



# THE POWER OF THEN

BEFORE ECKHART TOLLE'S BUBBLE BURST

by CLAIRE HOFFMAN

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THESE DAYS I BARELY MAKE A MOVE without thinking about the consequences. Last night, I stared at my 5-month old daughter, marveling at the miracle of her being. I stroked the round curve of her belly, gazed into her bright blue eyes. My chest warmed as she cooed ecstatically back at me. Had life ever been so new and wonderful? Then, my mind wandered. I reached over her breathtaking being for my computer. I was on deadline.

With that reach came a flood of thoughts—would Vivian be forever scarred by my multitasking? Would her brain waves be altered by the glow of the computer screen? And worse, did the work I had to do really matter when such beauty lay before me?

For so long, I've wanted to be in the moment. But I think that moment is over. I think the now has ended. Actually, I wonder if it ever existed.

Five years ago, I sat across from Eckhart Tolle—the millennial guru of being in the Now. He said he didn't like talking to press, with

the exception of his No. 1 disciple, Oprah. But, Tolle told me, his puckish face crinkling into a bemused smile, the universe had told him to grant me this interview. I'll admit I was suspicious of Tolle before I met him. I had read his books and felt vaguely annoyed that he had repurposed in a digestible form an age-old spiritual truth: Happiness was letting go. I was raised in a utopian community based on meditation that deified our guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who said he was enlightened and encouraged all of us to achieve his state of "24-hour bliss." I developed a long-standing dislike of men who stood on stages and told people to emulate them.

Still, all the meditating I'd done as a child hadn't eradicated my ego. So when I heard Eckhart and the universe had talked about me, he had my full attention.

Outside the sterile studio room where we were chatting at the University of British Columbia sat one other writer who had been approved by the universe. She was from *Modern Dog*. Tolle, as it

## THE POWER OF NOW

has been championed by comedian Zach Galifianakis,

musician Trey Anastasio, and current Cincinnati Reds manager Dusty Baker.



turned out, really loved dogs. I felt flattered despite myself. I had often thought the universe had something special in store for me and sitting across from Tolle, I tingled with the meaningfulness of it all. This was it! I was in the Now. I was in Tolle's Now. We sat facing each other. Tolle, an elfin 60 years old with reddish hair and pointed ears, seemed to be slowing time with his fixed intensity.

We were in Vancouver, where Tolle lived a relatively private life with his girlfriend and soon-to-be wife, Kim Eng. Despite having book after book on the best-seller list for years, Tolle said he was modest in his habits, citing a new Lexus SUV and a nice condo as his biggest splurges.

Before we sat down together, I had been nervous about interviewing him—how do you ask somebody about their history, and about what they do, and why they do it when that person has cobbled together a philosophy of life in opposition to history and who preaches that all that really matters is the moment?

Tolle told me that the reason he wrote his books, the reason he went on *Oprah*, the reason he was giving me that interview instead of just being Eckhart Tolle, was something he called the evolutionary impulse. He described it as that feeling, prompted by an inner voice that compels us to do something, to move forward, and to change our lives. It was what kept him, he said, from just meditating all day, content. The evolutionary impulse was what had propelled him from being Ulrich Leonard Tolle, a Cambridge Ph.D. dropout who lived

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on a park bench on and off for a year in Central London to Eckhart Tolle, spiritual mentor to the stars, a self-help guru of international fame who had authored best-selling books, flown around the world for countless lectures, set up an online seminar with Oprah that was watched by 11 million people, and masterminded Eckhart Tolle TV, an online channel where viewers worldwide could watch Tolle 24/7 implore them to be in the Now.

**IT WAS THE END OF 2008** but it felt like the end of the world. That September, the U.S. banking system had all but collapsed, the stock market was in a nose dive, and around the globe the drumbeat of daily news was one of fraud and collapse. Bernie Madoff had just confessed his \$6 billion dollar crime, Freddie Mac was going under, hundreds of thousands of people were losing their jobs and their houses every month. Suddenly all our institutions looked like sand castles in high tide, our sense of history and stability crumbling. But Tolle seemed excited about this, citing all the dramatic change, not to mention Obama's recent election, as signs of a new, more enlightened world order.

I was on the cusp of my own new world order. The night before my interview, I had lain sprawled on my hotel bed talking to my boyfriend of six months. We had moved in together and he was talking marriage. Within 18 months we would have a new baby and a whole new life together. Prior to that point, I had long imagined a life for myself as a perpetually single woman, living out my days in my architecturally compelling apartment, accompanied by books, NPR, and perhaps a quiet, well-behaved puppy. My world was being rocked, my sense of self and my sense of my future were mutating before my eyes, and listening to Tolle, I felt like maybe it was all adding up to one big conundrum: Only the present was real?

Tolle told me about the day when he ceased being a regular person with a head filled with thoughts and an ego and switched into being "in the Now."

"How did it feel?" I asked him.

"Suddenly I was at peace, the anxious person wasn't there anymore, the depressed person wasn't there anymore—there was just somebody who enjoyed the moment. All I knew was I was so peaceful. I got out of bed and walked around, and in the streets and even in the middle of London, there was enormous peace in the traffic. I was riding on the top of a bus. Peace was everywhere."

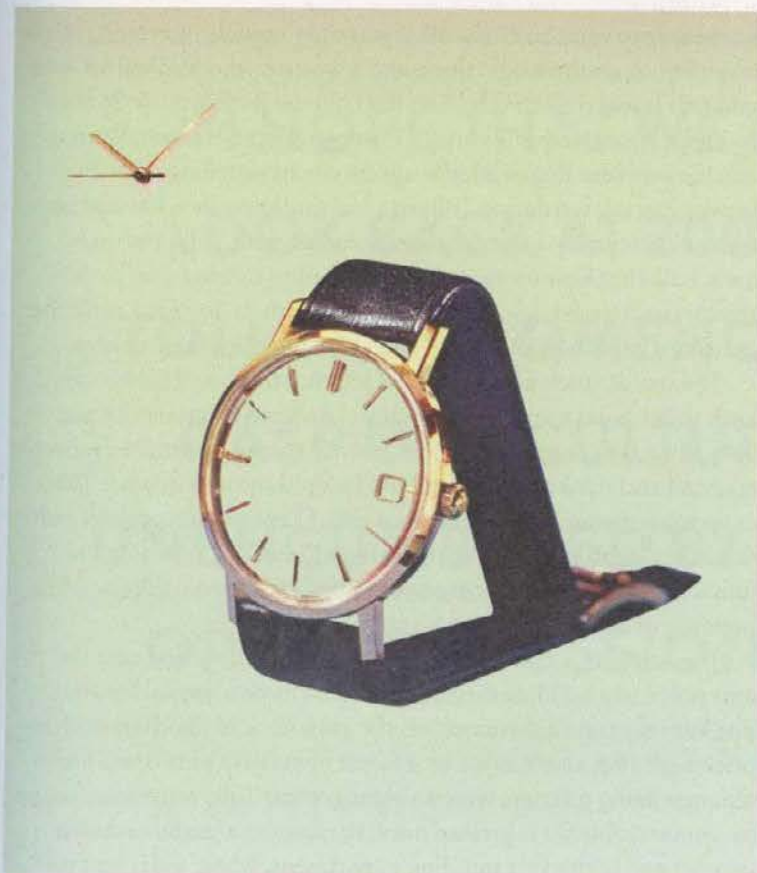
Tolle prefaced his best-selling spiritual guide *The Power of Now* with a statement of purpose: "I have little use for the past and rarely think about it." But there in that studio he conceded that even he had a history. "It exists on some level but it's the power of the present moment that brings it back to life," he said.

Tolle was born in West Germany in 1948. His father was a journalist and his mother was, he says, discontent. By the time he was a teenager, Tolle was living in Spain with his beatnik father, working as a tour guide for a local cruise ship company, driving visitors around to the local castle, the palm forest, a small mountaintop.

With the help of his mother, he moved to London, where he got a job teaching business English. But Tolle said he wasn't happy. He fell into occasional bouts of depression and anxiety. "Why do bad things always happen to me?" he wondered. "Why is my life so dreadful?"

Tolle described himself during the mid-70s as a morose character





who occasionally listened to Led Zeppelin and who mostly pined for some faraway, abstract idea of success. At 23, despite a mostly blank academic history, Tolle enrolled in King's College London. He was older than the other students and became friends with a few of the professors who saw promise in him. He flourished, and in 1977 he graduated with honors. Still, he said, he had a sense of "generalized failure. A fear of life, a fear of failure...being nobody really is the ego's strongest fear."

His ambitions were academic: maybe to be a professor, perhaps to be regarded as brilliant. But with no plan post-graduation, he became increasingly depressed and anxious. That spring, something changed. Like Siddhartha sitting under the Bodhi tree, fingers snapping, Eckhart Tolle became, for all intents and purposes, an enlightened man. He lay in bed one spring night, his head a whirlwind of sadness and despair. "I can't live with myself anymore," he recounted. And as he thought that, he says, he had another thought: "Who is myself? And who am I?"

And then, he says, "I realized the self is the mind-made entity of the unhappy me. Probably I couldn't have expressed it that way at the time. I didn't really understand the process. But there was a separation of consciousness that was no longer identified with the structure of mind and emotions. I couldn't have said that at the time. All I knew was I was so peaceful. Where did it come from? That was all I knew. It took me years to understand the process behind it."

Tolle immersed himself in religious texts, from the Bhagavad-Gita to the New Testament. "I suddenly realized that I knew what Jesus was talking about," he says. "My future didn't seem important anymore. The strange thing is this ambitious thing of 'I need to be somebody'—that just disappeared."

Still, Tolle applied and got into Cambridge to work on a doctorate in Latin American literature. He had his own place in Cambridge and for a few years, a girlfriend. "My life was transformed. I was living this dream." After four years, he decided it wasn't for him. He left abruptly and moved to London to sleep on a friend's couch. "Everybody thought I was mad because I'd given up a Ph.D. at Cambridge. My mother was near a nervous breakdown. And then came two years of drifting. I would just spend days and days walking around parks and sitting on benches."

For a time, Tolle was homeless, living and sleeping in neighborhood parks, whiling away the hours watching people who were lost in the clamor of their own lives. He lived as a sort of blessed fool, with strangers and friends occasionally offering him their couches, or garages, or the odd odd job. Slowly, people started to lean in to the small man on the park bench who didn't seem to have a care in the world. They asked him questions and listened to him talk about the nature of reality. He liked it. "I'm not a total outsider, like this tramp that laughed at everything. I'm part of this world, although I'm not part of the structure of this world, but I'm very much engaged in the human consciousness and change of human consciousness," he recalled.

Without meaning to, Tolle had transformed from a homeless academic into a spiritual guru. He used different texts, but his message was the same: Awake to the bliss of the moment. There, through word of mouth, people came to see him and seek his counsel. "At some point, somebody must have said, 'I'm going to invite my friends and you must give a talk in my living room.'" He charged people a nominal fee—about 10 pounds an hour—and they would tell him the psychological and emotional traumas they were wrestling with. One such client told him he was healing her, and so Tolle says, he became a healer for a few years. And then eventually he stopped. "I realized more and more people just wanted physical healing. I wanted to go deeper—I wanted to transform their consciousness."

**TOLLE'S METEORIC RISE**, his enviable success, his best-sellers, his website, his line of merchandise all beg the question: Was he really just a hapless fool? His answer? It's not him. It's the universe.

"I had a strong inner impulse to leave England and move to the west coast of North America without knowing why," he told me, as if he were a puppet on some sort of larger cosmic string. "But the pull was so strong that I just felt ready." Tolle sold his home and all his worldly goods and got on a plane to Vancouver, a place he had never been and a place where he knew no one. He then took a Greyhound bus down to Menlo Park, California, where he had a friend. He wasn't sure what he was doing there, so he asked the universe, "Why am I here? What am I doing here?"

"I was outside and this strong impulse came to me to get a notepad, and so I bought a notepad, and then I went back to the apartment and sat in the kitchen, and I had this strong impulse to write, which was very different," Tolle said. "From the very first sentence I wrote, which kind of came to me, I asked the question 'What is enlightenment?' and then an answer came, and I realized: This is going to be a book. From then on, I spent several hours everyday writing in a very energized way. It wasn't channeled, but it was inspired."



**IN JUNE 2008**, Bill Gates established his own new Now when he stepped down from daily duties at Microsoft

Corporation to concentrate on philanthropy after three decades as the company's chairman.

Remembering Tolle's story, I feel a less-than-enlightened sense of envy. He couldn't stop writing? And that writing became a best-seller 10 times over? *The Power of Now* was published in 1997 in a small run of 3,000 copies out of an indie publishing house, Namaste Publishing. The book was sold mostly at local bookstores and yoga studios. Several copies of Tolle's book made their way down the west coast, some to a Brentwood, California, yoga studio where actress Meg Ryan practiced. Ryan bought a copy of the book, read it, loved it, and told Oprah about it. In 2000, Oprah listed *The Power of Now* as one of her favorite books.

The book started flying off the shelves, and not just at New Age bookshops, but also at Amazon and Barnes and Noble. It quickly became an unusual best-seller—instead of talking about getting rich or getting thin, Tolle asked his reader to search for “portals into the unmanifested” and to try “moving deeply into the Now.” Somehow Tolle's message of simple awareness struck a chord. Translated into 33 languages, the book has sold more than 5 million copies. Blogs and fan sites reveal a world of readers who felt transformed by Tolle's work, while critics accused Tolle of popularizing a sort of Buddhism lite, borrowing heavily from Eastern meditation to create a commercially viable CliffsNotes version of ancient wisdom.

That criticism didn't inhibit Tolle's success. In 2007, Oprah created a series of webisodes specifically designed to promote the book and help people understand it. It made Oprah history, with millions of viewers tuning in each week to watch Tolle and Oprah talk about the book and meditate together. Oprah even created a workbook. It was then that Tolle began to experience true fame. He started wearing a big hat and sunglasses when he went out, and he received hundreds of letters describing enlightenment experiences from his readers. Paris Hilton—at the time, the personification of trendy vapidness—was seen toting a copy of the book under her arm. This was the apotheosis of his fame and it was then that we sat down together.

As he discussed all this success, Tolle seemed far away, as if it were

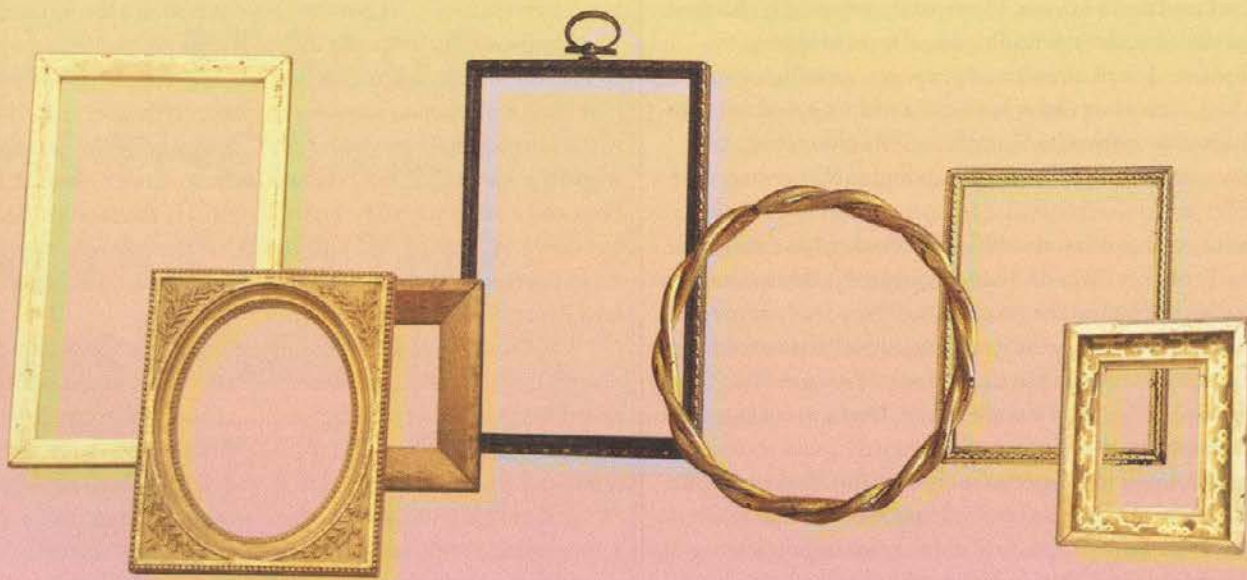
happening to somebody else who was only vaguely interesting. There was a knock on the studio door, and a woman who worked for Tolle said that it was time to stop. I walked out the door with Tolle as he was telling me that his favorite TV show was *7th Heaven*. Waiting outside was Kim Eng, a middle-aged woman watching me with a frown. Eng started dating Tolle in 1998 and since then has had her own enlightenment experience. She teaches with Tolle and on her own. I told her how I was looking forward to coming over to their apartment the next day, as planned, to take their dog for a walk. She gave me a hard look and said, “That's because he's famous now.”

The words stuck in my head as I left the studio and took a cab back to my hotel room. Upon arrival, I ordered room service and opened up my computer to write. But as I turned the interview over in my head and tried to figure out how I would recount it, what Tolle's experience meant for me or anyone else, I kept catching myself and thinking, “Stop thinking. Be in the Now!” Finally, I gave up and found myself Googling engagement rings and wedding dresses. The opposite of Bodhi tree being.

The next day, I visited Tolle in the tidy neighborhood near the university, in a building largely populated by academics. He and Eng kept separate apartments on the 16th floor of the characterless brick high-rise, surrounded by a forest of massive pine trees. Their separate living quarters were an arrangement Tolle touted as a recipe for romantic bliss. He greeted me at the door in a pastel cashmere sweater and invited me into Eng's apartment, where every surface seemed attended to—meticulously clean and decorated in a spare and cozy Zen style—a few orchids, a few bamboo pots, a few Buddha statues.

Tolle's spaniel, Maya, rolled around at our feet in a state of ecstasy as we talked and he rubbed her stomach. In Maya, he seemed to have found a kindred spirit, a being that could match his uninhibited Nowness.

I asked him if, despite being present all the time, he ever thought...



# “I HOPE THAT WE WILL ALL SOMEDAY LOOK BACK AT 2008 (THE PEAK OF THE TOLLE PHENOMENON) AS ALSO THE LAST GASP OF A CULTURE SEEKING TO LIVE UNENCUMBERED BY LESSONS OF THE PAST OR REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE FUTURE.”

thoughts. He laughed and thought about it. “Yes, if I start to think I have to say something I do, but I’m very reluctant to because whatever I say about another human being is very limiting. The same human being in time can change. Let’s say five years later you can change completely, and the potential for change may have been there. Every judgment is like tearing a little piece out of a big painting and saying, ‘That’s how it is.’”

**LYING IN BED** with my new baby girl here in 2013, I’ve thought about that caveat of Tolle’s. As if he had foretold it, I’m a totally different person than I was five years ago, with a totally different life. My Now can’t possibly be the Now of 2008. It’s my responsibility to think about the future and the past as I help create a history for two little girls. It’s my job to worry about unseen danger and to think ahead for them and try to guide them toward their destinies.

I hope that we will all someday look back at 2008 (the peak of the Tolle phenomenon) as also the last gasp of a culture seeking to live unencumbered by lessons of the past or repercussions for the future. I don’t hold Tolle personally responsible for his phenomenon, but I do think his spiritual message, while well-intentioned, might have inadvertently provided the cover for an unhealthy, unbridled Now. I heard Ray Kurzweil on the radio the other day predicting that in a few short decades devices like Google Glass would disappear and simply be programmed molecules flowing through our blood streams, flowing into our brains. With that as the potential future, how can we think the answer is to focus on the present?

Like anyone, I dedicate much of my life to the pursuit of happiness, of self-realization, or whatever you want to call it. But these days, I’ve

grown weary of Tolle’s message and all the conflict that comes with it. As sentient beings living in a complex and increasingly fucked-up world, how can we possibly tell ourselves that being present is the end-all?

As I said goodbye to Tolle that day, he seemed to sense I wasn’t entirely convinced. He reassured me that letting go of thought doesn’t mean becoming a puddle of a person. “I believe there’s a vast intelligence beyond the human brain,” he said. “The important thing is not to get trapped in this little instrument for which intelligence expresses itself, but to be consciously connected with that. Consciousness itself underlies everything.” As he talked, I found myself momentarily soothed, hypnotized. He told me there are black holes inside of everyone, and that there was one inside of me. He told me the universe told him to take this interview and that what I was going to write would be profound. As I walked to the door he stopped and gave me a polite hug that suddenly felt important. His dog rollicked at our feet. I walked away, and for a while, didn’t think anything at all.

I never wrote Tolle’s story. I came home to a largely blank notebook, devoid of any real notes or analysis. Being in the Now had rendered me impotent.

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LET THE PAST MAKE US BETTER,  
NOT BITTER **PAGE 72**