

“Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies” (TCTSE—“Taxi”)

Final Reading Notes

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Background

“Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies” (TCTSE) is a meaty article by Ken Wilber¹ first posted in late 2002 on his website (<http://wilber.shambhala.com>) as “Excerpt G”—the last in a series of excerpts that were posted as drafts of material that would go into Vol. 2 of the Kosmos Trilogy—Vol. 1 having been **Sex, Ecology, & Spirituality**, 1995. (Volume 2 is still pending.) Other excerpts posted in the same time period describe the start of what some have called “Wilber-5”—characterized by a “post-metaphysical” stance and a systematic “methodological pluralism” as refinements of the AQAL approach first described in SES. (I don’t find any Excerpts E or F there now, only A, B, C, D, and G). Excerpt G was published pretty much without change in “the new Larry Dossey journal:” *Explore Journal of Science & Healing* in July of 2005 (a bit more on this below). I believe some of the other excerpt materials were later worked into **Integral Spirituality** published in 2007.

Now that “A Scientific Map for Subtle Energies” (SMSE) is in solid first draft form², I have a working connection with Sean Esbjörn-Hargens, and I’m increasingly confident that I’m onto something new with the STS, I’m aiming for this to be a final reading of TCTSE in preparation for a rough 1st draft of something like, “Now, Towards a Comprehensive *Scientific* Theory of Subtle Energies.” I think I’ve read the article through on at least four previous occasions—this will be the 5th. I’ll focus here on the print published version, but will also refer to my notes on the on-line version.

(Note added 1/19/10: since this was originally drafted, the language in SMSE has been simplified in terms of the Anthropic Cosmological Timeline (ACT), a presentation was given at the Science & Nonduality Conference in October,³ and I’ve begun a collaboration with “anthropic cosmologist” and physicist Richard Amoroso—author of the recent scientific monograph from World Scientific **The Holographic Anthropic Multiverse**. In light of these developments I would otherwise change little of what I say here, however.)

¹ Ostensibly—I’ve since learned that it was actually written by Sean Esbjörn-Hargens PhD while doing a kind of post-doctorate under Ken’s direct personal supervision.

² Posted at <http://www.svamd.com>

³ Video and other materials from this presentation posted at <http://www.svamd.com>.

At ISSSEEM June '08, I asked keynote presenter Larry Dossey if there had been any response to the piece in his journal. He said there had been none. By way of further homework, over the past few weeks I've again looked on-line for any signs of a *significant* response to TCTSE. I can find none. However, I did find a few items of note that I'd not seen before:

- A brief report at the Esalen Center for Theory and Practice website regarding a discussion of TCTSE among the group of invited conferees at “Survival of Bodily Death” may 4-9 2003.⁴ “Many felt that a premature and meretricious⁵ taxonomy may be pleasing to some, but it could close theoretical doors that may need to remain open.” Michael Murphy, while expressing his excitement over Wilber’s “synoptic approach,” echoed these sentiments calling for “theoretical pluralism” and a richer natural history *before* focusing on theory. Apart from Murphy, looking at the bios of the participants reveals that they are mostly university-based academics and are thus unlikely to have much sympathy for Wilber’s overtly esotericist orientation—and orientation still highly suspect in most academic circles.
- “Subtle Energies Viewed from Four Quadrants,” a paper by Simon A. Senzon in the Winter 2007 issue of the AQAL Journal of Theory and Practice (vol 2, No. 4). This strikes me as an “introductory level” article. From my Yoga Science perspective, this piece does not bring a critical perspective to TCTSE nor does it break any new ground; it brings neither yogic nor scientific sophistication to the table. It might be of some use in introducing the topic in the context of training non-medical health care personnel—nurses, massage therapists, body workers, chiropractors, etc...
- A two part audio dialog between Ken Wilber and Michael Murphy posted on the Integral Naked and Integral Life websites as “The Supermind Part 1: the Divinization of the Body,” and “The Supermind Part 2: Evolution beyond Enlightenment.”⁶ Although a fast-paced, sophisticated, and fascinating dialog, and one in which one can feel that Ken and Michael see eye to eye on many key points, Michael does not really speak to Ken’s article—apparently sent to him by Ken. Instead, he stays focused on his own work, with extensive reference to Aurobindo’s and Poortman’s⁷ views. (Meanwhile zero acknowledgement is made by either party of either the recent, extensive, and original published works by nor the profound realization of Adi Da Samraj that bear directly on all topics here discussed. “Not invented here syndrome” perhaps?)

My previous readings are annotated as follows:

⁴ <http://www.esalenctr.org/display/confpage.cfm?confid=17&pageid=129&pgtype=1>

⁵ A word of derision with connotations of tawdry, falsely attractive, or pretentious.

⁶ <http://in.integralinstitute.org/talk.aspx?id=35>

⁷ Vehicles of Consciousness: the Concept of Hylic Pluralism, Vols I – IV, 1978, Theosophical Society of the Netherlands.

- Of a print-out of the online version (dated 3/24/03)
 - “3/03” is in yellow highlighter with marginal comments in red pen.
 - 1/04/04 is in blue highlighter with 11 handwritten points on a separate sheet.
 - 12/02/07 in green highlighter with 11 handwritten points on two separate sheets (written without reference to the ‘04 notes).
- In the Explore published version (July 2005, Vol 1, #4, pps 252 – 270)
 - I learned at ISSSEEM ’07 that Ken’s article had been published in Explore Journal. The following month, back home, I called Christine Jackson, publisher of the journal Explore: For the Professional, a publication well-known within alterative medical circles after a run of about 15 years. She told me that what I was looking for was in “the other Explore Journal,” that she was angry with Larry Dossey for “stealing” the name from her, and that when she had protested to him, he’d replied, “sue me.” I found that Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing was in its first year of existence as the “new Dossey Journal” (the old one having been Alternative Therapies), and published by Elsevier “the world’s leading publisher one science and health information.” On 7/2/07 I ordered a single copy of Vol 1 #4, the issue with Ken’s article.
 - Initial read-through with yellow highlighter—undated—probably sometime in late July, early August ’07.
 - Studied in parallel with the older on-line print out in the 12/02/07 reading with some green highlighting.

Here begin notes on this 5th reading:

The article is situated in this issue of Explore as the first in the major section titled “Clinical Articles,” with a subheading “Hypothesis,” and is presented without an abstract. My sense is that taken together this positioning might have tended to isolate the piece from its intended readership:

- It is not a “clinical” piece at all—neither Ken nor Sean are clinicians.
- What is presented is not framed as a scientific “hypothesis,” but rather as a very broad esotericist-based theoretical framework—it seems to me to be a stretch to think of this as hypothesis, especially in a supposedly “scientific” journal of this kind. At the same time, by the time the reader gets to the “three hypotheses in Step Three of Part One,” what is being referred to should be pretty obvious. This issue could have been addressed in a contextualizing introduction (as noted below re how the piece starts off).

- The author provided no “executive summary” to orient the reader.

TCTSE consists of three parts, here, one at a time in bold:

Part One: Introduction: from the Great Chain of Being to Postmodernism in Three Easy Steps

- The article begins with a very thoughtful review of “what the great wisdom traditions have to tell us”—a review that summarizes Ken’s synoptic learning and understanding as well as his sophisticated appreciation for the inherently complex topology of relations between “higher” and “lower” in the traditions. However, what strikes me is the lack of any contextualizing of this opening statement for general readers—no matter how “esotericist-friendly” the readership of Explore might be expected to be. When it was “Excerpt G,” the piece was clearly to be seen in the context of the preceding excerpts. Here, it seems to presume that readers will already have a sense of what the “great wisdom traditions” are and why we might want to begin by consulting them. In a journal devoted ostensibly to “science and healing,” perhaps it is no wonder there has been no response—science and the great wisdom traditions have little history of friendly relations. The article thus “starts out on the wrong foot,” thus making the following “three easy steps” ones that few have been able or willing to follow.
- Step One updates the interpretative framework of the experiential base of the wisdom traditions from pre-modern to modern using a key insight of Ken’s AQAL framework: “that matter is not the lowest rung in the great spectrum of existence, but the *exterior form of every rung*. The AQAL framework places the findings of the modern sciences in a holarchy in the exterior quadrants on the right, whereas the “findings” of the pre-modern wisdom traditions can be arrayed in the interior quadrants on the left. In this way, “matter is not lower with consciousness higher, but matter and consciousness are the exterior and interior of every occasion.” This is a key feature of Ken’s “post-metaphysical” approach. As a result, “what the pre-modern sages took to be META-physical realities are in many cases INTRA-physical realities.”⁸ I think this is a great point and one that I’ve not adequately acknowledged in SMSE—we might think of this as “the step from metaphysics to *intraphysics*.”
- Step Two further updates the wisdom traditions by adding “the post-modern turn,” in recognition of the now well-established findings from the past century that “much of what the ancient sages took as metaphysical absolutes is actually culturally molded and conditioned.” The lower two AQAL quadrants—the collective interior or cultural on the left and the collective exterior or social on the right—accommodate this. These collective realities simply cannot be ignored. What cross-cultural truths or universals do exist “must be identified with research methodology, not speculative metaphysics.” All

⁸ With a caveat: “as we will see, there are some aspects of the higher dimensions that might indeed be truly meta-physical.”

four quadrants are inherent in our language as first, second, and third person pronouns—and we would find it impossible to communicate without all three. Good points.

- Step Three finally addresses the question of where to place “subtle energies” within this holarchic AQAL framework in the form of three hypotheses:
 - Hypothesis one: *increasing evolution brings increasing complexity of form*. This refers to how evolution appears in the right upper quadrant—the exterior/objective individual quadrant—“from quarks, to protons, to atoms, to molecules, to cells, to complex organisms.” Well-established starting place, I feel.
 - Hypothesis two: *increasing complexity of form (in the UR quadrant) is correlated with increasing interior consciousness (in the UL quadrant)*. This seems logical enough, and has a long history behind it over the past four or five decades. However, Wallace has been critical recently of this approach as it has been pursued and interpreted in cognitive neuroscience as a program of finding the “neural correlates of consciousness,” especially where correlation slides semantically into equivalence.⁹
 - Hypothesis three: *increasing complexity of form is correlated with increasing subtlety of energies*. The evolution of ever more complex gross material forms is accompanied by a corresponding evolution of ever more complex (and therefore “subtle”) energy patterns—“a subtilization of corresponding energies.” An extensive footnote on page 258 explains an important idea: the matter = energy principle of physics is used to argue that in the RUQ, as matter forms complexify, energy patterns subtilize. Thus as we find reference in the traditions to gross, subtle, and causal *matter*, we find reference to corresponding “*bodies*” gross, subtle, and causal that can be the “vehicles” for states of consciousness in the LUQ that are in turn “gross, subtle, and causal.” Here again, the tricky part may have to do with how observed correlations are interpreted: materialists are demonstrably more than happy to see any such correlations as clear evidence for their reductive position. Perhaps a better formulation would be: *increasing complexity of form is correlated with increasing expression of the subtler potentialities of energy*.

Part Two: An Integral Theory of Subtle Energies

- The Spectrum of Subtle Energies: first, the traditions commonly refer to some kind of spectrum of energy. Here, this spectrum is reinterpreted via the “naturalistic turn” of the AQAL framework as representing a spectrum that is intra-physical rather than meta-physical. Recapitulating the extensive footnote to Hypothesis three: “complexity of gross

⁹ See his Hidden Dimensions, for example, pages 21-23. “At present, there is not empirical evidence that any neural process is equivalent to any mental process.”

form (in the URQ) is correlated with an increasing degree of consciousness (in the ULQ) and, in the URQ itself, a subtilization of corresponding energies.” “The ghost disconnected from the machine is actually intimately correlated with the degree of complexity of the machine.” There’s that perhaps too ambiguous term again—*correlation*.

- Point of information: there is no evidence that along with prokaryotes life evolved “starting with viruses.” (p 259)
- The association proposed above between degree of complexification of form and subtlety of associated energy is here applied as follows:
 - Simple life ~ etheric energies
 - Complex life (e.g. reptiles) ~ astral energies
 - Higher life (e.g. mammals) ~ psychic energies
- Point of information: there is no evidence that the nesting of holons goes on “endlessly.” (p 260) This relates to Ken’s oft-repeated but never clarified phrase “turtles all the way down.” The STS aimed to remedy this and in the process discovered the synchronic view—in my view *the missing link between AQAL and a science of subtle energies*.
- Comment: figures 7 and 8 could benefit from more explanatory legends and labeling of figure elements.
- Comment: the statement that ends this section, “consciousness itself is not energy, and energy is not consciousness” strikes me as unnecessarily dualistic and prematurely categorical.
- Terminology: How best to sub-divide the spectrum of subtle energies, the spectrum of levels of consciousness, the spectrum of levels of material complexity? The answer is here proposed as arbitrary, like the difference between Celsius and Fahrenheit—as if these spectra are *continuous* like temperature. In Table 2, however, a specific set of seven distinct levels is proposed as necessary “to cover most of the relevant issues”—a set that is based directly on the wisdom traditions. This suggests there may be significant *dis*-continuities within the spectrum, or perhaps distinct features that are emergent at different levels. My own view is that this spectrum is not continuous and that there may be at least two kinds of natural “break points” within it: those that arise as a consequence of specific frequency related processes and harmonics (like emission and absorption spectra, for example), *and* those that arise as a consequence of the fundamental differences between gross, subtle, and causal that I’ve proposed are inherent as *the meta-levels of complexity*.

- Involution and Evolution: “where is the quantum vacuum located in this scheme?” Many have proposed that this is “something like spirit, supermind, the Tao, Brahman, the Void of Buddhism, and so on. The result, in my personal opinion, has been calamitous.” The proposed solution: in *involution*, Spirit first creates soul, which creates mind, which creates energy (prana), which creates matter. Thus, “the quantum vacuum is spirit-as-prana, which gives rise to spirit-as-matter.” This proposal will warrant further consideration in terms of how QM is interpreted (and I feel there are any number of important and valuable contributions here¹⁰) and in light of my STS-based Yoga Science Cosmology.
- The Two Truths Doctrine: the word “doctrine” is a sign of trouble right off. This section is primarily a critique of Bohm’s notions of implicate and explicate orders as the “union of bad physics with bad mysticism.” The proposed solution is to keep clearly in mind that there is both involution and evolution, and that the wisdom traditions are unanimous on the Two Truths Doctrine. I feel this is an over statement, most specifically for Dzogchen. Norbu Rinpoche has very specifically criticized the Two Truths Doctrine¹¹ as problematic when it comes to expressing nondual truth. Thus, what seems to be expressed here retains a dualistic flavor that may not be necessary for a “comprehensive theory of subtle energies.” Beyond the recognition of the *difference* between duality and nonduality, there is a recognition of the nonduality of duality and nonduality. Thus even the Two Truths Doctrine itself is a form of “provisional understanding.” No doubt a tricky point, but one that may become crucial as we move from integral to radical.
- Summary of Quantum Realities: Here outlined below. I critique each summary point:
 - “Quantum vacuum has vast energy; spirit is unqualifiable.” As a critique of facile popularizing this may be true enough, but in terms of the more sophisticated interpretations of QM this strikes me as unnecessarily dualistic.
 - “Quantum reality is different in some important ways from gross matter, but Spirit is not.” Where exactly is “gross matter” separate from “quantum reality?” My sense here is that the assumption is being made here that there are two realities: classical reality and quantum reality. My understanding is that QM has now established experimentally that this is not the case—*all* reality is quantum reality. This is not to say that it is fully knowable by us as such, however, as d’Espagnat has made clear.
 - “Quantum reality has an opposite—nonquantum reality—but Spirit is radically nondual.” Again, only if we assume, as many *but not all* scientists do, that somehow “classical reality” is “non-quantum” reality.

¹⁰ Including for example: timeless interpretations ala Wheeler-deWitt, Barbour, and Rovelli, and the sophisticated understandings of quantum non-locality ala d’Espagnat and Maudlin.

¹¹ Song of the Vajra, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, 1992, Dzogchen Community Publication, Conway MA. P 109.

- “Spirit is dimensionless; quantum reality is merely in another dimension.” Again, this may be Two Truths Doctrinally correct, but not necessarily any kind of “ultimate truth.” Wilber has recently spoken of the Three Truths, a notion that I think aims to address the limits of doctrine.
- “Quantum material energy comes out of prana, not out of Spirit.” The non-separateness inherent in quantum non-locality would argue against such a categorical statement.

Part Three: Some Specifics of an Integral Theory of Subtle Energies.

- Refinements: a summary of “the correlations of energies and consciousness according to the traditions such as Vedanta and Vajrayana” is given in Table 3. (I’ve already noted the problems that have cropped up with the term “correlation.”) However, this section strikes me as mostly Hindu Vedanta with little contribution from the Tibetan Buddhist side, especially when it comes to the sophisticated experientially-based understandings found within Tibetan Buddhism (especially Mahamudra and Dzogchen) regarding the *alaya vijnana* and the “very subtle” domain that lies beyond it. With these caveats, however, this is an excellent summary overview of the view of the great wisdom traditions regarding the key issue of the inborn capacities to access *states* of consciousness vs capacities that only emerge in the course of the *stages* of development. The whole theory being presented here is most fundamentally a developmental one. Excellent work.
- A Refined Taxonomy of Subtle Energies. Gross, subtle, and causal are proposed as a *family* level, major subtypes of energy are proposed as *genus* level distinctions, and further subdivisions are suggested as a kind of *species* level refinements. Sounds like a good idea. However, in light of the STS, I think some of these are here assigned to the wrong category: EM is in the gross category whereas I’ve proposed that in the Yoga Science cosmology it will make more sense to see EM as “the subtle *hypercomplex* component of any occasion”—as Ken might put it. Likewise, the STS suggests that the nuclear forces may have a strong causal *ultra-complex* component and thus not necessarily best placed in the gross family. Bottom line, as Michael Murphy suggested in his critique, this scheme may be premature.
 - Point of information: cosmic rays are not EM, they are relativistic particles: protons, helium nuclei, and electrons.
- Reincarnation: “the most controversial topic related to subtle energies.”¹² Here we find an attempt to answer the question, “how could reincarnation (= transmigration) work if hypothesis three above is correct, that *subtle energies are associated with complexification of gross form?*” The answer is proposed in the form of an additional

¹² This is no doubt why the paper was considered at Michael Murphy’s invitational meeting on Survival of Bodily Death at Esalen in 2003.

hypothesis that *complexity of gross form is necessary for the expression or manifestation of both higher consciousness and subtler energy.*” The implications of this are then explored: that “higher consciousness and subtle energy” might thus exist in ways that are *not* associated with gross form; that a minimal set of “involutionary givens” might be found as a way of minimizing metaphysical baggage (here the reader is referred to Excerpt A posted online); that even “there is never a mind without a body,” *subtle* bodyminds and *causal* bodyminds might exist that are without *gross* bodymind. The *intra-physical* nature of these bodyminds is emphasized. The section concludes with the claim that in this way “an integral theory of subtle energies can accommodate the existence of transmigration, if we decide, on other grounds, that there is enough evidence that transmigration occurs.” I like this formulation, with the caveats given previously.

- The Chakras: “the real test case of any theory of subtle energies is whether it can adequately explicate the chakras.” Here an elegant scheme is presented, based on all the earlier content of the article, one that combines states and stages, minds and bodies, into an esoteric anatomy of higher human development. Since we begin, even as infants, with access to the three great states—gross waking, subtle dreaming, and causal deep sleep—each chakra must contain all three and “each chakra is a *stage* of development.” Motoyama’s scheme is chosen as just an example of the many variations that are found in the traditions—no doubt because he is a serious contemporary student of the subject, has done original research on how subtle energies can be detected with scientific instruments, and is himself an accomplished yoga practitioner.¹³
 - Each chakra has its gross, subtle, and causal dimensions. Check.
 - The chakras intermediate between the three dimensions and serve to convert energies of one dimension into another. Check.
 - Each chakra does the same for the consciousnesses (or minds) associated with the three dimensions as well. Check.
 - In the course of development, functions are awakened in the chakras in an ascending manner. Here my view is that this understanding may be *provisional* (i.e., temporal/developmental) and not *definitive* (i.e., based in nondual time/timelessness).

Some final notes

¹³ I’ve never studied his work. Peter Madill used to refer to him as a sort of eastern equivalent to Reinhold Voll with whom he had studied electroacupuncture personally. None of my three yoga teachers ever placed any particular importance on the chakra system, however. In looking through the materials posted at Motoyama’s California Institute for Human Science (<http://www.cihs.edu>), I get the impression of an Elmer Green like character—a person of some yogic accomplishment who is also a trained scientist and who uses the latter to study the former—in what I consider “scientific studies of yoga,” or “science of yoga”—as distinct from what I’m trying to describe in the name of Yoga Science. (Yet another distinct meaning for “yoga science” being “yoga as science”—the claim of many traditionalists that yoga *is* a science, broadly understood.)

- On balance, this is an excellent and most helpful article, at least it was for me. My main criticisms are
 - Integral (temporal, developmental/evolutionary, “provisional,” 2nd Tier) is great, but I’ve been drawn more to radical (nondual time/timeless, “definitive,” 3rd Tier) as the broader and deeper “view.”
 - There is inadequate lead-in for the average reader as it stands. This is not a “stand-alone” piece.
 - There are a few glaring to me errors of fact—but relatively minor, all things considered.
 - The proposed taxonomy has, in my view, some significant problems and I’ll need to consider how the STS might clarify what are I think are some basic confusions: the errors introduced when synchronic *states* are mapped onto diachronic *stages* is one major issue—these are not distinguished here.
 - The interpretation of QM here is, in my view, inadequate. This is an important issue, as noted. The emphasis on the Two Truths Doctrine is fundamentally Sutric,¹⁴ and thus, in my view, also inadequate. Thus, whereas the criticism offered there of the many pop interpreters who give us “bad physics and bad mysticism” is not unfounded, I feel that what we are being offered here is only perhaps somewhat better physics and somewhat better mysticism. Yoga science aims to be the offspring of the marriage of best physics and best mysticism.
 - It may be useful at some point to call out the issue of the topological re-entrance inherent in the scheme presented in Part One—“higher” being also “deeper in.”
 - AQAL is the view looking toward the BB along the STS whereas Adi Da’s Cosmic Mandala is the view looking the other way—toward the Planckian. I propose these two are best seen nondual. The overall potential error here, in my view, is one of “causal reductionism”—the error of assuming that reality itself might be described by the AQAL scheme—which is only one of the *two* possible perspectives along the STS—perspectives that I feel are best taken *together* and *nondual* from the beginning since they are fundamentally synchronic in any occasion.

¹⁴ (here Mahayana sutras in particular), as opposed to Tantra and Dzogchen—as per the doxography characteristic of Dzogchen.