

# THE BUDDHA AWAKENING, INTEGRAL EXPANDING, AND A SECOND AXIAL AGE FOR HUMANITY

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**ABSTRACT** Ken Wilber has stated that one of history’s most important spiritual teachers, the Buddha, was “half-enlightened” because he realized only the experience of cessation and not the full, nondual experience of integrating emptiness and form. This article examines the evidence for this assertion and concludes that the Buddha was fully awakened as his experience joined the unmanifest generative ground with the realm of form in a singular flow of interdependent co-arising. Importantly, when the Buddha’s awakening experience is considered along with the world’s wisdom traditions, it provides insight into a second axial age around which the world can pivot into a more sustainable and promising pathway toward the future. A huge area of untapped potential awaits development if Integral Theory recognizes the Buddha’s awakening as interdependent co-arising.

**KEY WORDS** Buddha, cessation, awakening, axial age, interdependent co-arising

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This article explores untapped potentials for Integral Theory that can emerge from recognizing the original nature of the Buddha’s awakening. With a fresh understanding of the Buddha’s awakening, Integral Theory can reach beyond Buddhism and discover the foundations for a new era of spiritual understanding that connects with both the world’s wisdom traditions and insights from the frontiers of science. To begin, it is important to recognize the limited view of the Buddha’s awakening described by Ken Wilber specifically and integral theorists more generally.

In a dialogue with the teacher Andrew Cohen, Wilber made the assertion, published in *EnlightenNext* magazine, that the Buddha was only “half-enlightened” (Cohen & Wilber, 2011, p. 45). Declaring that one of history’s most important spiritual teachers was only half-awakened is entirely legitimate but quite extraordinary. In fairness, it is important to quote Wilber’s statement in full:

What I’ve actually said is that Gautama Buddha was only half as enlightened as a modern sage has the potential to be. And to understand why that is, we have to look at a couple of facts. First, we have to understand that reality consists of two fundamental dimensions: the realm of emptiness and the realm of form. Emptiness is the timeless, unmanifest ground of being, and realizing that primordial emptiness has traditionally been what spiritual enlightenment is all about. That’s what the Buddha called nirvana. It means nothing is arising. It’s a state of consciousness essentially similar to deep dreamless sleep in that there’s no pain, no self, no suffering, no desire—none of that. It’s a place of peace, stillness and freedom beyond the turmoil of manifest existence. And discovering that unmanifest emptiness has always been seen as one way to find liberation from samsara.

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Wilber's view of the Buddha's awakening is that of an experience of cessation, where nothing is arising, where there is perfect peace and stillness beyond the turmoil of manifest existence. Wilber continues by saying:

Now, Gautama Buddha realized emptiness perfectly, so from the point of view of that traditional understanding, he was enlightened.<sup>[1]</sup> He experienced a perfect oneness in consciousness that transcended the multiplicity of manifestation, time, and form. But about eight hundred years after the time of Gautama, an extraordinary gentleman by the name of Nagarjuna came along and pointed out that if you're serious about finding ultimate oneness, then you can't just be looking for nirvana divorced from samsara, because that's still dualistic. You have to be looking, instead, for the union of nirvana and samsara, the union of emptiness and form, the union of the unmanifest and the manifest, which Nagarjuna called non-duality.<sup>[2]</sup>

Wilber concludes:

So that's the first point—the Buddha realized emptiness, but as far as we can tell, he didn't realize the fullness of non-duality, or becoming one with all form. The second point is that while emptiness is timeless and unchanging, the world of form is not. We now realize that the world of form is continuously changing, evolving and becoming.

Summarizing, Wilber states that the Buddha awakened to unchanging emptiness and the cessation of arising in the world of form (the first half of enlightenment in his view). The second half of enlightenment is realized when we recognize the world of form is continuously changing.

Although Wilber's description is clear from an intellectual perspective, when we consider the Buddha's description of his awakening experience, a different understanding emerges. Wilber is equating the Buddha's teachings with his experience of awakening, but they are not the same:

The Buddha taught the Dharma, doing so in a gradual way that corresponded to his disciples' faculty of comprehending the means of his words. Initially the Buddha did not expressly reveal the true nature of reality. Eventually he spoke directly of it, until finally he revealed it in full clarity, as it truly was. (Maitreya, 2000, p. 13)

The Buddha's description of his awakening experience (termed *paticca samuppada* in Pali Canon and *pratityasamutpada* in Sanskrit) is generally translated as "interdependent origination" or "dependent co-arising," as described by Fremantle (2003):

Interdependent origination (Sanskrit, *pratityasamutpada*) is the law of causality, which Shakyamuni [the Buddha] discovered at his awakening. It revealed to him the whole truth of existence, and in penetrating it he became the Awakened One. What he saw was a total vision of how and why all beings throughout space and time are entangled in samsara for countless lives, as well as his own past lives in his progress toward liberation. This was the extraordinary insight that distinguished his teaching from others, so it is said, "whoever sees interdependent origination sees the dharma [the truth], whoever sees the dharma sees the Buddha."

In contrast to Wilber's description of the Buddha's awakening as unmanifest emptiness and stillness where nothing is arising, interdependent co-arising joins the unmanifest generative ground with the realm of form in a singular flow of ever-renewing co-origination. This is *not* a dualistic experience divorced from the world of form; instead, it is the experience of being fully immersed in the world of form *and* the generative ground as the world of form arises as a unified, ever-renewing manifestation. The assertion that the Buddha's awakening was the experience of unchanging cessation where nothing is arising is not in accord with the description the earliest Buddhist traditions have recorded as the Buddha's account of his own experience.

I agree with Wilber that if the Buddha's experience were only that of cessation, then it would be appropriate to say he was "half-enlightened." However, based upon the preceding evidence, I conclude that the Buddha moved beyond cessation and was fully awakened. Although teachings based upon the Buddha's awakening have evolved through the millennia as the conditions and circumstances of life have changed (e.g., from the Hinayana to the Mahayana to the Vajrayana traditions), that does not diminish the depth and fullness of his original awakening to the interdependent co-arising of reality.

Importantly, *both* the Buddha and Nagarjuna viewed all phenomena as without independent existence and dependently co-arising.<sup>3</sup> Although there is only a vague record and little consensus about the individuals who originated Mahayana Buddhism around the first century B.C.E., Nagarjuna is regarded as a key person in developing the Mahayana school. He viewed "all phenomena as empty of 'substance' or 'essence' (Sanskrit: *svabhava*) because they dependently co-arise. It is because they dependently co-arise that they have no intrinsic, independent reality of their own." Nagarjuna is especially revered because he applied the Buddha's teaching broadly, emphasizing the awakening of all sentient beings above one's self.

Looking beyond Wilber's assertion that the Buddha was only half-enlightened, how do he and other integral theorists view the Buddha's foundational insight of interdependent co-arising? To my surprise, after carefully reviewing over 3,000 pages of writing by Wilber in his various books, I have found only a few, suggestive descriptions of the insight of the universe arising and *none* of these are offered in the context of the Buddha's awakening to interdependent co-arising.<sup>4</sup> This foundational insight is also largely absent from the writing of other, leading integral theorists as well. For example, I have carefully explored *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009) and have found no clear references to a co-arising universe as described by the Buddha. Because Integral Theory generally overlooks the co-arising nature of reality, an insight with great evolutionary potential is being neglected.

## **Buddhist Teachers' View of the Buddha's Awakening**

To explore the Buddha's awakening further, it is helpful to include insights from a number of highly respected Buddhist teachers:

The teaching of Interdependent Co-Arising is indeed deep and subtle. Anyone who is able to see the nature of Interdependent Co-Arising is able to see the Buddha. .... All teachings of Buddhism are based on Interdependent Co-Arising. If a teaching is not in accord with Interdependent Co-Arising, it is not a teaching of the Buddha. (Han, 1999, p. 226)

– *Thich Nhat Han, Buddhist teacher*

My solemn proclamation is that a new universe is created every moment. (Suzuki, 1970, p. 364)

– *D.T. Suzuki, Zen scholar and teacher*

At the heart of Buddhist cosmology is ... the idea [that multiple world systems, in-

cluding our own universe] are in a constant state of coming into being and passing away. (Lama & Cutler, 1998)

– *His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

The world is in a continuous state of creation, of becoming, and therefore in a continuous state of destruction of all that has been created. (Govinda, 1976, p. 207)

– *Lama Govinda, Tibetan teacher and scholar*

The beginning of the universe is now, for all things are at this moment being created, and the end of the universe is now, for all things are at this moment passing away. (Watts, 1958, p. 52)

– *Alan Watts, Zen teacher*

A tree, a stone, an animal cease to be seen as solid and durable bodies...and, in their place, the practiced disciple discerns a continual succession of sudden manifestations only lasting as long as a flash of lightning... (Linssen, 1958, p. 80)

– *Robert Linssen, author and Buddhist meditator*

The Buddhist scholar and former monk Stephen Batchelor (2010) writes that the Buddha gave the following description of his foundational insight:

Life is groundless ground: no sooner does it appear, than it disappears, only to renew itself, then immediately break up and vanish again. It pours forth endlessly, like the river of Heraclitus, which one cannot step into twice. If you try to grasp it, it slips away between your fingers. Gotama's awakening involved a radical shift of perspective rather than the gaining of privileged knowledge into some higher truth. . . He spoke only of waking up to a contingent ground—"this conditionality, conditioned arising"—that until then had been obscured by his attachment to a fixed position. "One who sees conditioned arising," he said, "sees the Dharma [the truth]; and one who sees the Dharma, sees conditioned arising." (p. 128)

According to these respected teachers, the complete dynamism of an interdependent co-arising existence is foundational to the Buddha's awakening. To say that the Buddha's awakening was an experience of immersion in the formless realm with complete cessation where "nothing is arising" is misleading. In contrast, it may be beneficial to consider that the full depth and meaning of the Buddha's awakening is still being discovered after more than 2,000 years. As the Buddha said, this insight is "deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined by thought, subtle, sensed by the wise" (Batchelor, 2010, p. 128).

## Insights from Interdependent Co-Arising

It is useful to consider the two words *interdependent* and *co-arising* separately, even though they are one expression with a singular meaning. To illustrate, we can talk about *space* and we can talk about *time*, but when we put them together as the phrase *space-time*, it reveals something distinctly different from the words considered in isolation. With this caveat, let us consider each word individually:

**Interdependent:** Everything that exists is contingent upon everything else. The totality of the universe is one interacting system of mutual interrelations.

**Co-Arising:** Beyond horizontal interdependence is the vertical emergence or origination of the entire universe all-at-once. The continuous creation of the cosmos means that all is emerging as a unified whole at every moment.

The implications of joining these two insights are enormous:

- If the universe is **interdependent but not co-arising**, then it will manifest with cause-effect connections that cascade through time but can be very remote from one another.
- If the universe is **co-arising but not interdependent**, then cause-effect connections will be largely disconnected from one another.
- If the universe is **interdependent and co-arising**, the synergy of the two is transformative. *Cascading consequences* manifest from the interdependent nature of existence and *instantaneous consequences* manifest from the co-arising nature of the universe.

Therefore, by combining these two words, we recognize the totality of existence is arising all-at-once as an interdependent whole—a fresh creation in its totality at every moment—where everything depends upon everything else. Reality then involves both cascading causality (or “karma”) through time and instantaneous causality in time.

The Buddha awakened to interdependent co-arising and the insight that there is no solid and enduring reality. In turn, he taught that our failure to recognize the flux and fluidity of existence produces an inaccurate and therefore unsatisfying relationship with the flow of life. An analogy clarifies this process: If we assume that the universe is a regenerative system that, for illustrative purposes, is arising or emerging at a pace of, say, 100 frames per second, and if we further assume that in everyday life our pace of perception is functioning at, say, 25 frames per second, then the regenerative universe will not appear to us as flashing into existence at each moment but rather will seem to be a seamless whole of solidity that endures over time. The Buddhist teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, describes this process clearly:

So everything arises and ceases at the same time, moment to moment. This is the condition of the universe and the condition of our own mind, perceptions, and experiences, without exception. But because it is so subtle and the movement so rapid, because each moment is so similar to the one that just vanished, we make up a continuum. Just as we do when watching a movie, which is actually twenty-four frames flashing each second on a screen, we create substantial appearances. (Kongtrul, 2013, p. 28)

Without precise attention, we can easily lose ourselves in the cosmic movie theatre. However, as we increase the precision of our perception to match the pace of manifestation of the universe, then all becomes transparent and there is no longer a boundary between our perception and the universe arising—all is co-arising as one direct experience. When both are embraced in awareness, the two are naturally one in experience—awakening wisdom and compassion.

Appreciating that we live within a co-arising universe is immensely valuable as it offers a way of understanding subtle spiritual insights such as the “impermanence” of reality. When we regard the world around us as solid and enduring, we are not seeing the lightning fast pace whereby the entire universe arises and passes away as a continuous flow. Then, in thinking the world around us is solid and permanent, it is only

natural that we would try to grasp hold of and possess the seeming solidity of things. Because this intention is not in accord with the actual, dynamic nature of existence, we can quickly find ourselves out of alignment with the true nature of a continuously regenerated reality, and this engenders feelings of dissatisfaction and disconnection.

Similarly, we may read about the “emptiness” of reality and be perplexed by what this means from a conventional perspective. However, in the context of an interdependent co-arising universe, the fullness of one moment vanishes completely only to be replaced by the fullness of the next instant of manifestation. All that existed in the preceding moment disappears completely so all things are truly empty of an enduring, physical existence. This is a subtle and foundational insight for a wise relationship with the complete dynamism of reality.

The ideas of impermanence and emptiness are confusing when seen from an “ordinary” perspective but they come into shining simplicity and clarity of meaning when seen from the perspective of a gigantic cosmic theater being projected into existence moment by moment as a seamless whole. All of existence is an evolving and learning system that never rests in its creative co-arising. There is no permanence. At every moment everything vanishes only to be born anew at every instant.

## Co-Arising in the World’s Wisdom Traditions

To place the Buddha’s description of his awakening in a larger context, it is useful to step back and explore the nature of awakening found in the world’s wisdom traditions. This broader view is important: In our world divided by spiritual conflicts, a pivotal question is whether a foundational insight exists that offers a meeting place for diverse traditions to come together in a shared view of reality. Research over decades suggests there is (Elgin, 2009).

Although variously described, all of the world’s wisdom traditions regard the universe as being dynamically regenerated—arising as a fresh creation at every moment. The insight that we live in a universe that is continuously arising anew as a unified whole is found in all of the world’s major spiritual traditions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Indigenous traditions, and more. Here are a few illustrative quotes from diverse traditions:

God is creating the entire universe, fully and totally, in this present now. Everything God created...God creates now all at once. (Fox, 1983, p. 24)

– Meister Eckhart, *Christian mystic*

Evolution presupposes creation...creation is an ever-lasting process—a *creatio continua*. (Paul, 1985)

– Pope John Paul II

You have a death and a return in every moment. . . . Every moment the world is renewed but we, in seeing its continuity of appearance, are unaware of its being renewed. (Barks, 1995)

– Jalaluddin Rumi, *13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Sufi*

The world is this whole, and in every twinkling of an eye,  
it becomes non-existent and endures not two moments.

There over again another world is produced,  
every moment a new heaven and a new earth.

Things remain not in two moments,

the same moment they perish, they are born again. (Shabistari, 1317)

– *Mahmud Shabistari, a celebrated Persian poet, 1317*

Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos  
And entered into everything in it.  
There is nothing that does not come from him...  
You are that...you are that. (Easwaran, 1987)

– *Hindu, Chandogya Upanishad*

There is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a relentless process,  
with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing. (Easwaran, 1987)

– *Heinrich Zimmer, scholar of Hindu art and civilization*

The Tao is the sustaining Life-force and the mother of all things; from it, all “things  
rise and fall without cease.” (Tsu, 1972)

– *Taoist tradition of China*

The Dreamtime for Australian aborigines “...is an ongoing process—the perpetual  
emerging of the world from an incipient, indeterminate state into full, waking reality,  
from invisibility to visibility, from the secret depths of silence into articulate song  
and speech.” (Abram, 1996, p. 169)

– *Indigenous tradition of Australia*

Based upon decades of research as presented in my book, *The Living Universe*, within each major tradition—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Indigenous, and more—we can find remarkably similar descriptions of the continuous regeneration of the universe. Many *Christians* affirm that God is not separate from this world but continuously creates it anew, so that we live, move, and have our being in God. *Muslims* declare that the entire universe is continually coming into being, and that each moment is a new “occasion” for Allah to create the universe. *Hindus* proclaim that the entire universe is a single body that is being continually danced into creation by a divine life force or Brahman. *Buddhists* state that the entire universe arises freshly at every moment in an unceasing flow of interdependent co-origination. *Taoists* state that the Tao is the “Mother of the Universe,” the inexhaustible source, from which all things rise and fall without ceasing. *Confucians* view our universe as a unified and interpenetrating whole that is sustained and nourished by the vitality of the life force or cosmic ch’i. *Indigenous* peoples declare that an animating wind or Life force blows through all things in the world and there is aliveness and sacred power everywhere. Finally, a cadre of *Western* philosophers portray the universe as a single, living creature that is continually regenerated and is evolving toward higher levels of complexity and consciousness. Overall, beneath the differences in language, a common reality is being described: Our universe is profoundly interconnected and continuously regenerated anew.

If an interdependent co-arising universe (or however this might be described in straightforward language) were more clearly recognized in Integral Theory, it might be possible to declare: “There is a place of deep integration across wisdom traditions—here is how a co-arising universe is described in Taoism; here is how it is stated in Buddhism; here is how it is presented in Hinduism; here is how it is described in Christian traditions; here is how it is presented in Islam, and so on.” By pointing out this deep insight found at the core of all of the world’s wisdom traditions, a place of common understanding and meeting could be further awakened—and a place for reconciliation and healing revealed.

## Awakening Into a Second Axial Age

The phrase *axial age* was used by the philosopher Karl Jaspers to describe the relatively brief period of time—roughly 700 years—when the great religions of the world arose: Hinduism and Buddhism in India; Confucianism and Taoism in China; and monotheism in the Middle East. Understanding the depth of the Buddha’s experience of awakening offers a doorway into a second axial age around which the future of humanity could pivot and reorient itself for a more promising future. To explore that possibility, it is important to recognize the spirituality of separation described by the first axial age (Thompson, 2006).

The first axial age represents a great phase of differentiation—a prolonged time of growing separation from nature, one another, and the “Mother Universe” (or meta-universe in the language of science). Assuming separation, it was only natural that religion would become a vehicle to bridge or connect people back to the sacred universe. Therefore, a core message of religion in the first axial age was that of compassion—treating others as we would like to be treated. In a world of growing individualism and separation, religion served as the bridge between the secular and the sacred. Despite great diversity of culture and geography, there is a common understanding found in the world’s wisdom traditions that is summarized in the Golden Rule.

A second, major phase with a very different axis and orientation is now opening around us. Religions of separation are becoming religions of communion as we realize there is no place to go where we can be separate from the ever-generative womb of the underlying cosmic context, a Mother Universe. At every moment, the entire universe is her revelation and celebration. The second epoch begins with the collective recognition that we are already home—that the Mother Universe already exists within us. As the world moves into spiritual communion and empathic connection with the living universe we will see the role of religion differently: Less often will people look for a bridge *to* the divine; increasingly, people will seek guidance and community in the journey of awakening *within* the living universe.

Not only does the Buddha’s original insight of interdependent co-arising connect across the world’s wisdom traditions, it also connects with the insights about the nature of the universe emerging from the frontiers of science.<sup>5</sup> Although there is not the space to develop this in a brief article, a few quotes are suggestive. In the words of cosmologist Brian Swimme (1996), “The universe emerges out of an all-nourishing abyss not only fourteen billion years ago but in every moment” (p. 100). The physicist David Bohm (1980) described the universe as “an undivided wholeness in flowing movement” (p. 11). The mathematician Norbert Wiener (1954) expressed it this way, “We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves; whirlpools of water in an ever-flowing river” (p. 130). Max Born (1936), a physicist who was instrumental in the development of quantum mechanics wrote, “We have sought for firm ground and found none. The deeper we penetrate, the more restless becomes the universe; all is rushing about and vibrating in a wild dance” (p. 277). If all is in motion at every level, and all motion presents itself as a coherent and stable pattern, then all that exists is a singular orchestration. All flows comprise one grand symphony in which we are all players, a single creative expression—a uni-verse. An extensive exploration of a scientific view of continuous creation of the universe can be found in my book, *The Living Universe* (Elgin, 2009). Overall, by connecting with both wisdom traditions and science, the Buddha’s awakening insight can lead into a new axial age that gives a deep sense of direction to humanity’s pathway into the future.

## Conclusion

Contrary to Wilber’s assertion, historical evidence indicates the Buddha awakened beyond cessation to the insight of the interdependent co-arising. Although the Buddha’s teachings have evolved through at three major transitions, or “turnings,” over the past several thousand years, that does not diminish the depth of his original awakening and deep insight into the interdependent co-arising of existence. This article has looked beyond a fourth turning in the teaching of Buddhism to the great turning of a planet in transition to a new future—and

the possibility that a second axial age will orient us toward that new future.

We are all humans living in the same universe and we have similar experiences of being awake in the *now*. Over the millennia, Buddhists, as well as sages in all of the world’s wisdom traditions, have discovered a subtle attribute of existence that is understood in common. This shared understanding is described in many different ways but all point toward the insight that all of existence continuously emerges as a singular, interdependent whole at every instant. Because this foundational insight is so widely shared, it offers place and potential for deep meeting and healing across the world’s wisdom traditions.

A huge area of untapped potential awaits development if Integral Theory recognizes the Buddha’s awakening as interdependent co-arising. When we connect the Buddha’s awakening experience with the world’s wisdom traditions and insights emerging from science, it provides the foundation for a new axial age around which the world can pivot into a more sustainable and promising pathway into the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Nirvana* is often used in reference to the third Noble Truth in the Buddha’s teaching regarding the extinction or cessation of the causes of suffering. The combined four Noble Truths flow from the Buddha’s awakening insight of dependent origination. Wilber seems to be conflating one of the teachings of the Buddha—the cessation of suffering—with his more foundational awakening experience of interdependent co-arising.

<sup>2</sup> The “Heart Sutra” is relevant to Wilber’s separation of emptiness and form. This sutra states: “Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.” See: <http://www.dharmabliss.org/audio/heartsutra-engtext.htm>. Wilber seems to be saying that although the Buddha realized emptiness, he did not realize that “form itself is emptiness.”

<sup>3</sup> Nagarjuna’s “primary contribution to Buddhist philosophy is in the use of the concept of sunyata, or ‘emptiness,’ which brings together other key Buddhist doctrines, particularly anatman (no-self) and pratityasamutpada (dependent origination)... *For Nagarjuna, as for the Buddha* [emphasis added], in the early texts, it is not merely sentient beings that are ‘selfless’ or non-substantial; all phenomena are without any svabhava, literally ‘own-being’ or ‘self-nature,’ and thus without any underlying essence. They are empty of being independently existent...” See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagarjuna>. Also see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhyamaka>

<sup>4</sup> To illustrate, here are three rare quotes from Wilber where the word *arising* appears. However, none of these are presented in the context of the Buddha’s awakening to interdependent co-arising: “Spirit is a vast infinite Abyss or Emptiness, out of which all things arise” (Wilber, 2006, p. 268); “All things are just a ripple in this pond; all arising is a gesture of this one” (Wilber, 2004, p. 181); “I-I is the box the universe comes in. Abiding as I-I, the world arises as before, but now there is no one to witness it” (*Ibid*).

<sup>5</sup> The frontiers of cosmology are beginning to engage this insight as well with a language unique to science—exploring the possibility that the universe is a dynamically regenerated hologram—a holo-dynamic creation that emerges in its totality at every moment. What an exciting time to see these two great paths of knowledge beginning to converge around a common understanding of an interdependent co-arising existence.

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