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A GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

Eckhart Tolle



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You are here to enable the divine
purpose of the universe to unfold.
That is how important you are!

— Eckhart Tolle

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

Six years after it was first published, *The Power of Now* continues to play its part in the urgent task of the transformation of human consciousness. Although I was privileged to give birth to it, I feel that the book has taken on a life and momentum of its own. It has reached several million readers worldwide, many of whom have written to me to tell of the life-changing effect it has had on them. Due to the extremely high volume of correspondence I receive, I am regretfully no longer able to send personal replies, but I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have written to me to share their experiences. I am moved and deeply touched by many of those accounts, and they leave no doubt in my mind that an unprecedented shift in consciousness is indeed happening on our planet.

Nobody could have predicted the rapid growth of the book when Namaste Publishing in Vancouver published the first edition of three thousand copies in 1997. During its first year of publication, the book found its readers almost exclusively through word of mouth. That was the time when I would personally deliver a few copies every week to some small bookstores in Vancouver, something I found enormously satisfying, knowing that every book that I handed over had the potential of changing someone's life. Friends helped by placing copies of the book in spiritual bookstores farther afield: Calgary, Seattle, California, London. Stephen Gawtry, the manager of Watkins, the world's oldest metaphysical bookstore in London, England, wrote at the time, "I foresee great things for this book." He was right: by the second year *The Power of Now* had developed into an "underground bestseller," as one reviewer later called it. Then, after the book received a number of favorable reviews in various journals and magazines, its growth accelerated and finally became explosive when Oprah Winfrey, who had been deeply affected by the book, proceeded to tell the world about it. Five years after it was first published, it reached #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and it is now available in thirty languages. It has been very well received and become a bestseller even in India, a country considered by many to be the birthplace of humanity's quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Most of the thousands of letters and emails that have been sent to me from all over the world are from ordinary men and women, but there are also letters from Buddhist monks and Christian nuns, from people in prison or facing a life-threatening illness or imminent death. Psychotherapists have written to say that they recommend the book to their patients or incorporate the teachings in their practice. Many of those letters and emails mention a lessening or even a complete disappearance of suffering and problem-making in people's lives as a result of reading *The Power of Now* and putting the teachings into practice in everyday life. There is frequent mention of the amazing and beneficial effects of inner body awareness, the sense of freedom that comes from letting go of self-identification with one's personal

history and life-situation, and a newfound inner peace that arises as one learns to relinquish mental/emotional resistance to the “suchness” of the present moment. Many people have read the book more than once, and they comment that the text loses none of its freshness upon subsequent readings, indeed that the book’s transformative power remains not only undiminished, but actually becomes intensified.

The more the dysfunction of the human mind plays itself out on the world stage, clearly visible to everyone in the daily television news reports, the greater the number of people who realize the urgent need for a radical change in human consciousness if humanity is not to destroy both itself and the planet. This need, as well as readiness in millions of people for the arising of a new consciousness, is the context within which the “success” of *The Power of Now* must be seen and understood.

This does not mean, of course, that everyone responds favorably to the book. In many people, as well as in most of the political and economic structures and the greater part of the media, the old consciousness is still deeply entrenched. Anyone who is still totally identified with the voice in their head — the stream of involuntary and incessant thinking — will inevitably fail to see what *The Power of Now* is all about. Some enthusiastic readers gave a copy of the book to a friend or relative and were surprised and disappointed when the recipient found it quite meaningless and could not get beyond the first few pages. “Mumbo jumbo” was all that *Time* magazine could see in a book that countless people around the globe found life-changing. Furthermore, any teaching that puts the spotlight of attention on the workings of the ego will necessarily provoke egoic reaction, resistance, and attack.

However, despite a certain amount of misunderstanding and critical dissent, the response to the book around the globe has been overwhelmingly positive. I feel confident that in the years to come millions more will be drawn to it, and that *The Power of Now* will continue to make a vital contribution to the arising of a new consciousness and a more enlightened humanity.

— Eckhart Tolle
Vancouver, B.C.
April 19, 2004

THE POWER OF
NOW

INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGIN OF THIS BOOK

I have little use for the past and rarely think about it; however, I would briefly like to tell you how I came to be a spiritual teacher and how this book came into existence.

Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression. It feels now as if I am talking about some past lifetime or somebody else's life.

One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train — everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that it created in me a deep loathing of the world. The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

“I cannot live with myself any longer.” This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” “Maybe,” I thought, “only one of them is real.”

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing,” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.

I was awakened by the chirping of a bird outside the window. I had never heard such a sound before. My eyes were still closed, and I saw the image of a precious diamond. Yes, if a diamond could make a sound, this is what it would be like. I opened my eyes. The first light of dawn was filtering through the curtains. Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize. That soft luminosity filtering through the curtains was love itself. Tears came into my eyes. I got up and walked around the room. I recognized the room, and yet I knew that I had never truly seen it before. Everything was fresh and pristine, as

if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marveling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world.

For the next five months, I lived in a state of uninterrupted deep peace and bliss. After that, it diminished somewhat in intensity, or perhaps it just seemed to because it became my natural state. I could still function in the world, although I realized that nothing I ever *did* could possibly add anything to what I already had.

I knew, of course, that something profoundly significant had happened to me, but I didn't understand it at all. It wasn't until several years later, after I had read spiritual texts and spent time with spiritual teachers, that I realized that what everybody was looking for had already happened to me. I understood that the intense pressure of suffering that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from its identification with the unhappy and deeply fearful self, which is ultimately a fiction of the mind. This withdrawal must have been so complete that this false, suffering self immediately collapsed, just as if a plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left then was my true nature as the ever-present *I am*: consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form. Later I also learned to go into that inner timeless and deathless realm that I had originally perceived as a void and remain fully conscious. I dwelt in states of such indescribable bliss and sacredness that even the original experience I just described pales in comparison. A time came when, for a while, I was left with nothing on the physical plane. I had no relationships, no job, no home, no socially defined identity. I spent almost two years sitting on park benches in a state of the most intense joy.

But even the most beautiful experiences come and go. More fundamental, perhaps, than any experience is the undercurrent of peace that has never left me since then. Sometimes it is very strong, almost palpable, and others can feel it too. At other times, it is somewhere in the background, like a distant melody.

Later, people would occasionally come up to me and say: "I want what you have. Can you give it to me, or show me how to get it?" And I would say: "You have it already. You just can't feel it because your mind is making too much noise." That answer later grew into the book that you are holding in your hands.

Before I knew it, I had an external identity again. I had become a spiritual teacher.

THE TRUTH THAT IS WITHIN YOU

This book represents the essence of my work, as far as it can be conveyed in words, with individuals and small groups of spiritual seekers during the past ten years, in Europe and in North America. In deep love and appreciation, I would like to thank those exceptional people for their courage, their willingness to embrace inner change, their challenging questions, and their readiness to listen. This book would not have come into existence without them. They belong to what is as yet a small but fortunately growing minority of spiritual pioneers: people who are reaching a point where they become capable of breaking out of inherited collective mind-patterns that have kept humans in bondage to suffering for eons.

I trust that this book will find its way to those who are ready for such radical inner transformation and so act as a catalyst for it. I also hope that it will reach many others who will find its content worthy of consideration, although they may not be ready to fully live or practice it. It is possible that at a later time, the seed that was sown when reading this book will merge with the seed of enlightenment that each human being carries within, and suddenly that seed will sprout and come alive within them.


The book in its present form originated, often spontaneously, in response to questions asked by individuals in seminars, meditation classes, and private counseling sessions, and so I have kept the question-and-answer format. I learned and received as much in those classes and sessions as the questioners. Some of the questions and answers I wrote down almost verbatim. Others are generic, which is to say I combined certain types of questions that were frequently asked into one, and extracted the essence from different answers to form one generic answer. Sometimes, in the process of writing, an entirely new answer came that was more profound or insightful than anything I had ever uttered. Some additional questions were asked by the editor so as to provide further clarification of certain points.

You will find that from the first to the last page, the dialogues continuously alternate between two different levels.

On one level, I draw your attention to what is *false* in you. I speak of the nature of human unconsciousness and dysfunction as well as its most common behavioral manifestations, from conflict in relationships to warfare between tribes or nations. Such knowledge is vital, for unless you learn to recognize the false as false — as not you — there can be no lasting transformation, and you would always end up being drawn back into illusion and into some form of pain. On this level, I also show you how not to make that which is false in you into a self and into a personal problem, for that is how the false perpetuates itself.

On another level, I speak of a profound transformation of human consciousness — not as a distant future possibility, but available now — no matter who or where you are. You are shown how to free yourself from enslavement to the mind, enter into this enlightened state of consciousness and sustain it in everyday life.

On this level of the book, the words are not always concerned with information, but often designed to draw you into this new consciousness as you read. Again and again, I endeavor to take you with me into that timeless state of intense conscious presence in the Now, so as to give you a taste of enlightenment. Until you are able to experience what I speak of, you may find those passages somewhat repetitive. As soon as you do, however, I believe you will realize that they contain a great deal of spiritual power, and they may become for you the most rewarding parts of the book. Moreover, since every person carries the seed of enlightenment within, I often address myself to the knower in you who dwells behind the thinker, the deeper self that immediately recognizes spiritual truth, resonates with it, and gains strength from it.

The pause symbol  after certain passages is a suggestion that you may want to stop reading for a moment, become still, and feel and experience the truth of what has just been said. There may be other places in the text where you will do this naturally and spontaneously.

As you begin reading the book, the meaning of certain words, such as “Being” or “presence,” may not be entirely clear to you at first. Just read on. Questions or objections may occasionally

come into your mind as you read. They will probably be answered later in the book, or they may turn out to be irrelevant as you go more deeply into the teaching — and into yourself.

Don't read with the mind only. Watch out for any "feeling-response" as you read and a sense of recognition from deep within. I cannot tell you any spiritual truth that deep within you don't know already. All I can do is remind you of what you have forgotten. Living knowledge, ancient and yet ever new, is then activated and released from within every cell of your body.

The mind always wants to categorize and compare, but this book will work better for you if you do not attempt to compare its terminology with that of other teachings; otherwise, you will probably become confused. I use words such as "mind," "happiness," and "consciousness" in ways that do not necessarily correlate with other teachings. Don't get attached to any words. They are only stepping stones, to be left behind as quickly as possible.

When I occasionally quote the words of Jesus or the Buddha, from *A Course in Miracles* or from other teachings, I do so not in order to compare, but to draw your attention to the fact that in *essence* there is and always has been only one spiritual teaching, although it comes in many forms. Some of these forms, such as the ancient religions, have become so overlaid with extraneous matter that their spiritual essence has become almost completely obscured by it. To a large extent, therefore, their deeper meaning is no longer recognized and their transformative power lost. When I quote from the ancient religions or other teachings, it is to reveal their deeper meaning and thereby restore their transformative power — particularly for those readers who are followers of these religions or teachings. I say to them: there is no need to go elsewhere for the truth. Let me show you how to go more deeply into what you already have.

Mostly, however, I have endeavored to use terminology that is as neutral as possible in order to reach a wide range of people. This book can be seen as a restatement for our time of that one timeless spiritual teaching, the essence of all religions. It is not derived from external sources, but from the one true Source within, so it contains no theory or speculation. I speak from inner experience, and if at times I speak forcefully, it is to cut through heavy layers of mental resistance and to reach that place within you where you already *know*, just as I know, and where the truth is recognized when it is heard. There is then a feeling of exaltation and heightened aliveness, as something within you says: "Yes. I know this is true."

YOU ARE NOT YOUR MIND

THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Enlightenment — what is that?

A beggar had been sitting by the side of a road for over thirty years. One day a stranger walked by. “Spare some change?” mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap. “I have nothing to give you,” said the stranger. Then he asked: “What’s that you are sitting on?” “Nothing,” replied the beggar. “Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember.” “Ever looked inside?” asked the stranger. “No,” said the beggar. “What’s the point? There’s nothing in there.” “Have a look inside,” insisted the stranger. The beggar managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold.

I am that stranger who has nothing to give you and who is telling you to look inside. Not inside any box, as in the parable, but somewhere even closer: inside yourself.

“But I am not a beggar,” I can hear you say.

Those who have not found their true wealth, which is the radiant joy of Being and the deep, unshakable peace that comes with it, are beggars, even if they have great material wealth. They are looking outside for scraps of pleasure or fulfillment, for validation, security, or love, while they have a treasure within that not only includes all those things but is infinitely greater than anything the world can offer.

The word enlightenment conjures up the idea of some superhuman accomplishment, and the ego likes to keep it that way, but it is simply your natural state of *felt* oneness with Being. It is a state of connectedness with something immeasurable and indestructible, something that, almost paradoxically, is essentially you and yet is much greater than you. It is finding your true nature beyond name and form. The inability to feel this connectedness gives rise to the illusion of separation, from yourself and from the world around you. You then perceive yourself, consciously or unconsciously, as an isolated fragment. Fear arises, and conflict within and without becomes the norm.

I love the Buddha’s simple definition of enlightenment as “the end of suffering.” There is nothing superhuman in that, is there? Of course, as a definition, it is incomplete. It only tells you what enlightenment is not: no suffering. But what’s left when there is no more suffering?

The Buddha is silent on that, and his silence implies that you'll have to find out for yourself. He uses a negative definition so that the mind cannot make it into something to believe in or into a superhuman accomplishment, a goal that is impossible for you to attain. Despite this precaution, the majority of Buddhists still believe that enlightenment is for the Buddha, not for them, at least not in this lifetime.

You used the word Being. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Being is the eternal, ever-present One Life beyond the myriad forms of life that are subject to birth and death. However, Being is not only beyond but also deep within every form as its innermost invisible and indestructible essence. This means that it is accessible to you now as your own deepest self, your true nature. But don't seek to grasp it with your mind. Don't try to understand it. You can know it only when the mind is still. When you are present, when your attention is fully and intensely in the Now, Being can be felt, but it can never be understood mentally. To regain awareness of Being and to abide in that state of "feeling-realization" is enlightenment.



When you say Being, are you talking about God? If you are, then why don't you say it?

The word *God* has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse. I use it sometimes, but I do so sparingly. By misuse, I mean that people who have never even glimpsed the realm of the sacred, the infinite vastness behind that word, use it with great conviction, as if they knew what they are talking about. Or they argue against it, as if they knew what it is that they are denying. This misuse gives rise to absurd beliefs, assertions, and egoic delusions, such as "My or our God is the only true God, and your God is false," or Nietzsche's famous statement "God is dead."

The word *God* has become a closed concept. The moment the word is uttered, a mental image is created, no longer, perhaps, of an old man with a white beard, but still a mental representation of someone or something outside you, and, yes, almost inevitably a *male* someone or something.

Neither *God* nor *Being* nor any other word can define or explain the ineffable reality behind the word, so the only important question is whether the word is a help or a hindrance in enabling you to experience That toward which it points. Does it point beyond itself to that transcendental reality, or does it lend itself too easily to becoming no more than an idea in your head that you believe in, a mental idol?

The word *Being* explains nothing, but nor does *God*. *Being*, however, has the advantage that it is an open concept. It does not reduce the infinite invisible to a finite entity. It is impossible to

form a mental image of it. Nobody can claim exclusive possession of Being. It is your very essence, and it is immediately accessible to you as the feeling of your own presence, the realization *I am* that is prior to I am this or I am that. So it is only a small step from the word *Being* to the experience of Being.



What is the greatest obstacle to experiencing this reality?

Identification with your mind, which causes thought to become compulsive. Not to be able to stop thinking is a dreadful affliction, but we don't realize this because almost everybody is suffering from it, so it is considered normal.

This incessant mental noise prevents you from finding that realm of inner stillness that is inseparable from Being. It also creates a false mind-made self that casts a shadow of fear and suffering. We will look at all that in more detail later.

The philosopher Descartes believed that he had found the most fundamental truth when he made his famous statement: "I think, therefore I am." He had, in fact, given expression to the most basic error: to equate thinking with Being and identity with thinking. The compulsive thinker, which means almost everyone, lives in a state of apparent separateness, in an insanely complex world of continuous problems and conflict, a world that reflects the ever-increasing fragmentation of the mind. Enlightenment is a state of wholeness, of being "at one" and therefore at peace. At one with life in its manifested aspect, the world, as well as with your deepest self and life unmanifested — at one with Being. Enlightenment is not only the end of suffering and of continuous conflict within and without, but also the end of the dreadful enslavement to incessant thinking. What an incredible liberation this is!

Identification with your mind creates an opaque screen of concepts, labels, images, words, judgments, and definitions that blocks all true relationship. It comes between you and yourself, between you and your fellow man and woman, between you and nature, between you and God. It is this screen of thought that creates the illusion of separateness, the illusion that there is you *and* a totally separate "other." You then forget the essential fact that, underneath the level of physical appearances and separate forms, you are one with all that *is*. By "forget," I mean that you can no longer *feel* this oneness as self-evident reality. You may *believe* it to be true, but you no longer *know* it to be true. A belief may be comforting. Only through your own experience, however, does it become liberating.

Thinking has become a disease. Disease happens when things get out of balance. For example, there is nothing wrong with cells dividing and multiplying in the body, but when this process continues in disregard of the total organism, cells proliferate and we have disease.

The mind is a superb instrument if used rightly. Used wrongly, however, it becomes very destructive. To put it more accurately, it is not so much that you use your mind wrongly — you