

FEATURED ARTICLES

Unconditioned Consciousness and the Power of Now

A Dialogue between Eckhart Tolle and Mary O'Malley

Eckhart Tolle, a spiritual teacher from Vancouver, B.C., Canada, is the author of *The Power of Now*, a jewel of clarity and insight that has been lauded as "a spiritual masterpiece of and for our times."



Mary O'Malley is a counselor and spiritual teacher from Kirkland, Washington, and the author of *Belonging to Life: The Journey of Awakening*.

Mary: We are living in a most incredible time, a time where more and more people are reawakening to life, to the field of Being that is available in the present moment. In this reawakening, we are ready to let go of defining ourselves from the content of thought and discover ourselves as something much bigger and grander than that.

Eckhart: Yes. For many thousands of years, we have lived identified with the conditioned mind, deriving from it a narrow and ultimately illusory sense of self, a "little me" — always struggling, fearful, uneasy, in conflict with itself and others. We are now opening into our natural state of "self," oneness with Being — the vast realm of consciousness or universal intelligence itself, of which the thinking mind is only a tiny aspect. This is the realm of inner stillness from where all the things arise that make life worth living: creativity, peace, aliveness, joy, love.



Mary: We each awakened to the unconditioned in different ways. Your experience was a spontaneous awakening. Mine was an initial awakening and then a many-

year journey in which I had to see and let go of the conditioned mind.

Eckhart: For most people, it is a gradual process, such as you experienced. This dimension emerges within them. It wants to emerge. For me, it happened suddenly, in my 29th year. I was in the middle of a suicidal depression, contemplating killing myself. The thought "I cannot live with myself any longer" kept repeating itself in my mind. Then, suddenly, I became aware of the strangeness of that thought. "If 'I' cannot live with 'myself,' there must be two of me: the 'I' and the 'self' I cannot live with."

In that moment, my consciousness withdrew its identification from the unhappy, deeply conditioned and very fearful self. The withdrawal must have been so complete that this false, suffering self collapsed completely, much like a plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left was my true nature as the ever-present I AM: consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form. I woke up the next day in bliss, which comes and goes. But the undercurrent of peace has never left me since then.

Mary: What do you see as the major obstacle to knowing the unconditioned consciousness?

Eckhart: To not be able to stop thinking. This 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.

Mary: For me, the conditioned mind was full of fear. I truly tried to fix it and get rid of it. This only made me more contracted and cut off from life. It was only when I began to be able to see thought that I could become still and open again to life.

Eckhart: Opening to life implies you are no longer interpreting the present moment in any way. That is the state of freedom. When you can allow this moment to be as it is without needing to label it wanting it to be different than what it is, you open to the vast power that is concealed in the present moment. It was always there, but it was covered up. This connection has nothing to do with the circumstances of your life at that moment. In fact, for many people it happens when the outer circumstances are so-called "bad." It is the simple fact that you have allowed this moment to *be* that does it.

Mary: In my book, I go into passionate detail about the senses, for to me they are a doorway back into Being. As people let go of the busyness of life and cultivate their senses, they awaken again to the pure joy that is contained within the now.

Eckhart: To be aware of your senses is a doorway into the present moment, into the state of presence. What that implies is that in that moment of acute awareness,

the mind has become still. That is the state of consciousness that is free of thought, and that is the most precious thing that could ever happen to you. Some people experience it accidentally in a moment of danger, beauty, physical exhaustion. We now realize that we can consciously choose to enter that state.

Mary: In my awakening, one of the most difficult things I had to deal with was the opening and closing, the remembering and the forgetting. Experiencing the state of Being and then watching the conditioned mind turn it all into a problem again, I knew grief.

Eckhart: Problems are embedded in the very structure of the conditioned mind. To survive and stay in control, the mind needs problems. It will never say that openly. It will say, "I want to be free of problems," but it always recreates problems. A quick way, when you observe problems arising, is to ask, "What is the problem in this moment?" Then become very alert to the reality of this moment and see if the problem has any reality right now.

Mary: And it usually doesn't! I can now watch my struggling mind with great tenderness. I think the reason why I can see it so clearly is that my heart is open to it. I have such mercy for this mind that has desperately tried to keep me "safe" until I became conscious enough to discover that I am safe.

Eckhart: Recognizing that there never is a problem in the present moment is a very revolutionary realization. Sometimes, that is misinterpreted by the mind. It says that you are denying reality by not focusing on these problems. Of course, it is not that at all. There will always be challenges in life. The ability to deal with challenges is far greater when the attention is fully in the now rather than in the state of resistance.

You can then ask, "In this moment, is there anything I can do?" If so, then doing happens; action is taken. Or maybe there is nothing you can do in the moment, and this moment is accepted the way it is. It enormously simplifies life. Challenges no longer turn into problems, and the heaviness goes out of life.

Mary: Another thing that helped immensely in my awakening is to not resist what is happening.

Eckhart: To welcome whatever arises in this moment is the ultimate spiritual practice. If you practice just this one thing, you won't need to read any more books or learn any other meditation techniques. Welcoming whatever arises in this moment, outside or inside of you, brings freedom.

The conditioned mind will tell you not to do this, for it believes that by resisting, it will become free. The opposite is true. By resisting, you become even more stuck. When you no longer believe what the mind is saying, you realize that the quickest way for transformation to happen is to welcome what is. In that moment, life is free

to move through you. The conditioned mind is no longer obstructing life.

Mary: When speaking about cultivating the now, it is easy to think that we are "putting down" the mind and its belief in the past and the future. It is not that at all. It is an exquisite tool that is needed to maneuver through life, but for most of us it has taken over our life.

Eckhart: It is just self-identification with the mind that causes suffering. When this happens, the mind has a compulsive quality. When that goes, then the mind is a wonderful tool that can give expression to what arises from the deeper levels. In daily life, you need the past and the future, but your identity does not need to come from them.

The illusion is to seek identity in the past, to identify with the past as "me." The other illusion is seeking fulfillment in the future: I need to become something; become more complete; one day I will get there. Even enlightenment can become an illusion, if you seek it as some future state.

When cultivating the now, you still remember things from the past, but the self-seeking has gone out of this remembering. And you still use the future for practical matters. The grasping and clinging, which is a recipe for non-fulfillment, isn't there anymore.

Mary: The more I cultivate the now, the more joy I feel. My whole body experiences radiance as I soften and open back into life.

Eckhart: I call what you are experiencing the "inner body." Some people call it the light body. It is a general sense of aliveness throughout every cell of the body. The state of presence is not a head state; your entire being participates in it.

Mary: When I heard you speak last summer, I let go of listening to your words and opened to this light body.

Eckhart: When one speaks from stillness, the words carry an energy transmission, a vibration. It is as if the words are secondary. It is the energy that comes with the words — or rather the stillness *beneath* the words — that is the greatest teaching.

Mary: Would you like to leave us with a last thought?

Eckhart: People say that living in the now is hard. The opposite is true. The normal way is hard, not living in the now. To welcome the now is to welcome life itself, for the now is inseparable from life. So don't make the now into an enemy. Make friends with it. In other words, accept each moment and whatever it contains as if you had chosen it. Immediately, life will begin to work *for* you, rather than against you. Then watch the miracle of life unfold.