

THE SACRAMENT OF NOW

Andrew Ryder

WHEN CHRISTIANS USE THE PHRASE ‘the sacrament of the present moment’, they are expressing the conviction that God is present at every moment of their lives. They understand that the key to holiness is following the divine will, step by step, as we go through our day. It does not matter what we are doing—whether we are at work, at leisure or at rest—God is with us and God’s grace is available to us. However trivial or mundane an action may appear, it can be a source of blessing and spiritual growth.

Being attentive to the grace of the present moment is an approach to life associated with Jean-Pierre de Caussade. The classic work attributed to him, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, describes the practice in these terms:

What happens at each moment bears the imprint of the will of God and of his adorable name. How holy is that name! How just, then, to bless it, to treat it as a sacrament which hallows by its own power souls which place no obstacle to its action! Can we see what bears this august name without esteeming it infinitely? It is a divine manna which falls from heaven in order to give us a constant increase in grace.¹

Living fully in the present is a concern of many spiritual teachers, and goes beyond the range of Christian writers, reaching back to early Buddhist and other Eastern traditions. Few modern authors have explained the value of the practice with such enthusiasm and clarity as has Eckhart Tolle. *The Power of Now*, his first book, is a best-seller; he explores his ideas in greater depth with his most recent work, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*.²

¹ *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, translated by Alger Thorold (London: Collins, 1977), 7. This translation, still widely used in the English-speaking world, is from Henri Ramière’s first French edition (1861). For information about subsequent editions and about the current state of opinion on de Caussade’s authorship, see the next article in this issue by Dominique Salin.

² *The Power of Now* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001); *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (London: Penguin, 2005)—hereafter PN and NHNE respectively.



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Tolle draws on various spiritual traditions, especially Eastern ones. He also uses Christian sources—though when he quotes the New Testament his interpretations are at times far removed from the original sense of the text. Above all, however, Tolle's writing is based on his own experience and personal reflection. This makes his approach to the challenge of living in the present moment both practical and fresh. While he may not use the language of traditional Christian spirituality, Tolle is very much concerned that, as we make our way through the ordinary events of the day, we keep in touch with the deepest source of our being.

Tolle complements the ideas in *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* by dealing with the mental blocks that prevent us from responding more fully to the sacrament of the present moment. When it comes to the apostolic ideal of 'finding God in all things' the treatise on self-abandonment gives us the *why*, and Tolle shows us the *how*. Most importantly of all, Tolle throws a new and encouraging light on the quest to become a contemplative in action.

What makes *The Power of Now* so attractive is the style and manner of the presentation. There is a continuous interaction with the reader, through the questions and objections that Tolle has had to deal with when explaining his ideas to various audiences. This gives the theories a deeper grounding in reality. The terminology, however, is highly personal at times. So, as a means of introduction, I shall build this article around three of Tolle's key concepts: time, the ego and surrender.

Time

Given his insistence on living in the present, Tolle's understanding of time is obviously important. Though he brings his own refinements to

the question, his approach to time is based on the usual divisions of past, present and future. His emphasis is totally on the present:

Make the Now the primary focus of your life. Whereas before you dwelt in time and paid brief visits to the Now, have your dwelling place in the Now and pay brief visits to past and future when required to deal with the practical aspects of your life situation.³

Whatever the present moment contains, advises Tolle, we are to accept it as if we had chosen it, always working with it, not against it. If we can make the Now our friend and ally, not our enemy, we will miraculously transform our lives (PN 28, 29).

The Power of Now makes a distinction between 'clock time' and 'psychological time'. The former is our usual perception of time, telling us the hour of the day and indicating the tasks to be done at that moment. Psychological time, on the other hand, is a state of mind, for example a personal preoccupation with past events or a compulsive concern about the future. If we allow ourselves to be distracted from the present by thinking about the past, or if we become so concerned with future possibilities that they take our minds off the present, the present is no longer honoured for itself:

All negativity is caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present. Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry—all forms of fear—are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of nonforgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence.⁴

The danger of seeing our present actions as only steps to some future goal is that we will find ourselves waiting to start living, postponing present possibilities in the vain hope of some future state of bliss. The secret of happiness is to make peace with the present.

³ Eckhart Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now: Essential Teachings, Meditations, and Exercises from The Power of Now* (Novato, Ca: New World Library, 2001), 30.

⁴ PN 50. *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* also uses the image of a clock. Referring to the spirituality of former ages, the author writes: 'Then it was enough for those who led a spiritual life to see that each moment brought with it a duty to be faithfully fulfilled. On that duty the whole of their attention was fixed at each successive moment, like the hand of a clock which marks each moment of the hour. Under God's unceasing guidance their spirit turned without conscious effort to each new duty as it was presented to them by God each hour of the day.' (*Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, 31)

The present moment is the field on which the game of life happens. It cannot happen anywhere else. Once you have made peace with the present moment, see what happens, what you can do or choose to do, or rather what life does through you. There are three words that convey the secret of the art of living, the secret of all success and happiness: One With Life. Being one with life is being one with Now. You then realise that you don't live your life, but life lives you. Life is the dancer, and you are the dance. (NHNE 115)

While attention to childhood experiences and family background is a vital element of much modern psychotherapy, Tolle warns against an emphasis on the past in dealing with present difficulties: 'Only refer to it when it is absolutely relevant to the present. Feel the power of this moment and the fullness. Feel your presence.' (PN 70) If we spend too much time exploring the past we may become bogged down in it:

You may think that you need more time to understand the past or become free of it, in other words, that the future will eventually free you of the past. This is a delusion. Only the present can free you of the past. More time cannot free you of time. Access the power of Now. That is the key. (PN 75)

In themselves our memories are not a problem, says Tolle. In fact, it is through memory that we learn from the past, especially from our past mistakes. It is only when our memories take us over that they turn into a burden and become problematic. Too many people, unfortunately, allow their unhappy memories to limit them, holding on to grievances, regrets, hostility and guilt. They carry a large amount of unnecessary baggage, both mental and emotional, throughout their lives. Negative memories take over their personalities. The past becomes a prison. We have to learn to break the habit of perpetuating old emotions and refrain from dwelling on the past, regardless of whether something happened yesterday or thirty years ago. We can learn to return our attention continuously to the pristine, timeless present moment rather than keeping situations or events alive in our minds and engaging in mental movie-making. Our very Presence, rather than our thoughts and emotions, then becomes our identity (NHNE 141).



Eckhart Tolle

In a more theological style than Tolle, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* also upholds the healing power of the present moment, locating its purifying source in the divine will:

In whatever manner this divine will touches the mind, it nourishes the soul and continually enlarges it by giving it what is best for it at every moment. These happy effects are produced not by any particular event as such, but by God's design for each individual moment.⁵

The Ego

Books that encourage the practice of attention to the Now (including, in my view, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*) often do not give

⁵ *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, 39.

enough thought to the difficulties of the practice. They make it all seem very simple and easy. But if such is the case, why does it not work for most people? This is where Tolle gives valuable insights and help.

Looking at the obstacles that hinder our attention to the present, Tolle acknowledges their strength and roots them in the human condition. He uses the term 'ego' to sum up the fear, the greed, the abuse of power and all the other manifestations of human dysfunction that prevent us from giving our full attention to the Now. When reading his harsh criticisms of the ego, we have to remember that for Tolle the ego is not the personal subject, but the sum of weaknesses that mar every human personality.

Given the more positive, or at least neutral, use of the term 'ego' by other writers, it is important to keep in mind that in Tolle's writing the ego is not the deeper self, but a false self—the outer cast of the personality that isolates us and locks us into selfishness.

This results in a total unawareness of my connectedness with the whole, my intrinsic oneness with every 'other' as well as with the Source. This forgetfulness is original sin, suffering, delusion. (NHNE 22)

The ego opposes the practice of attention to the present because it only looks to the past and the future. The present moment hardly exists:

Even when the ego seems to be concerned with the present, it is not the present that it sees: it misperceives it completely because it looks at it through the eyes of the past. Or it reduces the present to a means to an end, an end that always lies in the mind-projected future. (NHNE 18)

Obscuring the joy of our connectedness with Being, the ego isolates us from the wider flow of life and causes profound human unhappiness.

Whatever behaviour the ego manifests, the hidden motivating force is always the same: the need to stand out, be special, be in control; the need for power, for attention, for more. ... Often it is thwarted in its aims, and for the most part the gap between 'I want' and 'what is' becomes a constant source of upset and anguish. (NHNE 79-80)

THE MORE YOU
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Anger, anxiety, hatred, resentment, discontent, envy and jealousy are all manifestations of the ego. Holding other people responsible for our personal problems makes cooperation with them impossible, thereby increasing personal pain and confusion:

The ego doesn't know that the more you include others, the more smoothly things flow and the more easily things come to you. When you give little or no help to others or put obstacles in their path, the universe—in the form of people and circumstances—gives little or no help to you because you have cut yourself off from the whole. (NHNE 123)

Tolle is not completely pessimistic, however. A greater focus on the present will diminish the unbalancing influence of the ego. For this to happen we need to become aware of our fears and anxieties:

All that is required to become free of the ego is to be Aware of it, since awareness and ego are incompatible. Awareness is the power that is concealed within the present moment. That is why we may also call it Presence. (NHNE 78)

In his nearest approach to the mystical language of *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Tolle speaks of what happens when, through awareness, we let go of our false self. What remains,

... is the light of consciousness in which perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings come and go. That is Being, that is the deeper, true I. When I know myself as that, whatever happens in my life is no longer of absolute but only of relative importance. I honour it, but it loses its absolute seriousness, its heaviness. The only thing that ultimately matters is this: Can I sense my essential Beingness, that I Am, in the background of my life at all times? (NHNE 79-80)

Roles

One of the ways in which the false self, the ego, reveals itself is through the roles it adopts.

Usually people are completely unaware of the roles they play. They *are* these roles. Some roles are subtle; others are blatantly obvious, except to the person playing it. Some roles are designed simply to get attention from others. The ego thrives on others' attention, which is after all a form of psychic energy. The ego doesn't know that the source of all energy is within you, so it seeks it outside. (NHNE 85)

Inevitably we fulfill a function in society. What we must always keep in mind is the danger of identifying with our function so much that it takes us over completely. Even if the social structures of the contemporary world are less rigid than in former times, there are still many roles with which people readily identify (in the military, for example, or in the Church). This easily causes human interactions to become inauthentic and even alienating. Roles may give us a comforting sense of identity, but ultimately we may lose ourselves in them.

Again, attention to the present moment is the way forward:

To do whatever is required of you in any situation without it becoming a role that you identify with is an essential lesson in the art of living that each one of us is here to learn. You become most powerful in whatever you do if the action is performed for its own sake rather than as a means to protect, enhance, or conform to your role identity. (NHNE 106-107)

The Ego, the Mind and Emotion

Closely connected with the ego is 'the mind', another of Tolle's key concepts. He sees the mind as the voice of the ego, the flow of human consciousness that compulsively latches on to the past or the future and resists the present in an internal monologue of comment, comparison and complaint.

The greater part of people's thinking, Tolle suggests, is involuntary, automatic and repetitive, no more than a kind of mental static that

fulfils no real purpose. Often it is inaccurate to talk about people thinking: rather, thinking is something which happens to them.

The voice in the head has a life of its own. Most people are at the mercy of that voice; they are possessed by thought, by the mind. And since the mind is conditioned by the past, you are then forced to re-enact the past again and again. (NHNE 129)

Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence has a similar gloomy view of mental activity:

The mind, together with everything that depends on it, is bent upon holding first place among the means of divine action, and it has to be reduced to the last place like a dangerous slave.⁶

Tolle sounds a warning note about the negative emotions that flow automatically from negative thoughts:

The voice of the ego continuously disrupts the body's natural state of well-being. ... a stream of negative emotion accompanies the stream of incessant and compulsive thinking.

There is an important difference between the ego-generated emotions that are derived from the mind's anxieties regarding the past and future and the deeper emotions that are not really emotions at all but states of being. These states of being emanate from within a person and are the love, joy, and peace that characterize our true human nature. (NHNE 135-136)

Giving practical advice on dealing with negative emotions, Tolle comes back to his basic position: we have to be alert enough, present enough to ourselves, to notice that we are experiencing such negative emotions as resentment and guilt. Once we have recognised it, importantly, we need to stay with the negative emotion. This conscious presence in the emotion breaks our identification with it. As we become more aware of what we are feeling, our perceptions are no longer distorted. Above all, such an awareness can free us from being so overcome by negative emotions that we fall into the error of thinking there is something wrong with us.

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⁶ *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, 41.

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Awareness, accompanied by acceptance, can bring us a deep sense of divine peace:

Accepting means you allow yourself to feel whatever it is you are feeling at that moment. It is part of the is-ness of the Now. You can't argue with *what is*. Well, you can, but if you do, you suffer. Through allowing, you become what you are: vast, spacious. You become whole. You are not a fragment any more, which is how the ego perceives itself. Your true nature emerges, which is one with the nature of God. (NHNE 184)

Surrender

Tolle's teaching on surrender is very close, at least in its practical implications, to that of *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, and also to the Ignatian ideal of detachment.

If we find our present situation intolerable, says Tolle, there are three concrete ways of dealing with it: we can remove ourselves from the situation; work towards changing it; or accept it totally. If there is nothing we can do to change the here and now, and if we cannot remove ourselves, then the best way to react is to drop all inner resistance and accept the present reality as completely as if we had freely chosen it. This is the wisest course of action:

The false, unhappy self that loves feeling miserable, resentful, sorry for itself can then no longer survive. This is called surrender. Surrender is not weakness. There is great strength in it. Only a surrendered person has spiritual power. Through surrender, you will be free internally of the situation. You may then find that the situation changes without any effort on your part. In any case you are free. (PN 69)

Tolle's emphasis on the positive side of surrender distinguishes it from many counterfeit forms and disguises. True acceptance, he insists, is not a failure to rise to the challenges of life, nor does it make one lethargic. Surrender is not passively putting up with whatever situation we find ourselves in, nor does it stop us making plans for the future and initiating positive action. It is something entirely different:

Surrender is the simple but profound wisdom of *yielding* to rather than *opposing* the flow of life. The only place where you can experience the flow of life is the Now, so to surrender is to accept the present moment unconditionally and without reservation. It is to relinquish inner resistance to what *is*. (PN 171)

In a manner reminiscent of the Ignatian practice of detachment, Tolle holds that true surrender is perfectly compatible with planning action, initiating change and achieving our goals. What distinguishes 'surrendered action' from mere busyness is the inner quality of detachment. This quality becomes the principal component of the action, purifying it from mere self-seeking, and ensuring that we do what is most likely to bring about positive change. When there is real surrender a different kind of energy flows into the activity, 'because to surrender is the most important thing you can do to bring about positive change. Any action you take is secondary.' (PN 174)

Surrender is not to be confused with an attitude of 'I can't be bothered any more' or 'I just don't care any more'. Such reactions are tainted with hidden resentment, and so are not surrender at all, but rather a masked resistance. As we surrender to a difficult situation, Tolle suggests that we direct our attention inwards to check if there is any trace of resistance left inside us. As in the Ignatian Examen, he urges us to face courageously any pockets of resistance that may continue to hide in some dark corner in the form of a thought or an unacknowledged emotion:

Start by acknowledging that there is resistance. Be there when it happens, when the resistance arises. Observe how your mind creates it, how it labels the situation, yourself, or others. Look at the thought process involved. Feel the energy of the emotion. By witnessing the resistance, you will see that it serves no purpose. By focusing all your attention on the Now, the unconscious resistance is made conscious, and that is the end of it. (PN 174-175)

Surrender is the key to life, especially when disaster strikes. When we are faced with something going seriously wrong—with illness or disability, with the loss of our home or possessions, with unemployment, with the break-up of a close relationship, with the death or suffering of a loved one, or with our own death—we are one step away from something incredible: a complete alchemical transmutation of the base metal of pain and suffering into gold. Through surrender, all can be transformed by the redeeming power of the Now.

The ego believes that resistance to a situation is strength, whereas in truth, says Tolle, resistance cuts us off from Being, the only place of true power. In truth, resistance is weakness, fear masquerading as strength. By contrast surrender frees us from the need for ego defences and false masks. We become very simple, very real.⁷

Quoting the words of Scripture, Tolle promises that even in times of tragedy we can find, if not happiness, then at least God's peace through surrender and concentration on the present.

I do not mean to say that you will become happy in such a situation. You will not. But fear and pain will become transmuted into an inner peace and serenity that comes from a very deep place—from the Unmanifested itself. It is 'the peace of God, which passes all understanding'. Compared to that, happiness is quite a shallow thing.⁸

Traditional church wisdom such as is found in *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* gives us the theological reasons for living in the present. God, the Eternal Now, is always close. The divine will points out the particular duty of each moment and whatever it is, we can do it for the glory of God. Tolle moves the traditional teaching forward by illustrating how our obsession with the past and the future operates as a pincer movement preventing us from giving our full attention to the present moment. More importantly, he shows the way to counter-attack, and helps us to direct our attention more consciously and fully to the present, to the Now.

⁷ PN 180. The same point is made in *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*: 'Do you think you will find peace by struggling against the Almighty? Is it not rather this very resistance which we too often make almost without admitting the fact to ourselves, that is the cause of all our agitation?' (44)

⁸ PN 183. Surrender also enlivens our relationships, because the chief obstacle to love is the same unwillingness to accept reality, in this case, the personality of others: 'You will judge, criticise, label, reject, or attempt to change people' (178).

Tolle's work is thoroughly grounded in experience and written in a simple, compelling style. For those whose desire in life is to become a contemplative in action, it is an encouraging reminder that close attention to the task of the moment is the surest way to 'find God in all things'.

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