

Survival of Bodily Death  
An Esalen Invitational Conference  
May 4 to 9, 2003

Responses to Ken Wilber's Essay on Subtle Energies and Reincarnation  
Group Discussion

On Thursday the group held an open discussion on theoretical issues related to the survival hypothesis. This included a discussion of Ken Wilber's essay "Toward A Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies," which can be found at:

<http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/kosmos/excerptG/part1.cfm>

There were a number of responses to the essay by Wilber and his work in general. Unfortunately, many of the participants had not had sufficient time to read Wilber's essay carefully and thus they chose not to pass detailed judgement on it but preferred to have a follow-up discussion over email about it. Those who did comment suggested that Wilber may want to be more cautious about some of his claims if he is interested in gaining more respect from mainstream scientists. They pointed out that not all of the phenomena Wilber discusses in the essay have the same degree of empirically tested evidence to back them up. For example, some in the group did not think there is sufficient scientific evidence supporting claims about the chakra system. Thus, they do not want what they feel is a better-documented phenomenon, the evidence for survival, linked to a less well-documented one, the chakra system and auras. Others emphasized their dislike for Wilber's "over-taxonomizing" of the different subtle bodies (etheric, astral, psychic-1, psychic-2). Many felt that a premature and meretricious taxonomy may be pleasing to some, but it could close theoretical doors that may need to remain open—particularly in light of the fact that there is not much scientific evidence for or measurement of such subtle bodies. Overall, many in the group shared an appreciative sentiment for Wilber's work, but some were cautiously concerned that it is not a good idea to rigidly identify and classify experiences that may be better understood using a different theoretical framework.

On this note, Michael Murphy drew an analogy to other fields of inquiry in the history of science and argued that the general trend in science has been toward a long period of data collection (or natural history) before classification or taxonomic systems emerge to explain the data. Murphy cited Darwin's theoretical breakthrough in evolutionary theory as a classic example. He noted that Darwin's breakthrough idea of natural selection came only after there had been several decades (or centuries if one dates back to Aristotle) of meticulous collection of animal species by naturalists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At its best, science proceeds first through a robust, varied, and comprehensive natural history (the data collection phase) before proceeding to a second phase in which theoretical proposals are assessed for their advantages and disadvantages in explaining the data. Overall, Murphy emphasized the need for contemporary researchers to remain "theoretical agnostics" or "theoretical pluralists" about phenomena such as the survival hypothesis, the chakra system, and subtle bodies. Until a much richer natural history has been conducted on them, it is difficult to argue for a tight classification system. Even so, Murphy also mentioned his excitement at Wilber's synoptic approach to these phenomena, which is imbued with the scientific spirit of balancing rigorous observation with theoretical and classificatory proposals.

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[Conferences Menu](#) | [Summary Home](#)

[Discussion of "Irreducible Mind" and William James](#) | [Hypnotic Suggestion for Surgery Patients](#) | [Update on Evolutionary Theory conference](#) | [How Reincarnation May Generate Complexity](#) | [Comments on Paul Edwards](#) | [Reflections on Kant, Myers, Schopenhauer, and Whitehead](#) | [The Many Faces of Creativity](#) | [Responses to Ken Wilber's Essay on Subtle Energies and Reincarnation](#) | [Frederic Myers CD-Rom and the History of Science](#) |

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[Survival Research](#)  
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