

# Eckhart Tolle and Evolutionary Enlightenment



I felt obliged to read *A New Earth*, by Eckhart Tolle, because everybody and their aunt has read it, thanks to Oprah. I'm glad I did. But I had the same sense a few pages into this book as I had after reading *The Power of Now*: "I get it, already". We are not the forms to which our small self becomes attached. Even our thoughts are forms that the contracted self clings to, having forgotten our formless, Absolute origin – our face before we were born. And I get as well that I don't really get it. I am not as joyful, enthusiastic, accepting of my life as I could be because I don't live out of this witnessing consciousness. I'm working on it. And Eckhart Tolle does a great service to humankind in trying to help us to awaken to our Higher Self.

Here's my small quibble. He starts the book with an evolutionary insight that at some point rocks take an evolutionary leap and become crystals, coal turns into diamonds, reptiles grow wings and become birds, and plants begin to flower. The crystal, the flower, and the bird have become symbols that have captivated the human psyche for millennia because they presage an evolutionary leap in the human realm – to an awakened state. They have an archetypal power to awaken us to the next stage of our development – awakening to consciousness, the divine intelligence that is

the source and substance of our own life.

But then the rest of the book shelves the evolutionary perspective. I think there's more to life than being in the eternal now as critical as this is to spiritual practice. I have attended lectures by Mr. Tolle and various other enlightened souls, and I don't mean to be unkind, but I usually come away feeling like there is a missing piece for me.

A much more intellectually and spiritually satisfying framework, I believe, is one that recognizes a distinction between states and stages of consciousness. Thank you, [Ken Wilber](#). Mr. Tolle focuses on various states of consciousness – witnessing and non-dual mostly. I've written about stages elsewhere: emergent waves of consciousness provoked into being in response to changing life conditions, each new stage transcending and including the previous stage. Wilber's brilliant realization that every state of consciousness has been available to every human being in every age, but the same is not true of stages of consciousness.

Here's the important piece: Our states of consciousness – no matter how "high" – will be interpreted and concretized within the worldview/value system/belief system/ and institutions of that particular worldview. In other words, a tribal shaman in the Amazon and a physicist in New York will have the same state experience (pure consciousness witnessing whatever it is that they are doing), but interpret and apply it completely differently. A fundamentalist may have an experience of the witnessing consciousness and use it to validate his belief that Jesus' blood shed on the cross saves us from eternal damnation. We may not assume, in other words, that enlightenment necessarily lifts us out of our stage of consciousness. To use Ken Wilber's phrase "perspective replaces perception". What's missing, for me, in *A New Earth* is a vertical, developmental/evolutionary perspective.

Every great religion can tell us something about “state enlightenment” – primarily through their mystical traditions. But they don’t tell us much about stage enlightenment. And this is because, they hadn’t passed through modernism and the scientific worldview that helped us to realize the evolutionary nature of the universe.

Enlightenment, in an evolutionary paradigm, is to feel the non-coercive pull from an as-of-yet indeterminate future (agape) and to feel from within the gentle nudge of an actual force (evolutionary eros) pushing us onwards. It is to know oneself to be a center of this evolutionary creative pressure, to become a center of creative emergence. We aren’t naive about the challenges and the roadblocks implicit in the human condition, but there is a genuine excitement about what is on the horizon. As we open ourselves to this power, we feel not merely bliss, and not simply “presence” – as important as these are – but the power of a 13.7 billion year universe manifesting in the realm of nature, self, and culture. This surging power transcends the personal self, inviting us to surrender in service to its unfolding. All of this is Spirit – the eternal, formless Spirit, and the surging, creative power of an emergent future.