embrace, console, and celebrate the personal self. Sophisticated forms of the therapeutic culture replace "subjectivity" with an emphasis on communal awareness or "intersubjectivity," and now intersubjectivity has become the main home of boomeritis. But all are variations on a celebration of the entrenched green meme and its therapeutic culture.

AC: *So spiritual practice becomes nothing more than a form of therapy, where self-acceptance rather than ego-transcendence is the goal. The "practice" is being "nonjudgmental" under all circumstances and one ends up tying oneself up in knots trying to cultivate a dubious kind of compassion that often goes against all common sense.*

KW: Yes, what Chogyam Trungpa called "idiot compassion." That's the therapeutic culture that is such a large part of boomeritis. But again, there are positive sides to the therapeutic culture and the green meme, and we need to honor those. Some people have low self-esteem, they're devastated, they've been abused and beaten and all of that—of course they need to improve self-esteem. But once you've done that, you need to let go of it. You really, really, really need to let go of self and egoic self-esteem altogether. And the problem is that therapists are basically pimps for *samsara*. They want to hold onto the egoic self-contraction and make it feel good about itself.

And yet the fundamental stance of enlightenment is: "If you feel rotten about yourself—good! That's the beginning of a correct perception."

AC: *That's right!*



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by Jessica Roemischer

KW: "You *should* fundamentally hate yourself in order to start moving beyond this tangled, contracted mess called you." That is the awakening of discriminating wisdom that opens up the possibility of higher, wider, deeper states and stages.

You know, there's that enigmatic statement of Christ's in the New Testament: "He who hateth not his own soul cannot be my disciple." Of course that makes perfect sense, but it is exactly what the therapeutic society does not want to hear or allow.

And so if people come and they say, "Gee, I'm not feeling too good about myself," the initial response should be, "Excellent, let's see if we can increase that. At some point you will find that your real Self is radically free of your small-self ego. And therefore you have a fullness and a freedom that is true Self esteem. But it starts by fundamentally throwing out this pitiful small slice of reality you call your ego."

AC: *And as one goes deeper and deeper into the process of transformation, it gradually becomes clear what a daunting foe the ego really is, and what a poison narcissism is. We become aware of the long shadow that ego casts over our own consciousness and over the consciousness of others. But this is something that we're not going to be able to appreciate until we actually begin to awaken.*

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