

From an underground best-seller to being discovered by Oprah Winfrey, the book *The Power of Now*, winner of *The Kindred Spirit Spirituality Book of 2001* award, has a huge following.

Richard Beaumont spoke to the author **Eckhart Tolle** about his revelations.

Now

— the **only** place to be



Now is always a good place to start. Ram Dass in the age of flower power hippies also hit the best-seller lists with *Be Here Now*. It is not a new message. The ancient teachings have always done their best to get us out of our thoughts and into our awareness of 'what is'. Yet along comes Eckhart Tolle from glorious obscurity and presents us all with the same message and he gets the attention of hundreds of thousands of people. Why? Well, certainly the format of *The Power of Now* is attractive. It is accessible. You can read a little at a time - bite-sized sections fit into the busy lives we lead today. It is also very clear. In fact, it is radiantly clear. It is also simple. In a nutshell: The more you can dis-identify with your thought process and the more you can be present, then the less you'll be run by unconscious patterns that keep you miserable.

Enlightenment

However, at the end of the day, it is not so much the message that is the key to the success of *The Power of Now* - as I said, it's a very old story that's told. The key is the man himself. As soon as you see

Eckhart Tolle you realise you're in the presence of an individual. He speaks in a particular monotoned voice, wears stubbornly unfashionable clothes and moves tentatively but surely to his target. He has a small, crinkly smile and a laugh that is infectious by its odd persistence that penetrates, however gloriously inappropriately, the sanctimoniousness of the ranks of the 'spiritually-minded' that habitually gather around him. But no matter how 'humble' or demure his mannerisms may appear, there is a steely resoluteness in his eyes that reflect a certain unshakability that could be almost unnerving. He claims to have had an experience that changed his life forever. A one-off fully-blown transformation that left him glowing forever more in its aftermath. I asked him whether he regarded himself as 'enlightened' - that generic term picked up from Eastern teachings to denote the pinnacle of human consciousness, and a word used with authority as the subtitle to his book. Immediately I found myself wrapped in an existential dialogue regarding the meaning of the terminology: 'Whenever anybody makes a statement like that I am enlightened, there's a danger that identification

happens with a conceptual identity because that is already a concept, an abstraction, a word. Then the belief and the claim that I am enlightened means that I get trapped in another conceptual identity. Whereas the very essence of enlightenment is to be no longer trapped in any conceptual identity; to realise that the essence of who I am is not contained in any form nor concept, nor image. So "I am" is the realisation of who you are prior to any identification or form.'

As the state of consciousness of the author of a book on consciousness was so important, I persevered, looking for a definitive statement. Eckhart had just said the essence of enlightenment is to realise yourself as prior to sensory perceptions, emotions, thoughts and so on. I asked him if he regarded himself as prior to all that. 'Yes, but that's not a personal attainment. I realise that this is the truth of everybody else also, except they do not know it... the enlightened state of consciousness exists already in everyone... the unconditioned pure awareness, pure consciousness before it is born into a form, is really the essence of every being. Now that deepest and essential "I am" is mixed up with identifications, I am this, I am that.'

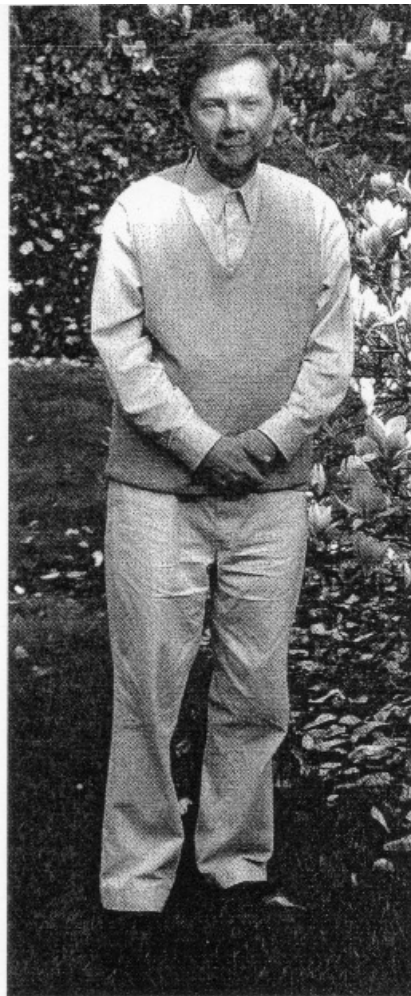
Source experience

We then began to discuss the nub of his teachings, the place where it all began - his own past life just before his 'awakening'. 'The realisation came to me at night, when I couldn't live with myself any longer; that was the sentence that came into my mind. I can't live with myself any longer because the suffering was too much. The depression, the pain, the continuous anxiety. I can't live with that heaviness any more. I cannot live with myself any more. That sentence spontaneously occurred to me and there was a stepping back and I looked at the sentence and I saw that there were two in that sentence, I and the self which I cannot live with, and that triggered the question which I did not have an answer for conceptually, but I questioned: am I one or two? Who am I? Who is the self I cannot live with? That triggered a dis-identification of consciousness from the whole structure of mind and mind-made self. The story of me, the heavy, unhappy story of me. So consciousness really is an impersonal happening - consciousness withdraws from identification and then suddenly consciousness knows itself directly as pure presence, pure awareness, no longer a subject/object knowledge. And that is the essence of enlightenment and you know yourself as that, but it is not a personal identity.'

A description of this experience is in the book, and in that description he refers to a voice that said 'Resist nothing'. I wondered from where this voice had come. Was it a force from outside or an inner machination of his own tortured mind? 'The fact that it was a voice means it came through my mind, but it was inspired from a deeper level... it came out of that state that is prior to thought.' For Eckhart that was the end of the illusion of self: 'After that, there was never any identification with thinking or any identification with anything external. In other words it continues in an underlying sense of stillness and peace, in which everything happens.'

The authority to teach

Now the very fact that Eckhart's 'awakening' was a spontaneous happening begs the question of how he knows his set of instructions for those seeking this non-identified state actually works. After all, he says that he read spiritual texts after the experience and then recognised his state of consciousness was exactly as described in the texts. Some could say he extrapolated the instructions he gives to his students



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from his new perception. 'I saw what happened spontaneously to me, to this form, and I did not understand it immediately. There are two kinds of teachers: one is suffering and one is a more direct form of spiritual teaching, an actual spiritual teacher, and for most people it is a combination of both. For a few rare individuals only suffering is enough and we have seen reports of people who have had dreadful suffering and they surrender totally, dis-identify totally from the unhappy me, and then there was peace because something happened in them in the concentration camp or prison when the body was approaching its end, it happened there. So how do I know that it works? I can see that it is already working for many people.'

The shelves of the *Kindred Spirit* offices are thick with spiritual instruction. I wanted to know if Eckhart could definitively say that his form of instruction had borne fruit. I asked if he knew anyone who had 'woken up' through following his instruction. 'I know many people who are now going through the process of awakening which for most people is not one single event - mostly the transformation is a process of gradual dis-identification from thought, from form.' Did this then mean there are stages of being awake? 'What happens is presence - there comes a point when you become aware of your thought processes and you realise that they are conditioned - that is the beginning of an awakening. The ability to take one step back from thought, and observe one's own thought processes is already the arriving of presence.'

I wanted to know if Eckhart knew of anyone in whom a permanent state of presence had become established. 'Yes, several people have told me that this is the case for them and what I say is, I am very happy of course, and if it is an illusion they will soon know it. If it is true, they will also know it. It's wait and see because often it is in the face of a challenge that you will truly know whether you are there or not; this is life unfortunately, it will always come up with another challenge. Challenge is a wonderful test as is your state of conscious relationships with other human beings. It is easy to delude oneself if you withdraw to a cave or become a hermit; it's through interaction that you know where you are at.'

Durability

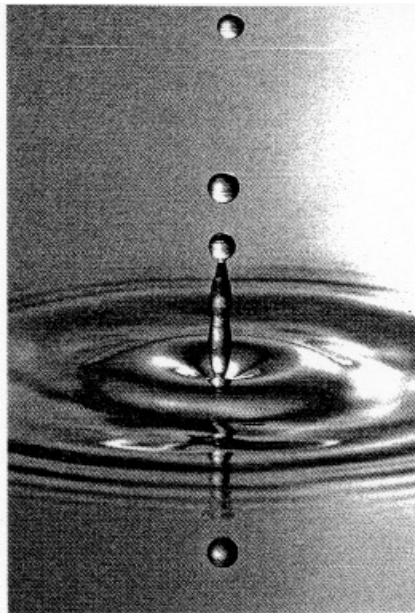
Another aspect of the 'consciousness game' is that advocates of any particular methodology can claim ascendance

INTERVIEW

through permanence. How did Eckhart know that the state he was in was indeed permanent? Was there a possibility that it was temporary and that one dark day he may open his eyes and discover himself back where he started? He began his answer as a general statement: 'Presence arises but then perhaps through some event or perhaps through some strong movement or momentum of thought which has an enormous power behind it, it can become obscured again and one may get lost again with the identification of thinking and then begin to suffer again. But then after a while, presence emerges again. It doesn't matter how long it is there, as long as it emerges again and there's a state of clarity, of peace, of enlightenment.' So was this the case for him? 'No, it doesn't become obscured anymore, but the temporary state for many people is that they have a foot in what I could call the old consciousness, and one foot in the new. They shift from the old to the new and this is where a spiritual teaching during that stage can be very helpful - it can be very helpful to listen to a tape, to read a book which came out of that state of presence, not out of mind.'

Humour

So much was spoken about the peace and the joy of the non-identification with the mind - generally it seemed to me to be shrouded in seriousness. At the *Kindred Spirit* awards ceremony Eckhart had cracked a joke about The Now being anything but a new message. It was a self-parody I appreciated. I wanted to know what Eckhart found humorous. 'The most humorous thing is to witness your own mind and you begin to laugh, whereas before it was a drama. Now because you no longer totally identify with those conditioned mind movements, you realise that it is not actually a drama at all and that actually it is quite amusing. Before you were so trapped in it that it took you over completely. Very often you can see how silly that dysfunctional mind is in its constant re-activity, how it is looking for the problem, how it is often looking for an enemy somewhere, just to feel that it still has an identity. When I started teaching and people started coming to me they would often tell me their story and, of course, I identified with their story. Often it was an unhappy one, and when I listened to them I was always smiling and sometimes a few people stopped, sometimes angrily and said: "Why are you smiling, this is a very serious business? You are laughing at me!"



I said: "No I am not, the smile arises because I can see the unreality of that because I know you are not that at all..." and seeing the unreality of it you cannot help but laugh. Laughter in itself is liberating because laughter often arises out of sudden dis-identification.'

The direction of the world

The world's attention has been firmly pulled towards the terrible occurrences in the Middle East especially, but serious wars seem to be breaking out all over the world. I asked Eckhart for his insights into these developments. 'What runs this world, still to a large extent, is the old, dysfunctional, egoic consciousness and the madness of that. Because that state of consciousness is reaching its final stage now on the planet there is an increase in the madness of it, it becomes amplified. Sometimes people ask me: "Is the world getting better or worse?" - the answer is, both. If human consciousness remained unchanged, there would probably be less than 100 years for humanity to survive. The madness would become so self-destructive, that would be the end. So that movement towards increasing madness and despair and violence is continuing on one level, but there is a reciprocal corresponding movement of the new arising.'

I asked him what he regarded as the evidence for this new movement. 'The evidence is everywhere. Because of the peculiar position I am in, virtually everyone I come into contact with is going through a transformation of consciousness. I receive hundreds and thousands of letters every day and emails, which I unfortunately cannot answer anymore, but it is beautiful to see how people write in to say their lives have become transformed. Sometimes through reading the book, sometimes by coming to a talk or listening to a tape, and their lives are becoming transformed.'

Universalisation and form

It occurred to me that human beings are so uniquely different from one another. We have so much in common and yet so much difference. Did Eckhart regard his teachings as prescriptive for everyone? 'I don't believe that there is any teaching that is for everyone. There are certain teachings that will be right for certain people, and other people may not be open to the form in which the teaching takes place. But *The Power of Now* is reaching so many people because the language and terminology is relatively neutral; I hardly ever use foreign words.'

Eckhart himself is, as described earlier, a fine example of a unique individual. Did his 'awakening' bring him closer to understanding his particular uniqueness, and was that relevant to him, or is he firmly rooted in the impersonal?

'There are certain ways in which one speaks, walks or behaves - those are part of the form and so the truth comes through and gets slightly coloured by the form but that is not important. The same truth may come through in another form very differently, but the essence would be the same. The form is not very important, it is just there, and that to some extent is something to do with who a particular teacher reaches, because it is only those who resonate with that form that will come to him or her.'

The now

Whatever the case regarding the importance of form, it is clear that Eckhart's book, audio tapes and video tapes have resonated with a large audience. The whole PR machine that will now follow him wherever he goes will be a test of his ability to be present. In answer to my questioning on how he was coping with all the attention and correspondence, he simply said that he just dealt with whatever appeared in his immediate vicinity. No guilt about the unanswered letters, the unreplyed to invitations, the enormity of pressure coming his way. May he always be at ease with discounting such worldly vibrations - there is a lesson for us all in that. AS

MORE INFORMATION

• *The Power of Now - A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle (£7.99) and *Practising The Power of Now* (£7.99) published by Hodder Mobius are both available at the special price of £6.75 from *Kindred Spirit* - see page 89. See page 94 for details of the audio cassette sets *Realisation of Being* and *Living the Liberated Life and Dealing with the Pain-Body*. Also available is a video on Eckhart Tolle, *The Flowering of Human Consciousness*.