

## **Eckhart Tolle and the Art of Truly Living**

Why should anthroposophists be concerned with Eckhard Tolle? The questions that have arisen for me after reading his work could be summed up in "Can we discern something of value in his teachings and what is it? Do they relate to anything within anthroposophy, and if so, what and how?"

It is interesting to note that this spiritual teacher is a quiet presence, somebody comfortable with but not eager to be in the limelight. Everywhere he speaks he seems to be utterly himself, comfortable with who he is, and clear about his role and his own limits. And of all paths that are offered indiscriminately on the New Age market, his is one that calls to earnest and continued practice, in fact something that will definitely discourage those who seek glamor and instant results. And when he mentions New Age it is as something else than what he does and I would argue in what comes that he has a point. Looking at his own work this is how he sets the limits: "Although group work is invaluable, it is not enough, and you must not come to depend on it. Nor must you come to depend on a teacher or a master, except during the transitional period, when you are learning the meaning and practice of presence."<sup>1</sup> Thus the teacher's role is limited.

It seems that in the instance of this man, the spiritual experience that marked him in his twenty-ninth year is the content from which he elaborated his own worldview and practice, together with an unshakeable inner conviction. What he conveys are the concepts that he extracted from the life transformation that took him by surprise and changed his own life. These are ideas seemingly simple, but not easy to put into practice and make integral part of our lives—ideas that can only light up and acquire meaning after being tested in the crucible of experience.

### **The Spiritual Experience**

Since here is a man and a spiritual teacher who would not be anything more than a regular human being, were it not for his spiritual experience, let us look at it and put a context to it, a before and an after, from the little that Tolle finds necessary to say about himself-

Ulrich Leonard Tolle was born in a small town north of Dortmund, Germany in 1948. At age thirteen he went to live with his father in Spain. From this moment until he was twenty-two he eschewed all formal education, deciding to "pursue his own creative and philosophical interests."<sup>2</sup> From his Wikipedia biography we are told he was influenced by the writings of Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, a German mystic and author of five books. At age nineteen he moved to London, where he started teaching German and Spanish in a London language school for three years. He then attended the

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<sup>1</sup> Eckhard Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 88.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart\\_Tolle#Books](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart_Tolle#Books)

University of London and continued his studies with a postgraduate program at the University of Cambridge in 1977. This episode turned out to be short-lived because of the marking experience that was to meet him in the same year. Before looking at this one, some biographical mentions from his bestseller *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* will offer a useful background.

A first significant experience met Tolle when he was a first-year student at the University of London. While riding the subway to the university library he was sitting opposite to a woman in her early thirties. She was talking to herself loudly in an agitated way and seemed completely oblivious of her surroundings. It just so happened that she was getting off at his same stop, so he decided to follow her for a short while. This led him to Senate House, a building of the 1930s. Ironically this had been used as the location of the "Mind Police" headquarters in the film *1984*, based on George Orwell's book. As he was washing his hands before exiting the men's room, he found himself thinking he hoped that he would not become like her. From the reaction of a man next to him he realized he had voiced his thought out loud and mumbled in reaction "Oh my God, I'm already like her." This made him doubt his own sanity, until he laughed out loud, what he called a "laughter of sanity" which allowed him to realize that the woman was only doing externally what he was continuously doing inwardly.<sup>3</sup> A possible beginning to a way out had emerged, but only in embryo.

This first episode which brought in question in Tolle's mind the primacy of the intellect, was followed by another symptomatic event. A few months later Tolle learned of the death by suicide of a professor whose mind he greatly admired. How could a man who seemed to have all the answers come to such an ending?<sup>4</sup> Although these were the first alarm bells, Tolle still spent the next three years in anxiety and depression, with the thought of suicide hovering close above him.

Shortly after his twenty-ninth birthday he woke up in a state of panic, a state more intense than any he had known before. In Tolle's words "... 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." This was accompanied with deeply suicidal thoughts. How he emerged out of it is best expressed once more in his own words.

"I cannot live with myself any longer." This was the thought that kept repeating in my 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

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<sup>3</sup> Eckhard Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 34.

'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 to 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."<sup>5</sup>

The next morning Tolle recorded the first signs of a radical transformation. While walking through London, he noticed that "everything was miraculous, deeply peaceful. Even the traffic."<sup>6</sup> The newly acquired pervasive sense of peace accompanied him in all subsequent situations. For the next two years, seen purely externally, one could have judged that he was drifting, either continuing to enjoy the state of bliss while sitting on benches in Russell Square of Central London, staying with friends in a Buddhist monastery, or sleeping outdoors in the public spaces of Hampstead Heath, London. It was during this time that he was inspired to leave his name behind and adopt the new name Eckhart, from the German mystic, Meister Eckhart.<sup>7</sup> Later, likely referring to experience like his own, he has this to say: "Even those rare beings who experience a sudden, dramatic, and seemingly irreversible awakening will still go through a process in which the new state of consciousness gradually flows into and transforms everything they do and so becomes integrated into their lives."<sup>8</sup> We will return to the importance of this statement further down in this exploration, since it seems very biographical.

At this point former fellow students and acquaintances became curious about the visible transformation Tolle had undergone. This signaled his move to becoming a counselor and spiritual teacher. In the following years, he moved to Glastonbury first, then to Vancouver in 1995. His now classical, *The Power of Now*, was published in 1997.

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<sup>5</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 1-2

<sup>6</sup> Parker, John W. *Dialogues With Emerging Spiritual Teachers*, quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart\\_Tolle#Books](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart_Tolle#Books)

<sup>7</sup> "A 2012 interview article states that he saw the name Eckhart on one of a pile of books in a dream, and knew he had written the book; soon after in real life he ran into a psychic friend who called him Eckhart out of nowhere, so he changed his name." Quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart\\_Tolle#Books](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eckhart_Tolle#Books)

<sup>8</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 259.

Let us look at the layers of Tolle's ideas. First of all we could say that he has a fine perceptions of the bodily sheaths, at least up to a certain point, from an experiential perspective. Let us see how.

### **The Human Being's Bodily Sheaths**

Tolle gives us a description of the human sheaths, at least up to the ego. Do they find a correspondence to what we know from spiritual science?

#### Physical Body and Inner Body

First of all Tolle clearly recognizes the physical body, separate from what he calls the "inner body" and underlies the need to shift our attention from the physical body to this inner body. Tolle stresses the limited dimension of the physical body, which for him is "only an *outer* shell." This is why it is contrasted with an *inner* body.

At various points in characterizing this body he calls it an "invisible inner body, animating presence within you"<sup>9</sup>; or "the invisible energy field that gives life to what you perceive as the physical body."<sup>10</sup>; and further "the inner body lies at the threshold between your form identity and your essence identity, your true nature"<sup>11</sup>; or finally "life energy, the bridge between form and formlessness."<sup>12</sup> The reader might agree that here are some coherent characterizations of what we know as the etheric body, perhaps a perception that arose from the experience that Tolle underwent. Furthermore, always in the same direction, the inner body is seen as a part of a universal field of energy and of intelligence that brings about all life forms. It is this intelligence that also creates instinctive responses in sentient beings, particularly animals and human beings. These instinctive reactions—different from what we will see as emotions—are the body's direct response to some external situation.<sup>13</sup>

In the views of the spiritual teacher the inner body doesn't age with the physical body, so that if a person starts inhabiting more and more the inner body, this will slow the physical body's decay or change its external appearance; even as the physical body does eventually decay, the true individuality will shine through the outer form, and the person will still seem younger or more vibrant. Learning to focus on our inner body is a key to disidentifying from our physical body. It is a doorway out of the prison of what Tolle calls the ego, in contrast to the I Am, or more seldom the Self.

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<sup>9</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 133.

## The Ego

Moving further from the physical and etheric we find a characterization that comes under the name of the "ego." Here it is important to understand what Tolle means and what this corresponds to.

The "Ego arises when your sense of Beingness, of "I Am," which is formless consciousness, gets mixed up with form."<sup>14</sup> Form is used by Tolle in contrast to Being or individual divine essence, even God, when looked at in a broader sense. The ego is constantly struggling for survival and sees others as enemies. Cooperation is alien to it. Making ourselves right and others wrong is another ego mechanism as is comparing ourselves to others. Jean Paul Sartre's quote "Hell is other people" is what the world looks like from the perspective of this ego.

The ego continuously feels a sense of lack, of incompleteness. It addresses it through a compulsive pursuit of gratification and things to identify with, to fill a hole. What the ego identifies with is a content; the unconscious compulsion to identify is a structure. A common thought of wanting like "I don't have enough" is really saying "I'm not enough yet." In this case wanting is the structure; what is wanted is the content. The ego augments itself through identification with things, and identifying with the body is a major ego structure in the West. This means not only identifying with its strengths, but also with its downfalls: illnesses and disabilities can form an identity of who we are. Here we can start to notice that Tolle has ease in thinking in terms of polarities, which appear everywhere in his writings.

A step above things, the ego can also identify with thought forms, "... energy formations, finer and less dense than physical matter, but they are forms nonetheless."<sup>15</sup> Thought forms are imprisoned in every memory, interpretation, opinion, viewpoint, reaction, emotion. Other limiting thought forms are our identifications with groups, nations, political parties, institutions, religious, cultural, spiritual allegiances,... We could say that all of these are elementals that we create. Our identification with them renders us unconscious and limits or paralyzes our thinking. Becoming unconscious when we cling to our ego is not the only danger. At the other end of the spectrum, through drugs, television and addictive behaviors, instead of rising above thinking, we fall below it. Television in Tolle's mind produces trance-like states akin to hypnosis.

Here again we have polarities at play. Tolle's ego can become identified Ahrimanicly with the objects and things of the external world, or become Luciferically enamored of thought structures that replace the search for Being or I Am. The ego can rise above itself by stepping beyond emotions and emotion-bound thinking or it can fall even lower in substance and behavior addiction, going below everyday consciousness.

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<sup>14</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 54.

In the ego the grievances of the past live in the present. The ego confuses viewpoints with facts, events with its own reactions to them. It jumps forward to selective perception and interpretation. Another trap comes from creating and completely identifying ourselves with roles which can be characterized as “positive” or “negative.” Negative roles appear clearly in the case of trauma.

The ego reacts according to what Tolle calls “repair mechanisms” of self-justification, defense or blaming, strategies for avoiding presence, change and growth. The untransformed ego stands in the way of what Tolle calls the Now, the power of living in the ever-present moment.

The ego that we see here described is the part of the I that is identified with the astral, enmeshed with it we could say; the ego seen from the perspective of the sentient soul alone; without the help of the intellectual soul it cannot start looking at itself. And we know from spiritual science that the lower ego is the gift of Lucifer to the human being, a vehicle for the attainment of personal freedom, as much as it is an obstacle when it becomes more than a stepping stone to the future. We will see later what Tolle refers to as the I Am. Meanwhile, another component which is closely associated with Tolle’s ego, but distinct from it, is what he calls the “pain body.”

### The Pain Body

Some of Tolle’s characterizations of the pain body are quite fascinating “The pain body is a *semi-autonomous energy form* that lives within most human beings, an entity made-up of emotion. It has *its own primitive intelligence, not unlike a cunning animal*, and its intelligence is directed primarily at survival.”<sup>16</sup> It feeds off energy similar to its own. The pain body is easy to observe in others, indeed almost inevitable. However, it is most important to struggle to see it in ourselves.

Tolle identifies what he calls pain body because its intelligence is bent on inflicting pain, suffering pain, or both. It feeds on emotional or physical violence. The pain body lives on a drive for survival, but it can only do so if we unconsciously identify with the messages it sends to our mind. It finds its sustenance through the human being’s beliefs and deeds. Ultimately the pain body will feed on any experience that brings forth its own kind of energy, in general something that creates further pain in whatever form: anger, hatred, grief, emotional trauma, violence, and even illness.

When the pain body has the upper hand the human being is completely turned toward the past, and unable to live in the present. In most human beings it oscillates between being active or dormant. The dormancy can go from a few days to a few weeks—the most common—to months. Triggers

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<sup>16</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 144.

to its awakening can outwardly appear quite insignificant, though they become revealing signs of the sources of pain in one's biography. The emotion of the pain body impacts the thoughts, which turn negative. When we give in to the messages of the pain body says Tolle "the addiction to unhappiness sets in."

In a normal on-and-off pattern, when it has satiated itself the pain body returns to the dormant stage, but not before having affected and depleted the human organism, which is then much more susceptible to illness. Tolle calls it thus a 'psychic parasite.'

Getting more specific yet Tolle indicates "The pain body consists of trapped life-energy that has split off from your total energy field and has temporarily become autonomous through the unnatural process of mind identification."<sup>17</sup> This is something of which we can be familiar through spiritual science. The trapped, split-off life energy, which has a primitive intelligence, is what Steiner characterizes as etheric/astral islands in our souls upon the which the ego has no control. Of these Steiner speaks in *Secrets of the Threshold* in relating to the Mystery Dramas.

"The soul contains portions that can be pried loose from its entirety, and because we do not fully control these components, Ahriman pounces on them. Through Ahriman's unjustified activity, overstepping his proper domain, a tendency arises for those *parts of man's etheric and astral being that are inclined to separate from the rest of the soul's life and become independent* to be formed by Ahriman and even given human shape. As a matter of fact, there are *all sorts of thoughts sitting in us that are capable of taking on human form*. When Ahriman has the chance to make these parts of the soul independent and give them human shape, they confront us in the elemental world as our *Doppelgänger*, or double."<sup>18</sup> (emphasis added)

The double is the being that Tolle calls the pain body, and this is why, as we will see, his work addresses the kind of thoughts that consistently sends us to relive our past, our indigested karma. Still more can be said about this double from Steiner's perspective:

"These beings have an extraordinarily high intelligence and a significantly developed will, but no warmth of heart at all, nothing of what we call human soul warmth (*Gemüt*). Thus we go through life in such a way that we have both our souls and a double of this kind, who is much more clever, very much more clever than we are, who is very intelligent, but with a Mephistophelian intelligence, an Ahrimanic intelligence, and also an Ahrimanic will,

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<sup>17</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Secrets of the Threshold* (GA 147), lecture of August 30, 1913.

a very strong will, a will that is much more akin to the nature-forces than our human will, which is regulated by the warmth of soul (*Gemüt*).

This double about which I have spoken is nothing more or less than the creator of all physical illnesses that emerge spontaneously from within, and to know him fully is organic medicine. Illnesses that appear spontaneously from within the human being come not through outer injuries, not from the human soul, they come from this being. He is the creator of all illnesses that emerge spontaneously from within; he is the creator of all organic illnesses."<sup>19</sup>

Here we see confirmed other of Tolle's observations, such as the cunning animal intelligence of the pain body and its propensity to generate illnesses.

In the pain body we can recognize a strictly personal element and also collective ones. The latter are strongest among ethnicities and religious, demographic groups that have suffered or imposed continued persecution for historical reasons. The collective pain body gives a comforting sense of identity through the dimension of solidarity, and its recognition can be an important step of transition, but ultimately it keeps the person in bondage to the past and blocks access to the experience of the Now. An example from Tolle: "... If you then develop a sense of identity based on your gayness, you have escaped one trap [remaining in the closet] only to fall into another. You will play roles and games dictated by a mental image you have of yourself as gay. You will become unconscious. You will become unreal. Underneath your ego mask, you will become very unhappy."<sup>20</sup>

What we have in the dimension of the pain body is thus the individual double, with which Tolle is most concerned, secondarily the collective double. Tolle correctly recognizes some of the elements that build it up: the upbringing, social, cultural elements, even male/female differentiation, that reinforce our dwelling in the past and resistance to change.<sup>21</sup> He does not go as far as to recognize that we already inherit a double at birth by virtue of what we carry into this life from previous incarnations.

### The Role of Emotions and Recurrent Thoughts

The inner body tries to counter the effect of the pain body. However, while a person becomes identified with physical or thought forms, in other words when leaving aside the conscious self, it cannot tell the difference between a real-life situation or the story it makes of it. It reacts to every thought as

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<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Geographic Medicine* (GA 178), lecture of November, 16, 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> For more about this double from a spiritual scientific perspective see Bernard Lievegoed, *Man on the Threshold: The Challenge of Inner Development*, Chapter 8: "About the Human Doubles."



if it were a reality. It doesn't know it is just a thought. If the mind tells the body it is in danger, the inner body responds accordingly. Since the danger is only a mental construct, the energy liberated has no outlet. Part of it goes back to generating more anxious thoughts and emotions, while the rest mobilizes the forces of the body. It will eventually interfere with the harmonious working of the body and generate illness.

Emotions and thoughts reinforce each other; the two produce what Tolle calls "emotional thinking and emotional story-making," a fixation with the past. At some level of trauma emotions trigger automatic, instinctive reactions. The pain body is locked into the body and harder to reach. Hanging on to the content of the pain body strengthens identity. We can reduce the strength of the pain body by teaching the mind to return from the past into the present, where the past continues to live, but where it can be transformed and dissipated. Hanging on to the content of the pain body strengthens identification with forms.

Through the pain body alone we live locked in the past. Persistent thoughts and emotions keep us tied to it. Here when Tolle speaks about thinking he means repetitive, associative, intellectual thinking that we are unable to control. Emotions are then the body's reaction to our thinking, a reflection of our mind in the body.

In the contrast between repetitive-fixated thinking and emotions we can recognize the roles of Ahriman and Lucifer, as we know from Steiner: "Whereas Ahriman wants to hold back thinking to the physical sense world and make shadows and phantoms of it, visible to elementary clairvoyance as floating, wafting shadows, Lucifer does the opposite: he takes what is soul feeling in the physical sense world, tears it out and puts it in a special luciferic kingdom set up as an isolated kingdom similar to his own nature, in opposition to the general cosmic order."<sup>22</sup> It is in this way that the two adversaries keep us bound to the pain body or double.

Here we can also recognize another differentiation, particularly in relation to thought forms and Lucifer.

"In spiritual love a personal, individual element—we can call it egoistic—is fully justified, for it detaches man from the sense world; it leads him upwards into the spiritual world; it leads him on to fulfill the necessary duty of continually bringing himself further and further towards perfection.

Now Lucifer has the tendency to interchange the two worlds with each other. In human love whenever a person loves in the physical sense world for himself with a trace of egoism, it occurs because Lucifer wants to make physical love similar to spiritual love. He

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<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Secrets of the Threshold*, lecture of 25 August 1913.

can then root it out of the physical sense world and lead it into his own special kingdom."<sup>23</sup>

Examples of these are romantic love, love of country or of groups we belong to in which we gratify our own cravings, rather than surrender to the other beings or order of reality.

Pain we create in our lives corresponds to non-acceptance, resistance to what is. At the level of thought it is judgment; at the emotional level negativity. Emotions live in the realm of duality. Love, joy and peace beyond duality; they have no opposite.

Ordinary, repetitive thinking is different from consciousness; and consciousness is the goal Tolle strives for. He separates what requires consciousness and getting above thinking on one hand and practical thinking on the other. He doesn't see a place for a higher kind of thinking. However, his writing is an effort in this direction, that of ordering his ideas through a clear thread.

We can see from the above, which will be confirmed in more detail below, that Tolle asks us to move our attention away from an astrally-influenced ego and away from the double by acquiring presence and focusing on the Now. Either we remain identified with body-bound thinking and emotions that reinforce our double and our attachments to the past, or we can start living more and more in the etheric and the Now, and the higher Self, which Tolle calls in most places the I Am.

We will return to the rest of Tolle's views, keeping in mind that it is not his goal to offer us a new view of the human being, but quite simply to render available the content of his spiritual experience, which is to say the ability to be present to life in the Now. For this we turn to concepts of Being, presence, surrender and how to achieve them, or move our lives in this direction.

### **Presence and the Now**

Having laid the basis for understanding the obstacles the human being faces, we can now turn to the work that Tolle proposes we embark upon and that the ego resists: living in the Now, being present to what life brings us.

The ego sees the present moment in three broad ways: a means to an end, an obstacle, or an enemy. The present moment is either what allows me to move to the future I desire; an obstacle that I meet with impatience and frustration and something I have to overcome; or in last resort, especially in situations of trauma, something I hate and have to endure. And most of all the entrenched ego fights off all change through "ego-repair

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

mechanisms": self-justification, defense and blaming, through which it can fight what it perceives as self-diminishment.

We have seen that there are different degrees of identification with physical forms and thought forms. If the pain body is very strong, when identification is complete, one needs to bring consciousness into it before reaching the inner body. From there on the work becomes the same: remain focused on the inner body, through which we live in the present from the dimension of the divine in us, from true Being. We will return to this particular aspect at the end of this essay.

The 'Now' is for Tolle the eternal present. We cannot experience time as such, only the present moment. Dysfunctional relationships to time come from fear relating to the future (unease, anxiety, stress, worry,...) and guilt/non-forgiveness (grievances, sadness, bitterness, resentment) relating to the past. Through the Now we can shed a different light on the past and have a different attitude toward the future.

Change cannot be initiated by injunctions to be good, or let go of fear and desire; there needs to be a gradual shift in consciousness. This can happen when we simply let associative thinking and deeply entrenched emotions, together with the stories they tell us about ourselves, rise to the surface of consciousness, without being analyzed, interpreted or judged. In essence through enhanced observer consciousness we separate the doer from what Tolle calls the "watcher"; we "watch the thinker" in a way that eschews trance or loss of consciousness. Refraining from putting on labels on things, people, situations leads us to the state of presence. It is in essence a way to bring Goetheanistic observation to the inner life. Tolle explains: "Everything is shown up by being exposed to the light, and whatever is exposed to the light itself becomes light."<sup>24</sup> "When you become conscious of Being, what is really happening is that Being become conscious of itself."<sup>25</sup>

The state of presence avoids most common problems of most ordinary psychoanalysis: "Whatever you learn through psychoanalysis or self-observation is about you. It is not you. It is content not essence. Going beyond ego is stepping out of content."<sup>26</sup> Tolle compares ordinary unconsciousness to a state of dream. When the pain body takes over in complete identification we are in a state comparable to dreamless, deep sleep. In most instances of day consciousness, dominated by emotions and repetitive thoughts, we are in the state of dream. In being totally present to all that comes toward us we carry the essence of meditation into daily life.

In the Now truly seeing what is rather than what we interpret becomes a prerequisite for action. In fact it must be followed by action, though not

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<sup>24</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 193.

necessarily simultaneously or immediately after. And in action we have three options:

- remove ourselves from a situation
- if possible change it
- if not possible accept it totally

With presence comes detachment, and with this we can experience inner space, a sense of my essential Beingness, the I Am, in the background of our lives at all times. Carried consequentially this approach predicates a Goetheanistic “dying and becoming,” what Tolle likes to express as “dying before dying.” “The acceptance of suffering is a journey into death. Facing deep pain, allowing it to be, taking your attention into it, is to enter death consciously. When you have died this death, you realize that there is no death—and there is nothing to fear.”<sup>27</sup>

What starts as an ongoing moment to moment exercise should in time become second nature. We can now turn to the spiritual dimension of presence and how it rests on surrender and leads to a fuller dimension of compassion and forgiveness.

### **Surrender, Compassion, Forgiveness**

Surrendering ultimately means yielding to, rather than opposing the flow of life. Surrender is not equivalent to resignation, since action is important in the completeness of the experience and movement of presence. However, experience shows that whatever we fight we strengthen, and what we resist, persists. We need to move beyond duality, beyond form, for our action to be blessed with Being. “When you are still [in surrender], you are who you were before you temporarily assumed this physical and mental form called a person. You are also who you will be when the form dissolves.”<sup>28</sup>

The surrendered state awakens us to the dimension of depth. In surrender “God is Being itself. There can be no subject-object relationship here, no duality, no you *and* God.”<sup>29</sup> The worst thing in your life, your personal cross, turns into the best thing that ever happened to you, by forcing you to surrender, forcing you into a death and rebirth experience.

If our doing comes from presence and is infused with Being, it becomes a joyful celebration of life energy. We no longer need ego defenses and false masks. We become very simple, very real. The modalities of this awakened doing are acceptance, enjoyment and enthusiasm. Acceptance speaks for itself and is the prerequisite for continuous surrender. Enjoyment will replace wanting as the main motivation for action. Motivation will come from the deeper inner resources, not from external motivations or rewards.

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<sup>27</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth* 256.

<sup>29</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 187.

Enthusiasm adds the element of a goal or a vision to work toward, something that gives us wings. Enthusiasm doesn't oppose; it works around all obstacles. And enthusiasm is most natural in the outgoing phase of life. Acceptance, aligns us with the return movement, the journey home. For Tolle "Only those who have transcended the world can bring about a better world."<sup>30</sup>

Surrender and awakened doing lead us to a deepened fulfillment of compassion. For this it is necessary to reach an understanding of our eternal nature. "On the level of form you share mortality and precariousness of life. On the level of Being, you share eternal, radiant life. These are the two aspects of compassion."<sup>31</sup> This means that through compassion we reach a unity beyond polarities; sadness and joy can merge and build the foundations of a deep inner peace.

Through deep compassion our deeds in the world will have evolutionary meaning. "Empathy with someone else's pain or lack and a desire to help need to be balanced with the deeper realization of the eternal nature of all life and the ultimate illusion of all pain. Then let your peace flow into whatever you do and you will be working on the levels of effect and cause simultaneously."<sup>32</sup> Working beyond duality also means having an inkling of how love works in the world. "So love is the recognition of oneness in the world of duality. This is the birth of God into the world of form. Love makes the world less worldly, less dense, more transparent to the divine dimension, the light of consciousness itself."<sup>33</sup>

### **The Higher Reality of the Human Being**

Having arrived so far in our explorations we can better understand what Tolle identifies as the ego and what lies beyond it. And here Tolle introduces the "I Am" and the Christ. All of this is better introduced in his own words.

"You can substitute "Christ" for presence, if that is more meaningful to you. Christ is your God-essence or the Self, as it is sometimes called in the East. The only difference between Christ and presence is that Christ refers to your indwelling divinity regardless of whether you're conscious of it or not, whereas presence means your *awakened* divinity or God-essence." Here Tolle adds a few distinctions. The first is the difference between Jesus and Christ; Jesus as the one who lived two thousand years ago in the dimension of time and form, even though he renewed it with his presence and Being. It was Christ who could say "I Am" introducing into world history something completely new, bringing the dimension of eternity into the world of form. "And so he said: 'before Abraham was, I Am.'" And further "The words I Am used in a sentence that starts in the past tense indicate a radical shift,

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<sup>30</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 167.

<sup>31</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 106.

a discontinuity in the temporal dimension. It is a Zen-like statement of great profundity. Jesus attempted to convey directly, not through discursive thought, the meaning of presence, of self-realization."<sup>34</sup> To further emphasize the above: "God [Christ] said 'I AM THAT I AM.' No time here, just presence."<sup>35</sup>

Just as Tolle discerns the role of the historical Jesus Christ, he also understands the Second Coming in ways different from the majority of church teachings or fringes of the New Age movement. "The 'second coming' of Christ is a transformation of human consciousness, a shift from time to presence, from thinking to pure consciousness, not the arrival of some man or woman."<sup>36</sup> The I Am, Christ, our higher Self is what Tolle places above the complex of astral/ego that he calls ego.

The above views of Tolle open the door to a liberating understanding of personal destiny, individual evolution and planetary evolution, which he covers most in his *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*.

When it comes to personal destiny Tolle says little about karma and reincarnation, although it's clear from youtube interviews that he knows about these ideas and he does not oppose them.<sup>37</sup> He sees primarily karma, or the effect of it, as the compulsion to repeat patterns of the past. For that to change we must change our perspective about good or bad events, which is in effect an easier step when we acquire a grounding in the Now. Presence requires from us total acceptance of what is and transcending of mental categories. Then, from a higher perspective, events are neither positive nor negative; we need no longer categorize them in such a way. In fact tragic losses can be gateways for acquiring a new consciousness or to relinquish attachment to thought forms / identifications. Of course they can open the door to even stronger identifications, e.g., that of the victim. If we are rooted in the practice of presence we can perceive the wholeness of life, seeing more than the sum of its parts. Chaos/disorder in our lives can lead us to opening to a reality of a higher order. In this view of things then "The down cycle is absolutely essential for spiritual realization. You must have failed deeply on some level or experienced some deep loss or pain to be drawn to the spiritual dimension. Or perhaps your very success became empty and meaningless and so turned out to be failure. Failure lies concealed in every success, and success in every failure."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 86. Restating this in another way: Contrasting what we experience with our senses, which is form, with the eternal; the first is what Jesus called "the world," the second is the "kingdom of heaven" or the "eternal life." Tolle, *A New Earth*, 220.

<sup>35</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 86-87.

<sup>37</sup> See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGrQpZThTZc>

<sup>38</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 152.

When we look at life more fully, happiness and unhappiness acquire a new meaning, one that set Tolle's views apart from much of New Age philosophy. "...your happiness and unhappiness are one. Only the illusion of time separates them."<sup>39</sup> And further: "Don't seek happiness. If you seek it, you won't find it, because seeking is the antithesis of happiness. Happiness is ever elusive, but freedom from unhappiness is attainable now..."<sup>40</sup>

### **Practical Exercises**

Before turning to Tolle's evolutionary views a survey of Tolle's work would be incomplete without looking at what his exercises entail. These he presents most in *Practicing the Power of Now: Essential Teachings, Meditations, and Exercises from the Power of Now*. In these we can see a progression from simpler to more difficult and the overarching goal of complete taking of responsibility for our lives. To achieve this goal Tolle does not want to curb the power of thinking, only involuntary and compulsive thinking. The following will offer some milestones of the exercises.

A first step consists in making room for the watcher, through which we attain a detached perception of our train of thoughts—to "watch the thinker of repetitive thought patterns". Thus we can realize that the I Am can separate into a compulsive thinker and a part that calmly watches. To reinforce presence Tolle then directs us to focus on the Now by devoting full attention to the most mundane of our activities, from walking up and down the stairs to washing one's hands. We can do this by paying meticulous attention to every single step to the exclusion of anything else that crosses our mind.<sup>41</sup>

Since emotions are another big element in the equation, and these are more connected with our body, focus on the inner body will help us get in touch with them when they are not immediately consciously available.<sup>42</sup> The attention to the inner body is a shift away from physical body and double, which obliges us to be present and conscious. Another exercise asks us to focus on the inner body from within, starting from the parts until we can experience the whole as a single field of energy. Tolle concludes: "By going deeply into the body you have transcended the body."<sup>43</sup>

Attention to the inner body is a bit equivalent to making room for the watcher. Tolle advises us as a real-life exercise, that whatever we do during our day, we leave some attention to remain connected with the inner body, especially so when relating to people or nature.<sup>44</sup> In essence being present paradoxically means not giving ourselves completely to the external world. In the contrary instance we would lose ourselves in the world. In this view

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<sup>39</sup> Tolle, *The Power of Now*, 154.

<sup>40</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 19-21.

<sup>42</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 64.

of the world Tolle comes close to what most of western esotericism predicates. An example among the many from Steiner: "To be able to rejoice rightly in the things of the sense world but not to be so dependent on them as to contradict the laws of death and decay—this is the right relationship of the human being to the sense world."<sup>45</sup>

The above practice will become challenging and need deepening when we face the emergence of our pain body, our double. In dealing with persistent unhappy feelings Tolle asks us to catch them as soon as they awaken from their dormant state in our soul. We need to be patient because the pain body has its own rhythm and this exercise will require time. Always in relation to the pain body we can start observing the pleasure we derive from being unhappy, such as the compulsion to incessantly talk or think about it.<sup>46</sup> This change takes time; we cannot change the emotions and thoughts, but we can create a space for this transformation to happen over time.

Daily exercise becomes a step more challenging when we deal with relationships, especially close ones. A big step forward is taken when we remain connected with the watcher, listen in an open way and learn to give expression to what we feel without blaming.<sup>47</sup> Since presence means authenticity we also need to learn to say no with grace; offer a non-reactive "no" that is free of charge and emotion.<sup>48</sup>

In dealing with an unpleasant situation we can arrive at the recognition that we want to get out of it. When we return to the Now we can take appropriate action.<sup>49</sup> When this affects not a single situation but our whole life, we can separate the single instant and surrender. Looking at the specifics we can see if there is anything that can be changed or improved, failing which we may need to remove ourselves from the situation and then take action. The key here is to focus only on the one thing we can do presently.

If there were no possible action we can take, we can still go more deeply into surrender. In extreme situations, if you cannot accept the externals, accept what lives in you. Surrender to the extreme emotions of grief, despair, loneliness without labeling them. "This is your crucifixion. Let it become your resurrection and ascension."<sup>50</sup> At this point Tolle's words are worth quoting in full since they offer us an ultimate perception of what the exercises render possible: "When there is no way out, there's still a way through. Give attention to the inner, not to the external situation. ... Don't let the mind place you in a victim situation. ... At first, it may seem like a dark and terrifying place, and when the urge to turn away from it comes,

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<sup>45</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Secrets of the Threshold*, lecture of 25 August 1913.

<sup>46</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 79-82.

<sup>47</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 124.

<sup>49</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 116-17.

<sup>50</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 134.



observe it but don't act on it. Keep putting your attention on the pain, keep feeling the grief, the fear, the dread, the loneliness, whatever it is. ... The acceptance of suffering is a journey into death. Facing deep pain, allowing it to be, taking your attention into it, is to enter death consciously. When you have died this death, you realize there is no death—and there is nothing to fear. Only the ego dies."<sup>51</sup>

When we review the sequence of the exercises, we may notice that these begin with the first step of Tolle's spiritual experience—"Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me"—and finish with the turning point that transformed Tolle's life—"I heard the words 'resist nothing,' as if spoken inside my chest." In effect his experience was made possible by the realization of the split of Self, which could only be overcome through deep surrender.

It seems Tolle has consciously striven to render his "instant experience" available to all over time. After receiving his original illumination in 1977 he tried to recognize in the following years what made it possible and how to maintain it. From there it was no big stretch to offer it to others. In this sense his life path bears some resemblance to that which Bill Wilson, of Alcoholics Anonymous, inaugurated through a Near Death Experience in 1934. The path to sobriety, that he was able to maintain, most of all thanks to his spiritual experience, is what he offered in the Twelve Steps to other alcoholics and those suffering other forms of addiction. Here too what Wilson achieved through one experience was broken apart, so to speak, for all to be able to achieve similar results over time. The AA path is one from addiction to sobriety, which allows the "victim" to reclaim a place in her life and find the importance of spiritual practice in the maintenance of sobriety and a meaningful life. Sobriety is in fact only possible through the achievement of a meaningful life, through the connection to the spirit offered by the work on the twelve steps.<sup>52</sup>

### **Evolutionary Views**

All of Tolle's ideas culminate in his views about evolution, which appear in the Book of Revelation theme of the "New Earth" borrowed for his last book, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. In this perspective individual and global earth development go hand in hand, starting with the realization of our life's purpose, which Tolle sees divided in a general inner purpose and in a specific, more personal, outer purpose.

The primary purpose happens through negation of psychological time—the time we have to endure time when relating to form alone—by awakening to the reality of the eternal present. And this awakening is a long process: its initiation is an act of grace. The outer purpose could not exist without

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<sup>51</sup> Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now*, 135-36.

<sup>52</sup> For more about Bill Wilson's biography, spiritual experience and relationship to the twelve steps see [millenniumculmination.net/Bill-Wilson-and-the-story-of-AA.pdf](http://millenniumculmination.net/Bill-Wilson-and-the-story-of-AA.pdf)

time, but varies according to our biography's unfolding and external circumstances.

When we reach the primary purpose we will act as naturally as a tree or flower, without seeking greatness. So "... while nature is a beautiful expression of the evolutionary impulse of the universe, when human beings become aligned with the intelligence that underlies it, they will express that same impulse on a higher, more wondrous level."<sup>53</sup> Here Tolle hints at the interconnection between personal and cosmic evolution, at the center of the book *A New Earth*. Let us look at it more closely.

In Tolle's views evolution takes place through discontinuities, leaps to an entirely new realm of Being, and through a lessening of materiality. He gives us the examples of the crystals in relation to rocks and of the appearance of flowers in plants in the course of evolution. Here something of the rock or plant was refined, etherealized, spiritualized.

Though Tolle does not go in depth into the theory of evolution we can still discern some themes that emerge quite naturally from all of the above. Tolle sees humanity ready for a transformation of consciousness, a sort of inner flowering. Looking at the larger picture of the Big Bang theory and the expansion of the universe, Tolle is interested in what some scientists posit as an inverse movement. The present expansion will be reversed and the universe will contract again and spiritualize, returning to the unmanifested. He uses these new scientific theories to explain that the universe goes through the interplay of form and essence, that it brings to birth forms and through consciousness transforms them.

The ultimate purpose of the world lies not within form but in its transcendence. Nature depends on the human being to evolve and Tolle derives this understanding mostly from St. Paul and from the *Book of Revelation*, witness this statement: "'A new heaven' is the emergence of a transformed state of human consciousness, and 'a new earth' is its reflection in the physical realm."<sup>54</sup>

### **Points of Divergence and Convergence**

For anthroposophists what would give us pause to think in Tolle's worldview, is ... his perception of the role of thinking. An example among the many: "Thought can at best point to the truth, but it never *is* the truth."<sup>55</sup>

On the subject of knowledge and epistemology Tolle doesn't have much to add, if not in the same direction as the above: "The subject, the I, the knower without which nothing could be known, perceived, thought, or felt,

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<sup>53</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 269.

<sup>54</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 70.

must remain forever unknowable. This is because the I has no form. Only forms can be known, and yet without the formless dimension, the world of form could not be."<sup>56</sup> All of this simply shows us that Tolle is not highly concerned with the transformation of thinking, other than for his own personal purpose, and even there in a fragmentary way. His books bear witness to his discipline in ordering his thinking even though he states that no human mind is able to comprehend the reason for the process of evolution. His *A New Earth* is a cogent, but fragmentary, effort in this direction.

It is definitely elsewhere then that we do indeed find correspondences with the contents of anthroposophy. Even though Tolle shows flashes of intuition in relation to a scientific spiritual understanding of the macrocosm, these are just isolated instances. When he refers to thinking he is really referring to associative thinking connected with emotion, the cunning animal-like thinking of the double, which he tries to overcome. Mostly, Tolle is concerned with the transformation of the will, in which thinking can play an important positive role. This is the thinking of the observer mind, the thinking that objectively looks at the fruit of our choices, and in so doing can perceive the utter futility of interpretation and judgment in guiding human conduct. In this realm he predicates the purest Goethean phenomenology. Tolle's truly living in the Now is based on the power of pure observation and awareness.

In Steiner's views, which can easily be confirmed in experience, if we only dedicate a little time and observation, thinking and willing are continuously intertwined. Thinking exists in the act of will, will in the process of thinking. It is only when the will is consciously applied to the effort of thinking that we can overcome associative thinking, direct our thoughts from percept to concept and complete in our minds what happens in Nature. We can spiritualize thinking by refining our gifts of observation and let reality dictate the direction of our thoughts, avoiding interpretations. Because this process is time-consuming, science most often bypasses it for the comfort of extrapolating from the little that is known and formulating theories, hypothesis to cover all or a certain part of reality. The body of spiritual science rests on the elaboration of thinking first into an objective phenomenology or Goethean science, then into direct spiritual perception. Therefore, contrary to what Tolle posits, thinking can lead us to knowledge of the spirit. And through thinking we can understand human, natural and cosmic evolution.

In the lead-up to the Christmas Meeting of 1923-24 Steiner called this transformation of thinking the Saturn path, or path to the macrocosm. In the Foundation Stone Meditation, where he didn't refer to the planetary spheres, he called it Spirit Beholding or Spirit Vision. These two sets of terms are contrasted first with the Moon Path, secondly with the term Spirit Remembrance or Spirit Recollection of the Foundation Stone Meditation. Let us look at the first formulation of this second path, the Moon path.

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<sup>56</sup> Tolle, *A New Earth*, 242.

In 1923, after referring to the Saturn path as that which leads us to the macrocosm, Steiner describes the "Moon path" as the one in which "one can advance on the opposite side [microcosm] by entering deeply into the will, to the extent of becoming wholly quiescent, by becoming a pole of stillness in the motion one otherwise engenders in the will." *Instead of becoming an unconscious part of world movement, one can consciously come to a standstill.* Through this "one succeeds in *keeping the soul still* while the body moves through space; succeeds in being active in the world while the soul remains quiet; *carries activity, and at the same time quietly observes it*; then thinking suffuses the will, just as the will previously suffused thinking [Saturn path]."<sup>57</sup> (emphasis added). This description of the Moon path in effect applies to the way in which Tolle sees his life and his own spiritual mission.

For the aim of cultivating this path Rudolf Steiner developed mostly in the years 1918 to 1924 a series of exercises which could be defined pure Goethean observation in the realm of the soul. These I have called "karmic exercises." They are part of what Steiner calls the path of Spirit Recollection or Spirit Remembrance in contrast to the path of Spirit Beholding. The exercises entail efforts of recollection: looking back at periods of our life from a pure observer consciousness that doesn't interpret or lets itself be overwhelmed by feelings, emotions, judgments; looking at people in our lives in a completely objective way that eschews sympathies and antipathies, in effect a way to create an imagination of the individual; looking at events we tend to label "bad" and start to perceive them with detachment and objectivity so as to completely overcome labels, and perceive the part they have played in our biography. Other exercises can move our center of attention from events in this life to causes in previous ones—the so-called 'Greater Karma exercise'<sup>58</sup> or the Moon-Sun-Saturn exercise.<sup>59</sup>

Having poured myself over this matter for two decades or more I can attest that these exercises change the perceptions of the forces at play in our biography, allow us to see ourselves and other people differently, more fully. They diminish our identification with ego, with our profession or place in life, with past events, and with physical forms and thought forms to use Tolle's terminology. Much more could be said in this direction that I have described in other places.<sup>60</sup> Here too we see that Tolle walks a very similar path, though he does not explore the theme of previous lives from a phenomenological perspective.

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<sup>57</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Awakening to Community*, lecture of February 6, 1923.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 2, May 9, 1924 lecture.

<sup>59</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 2, May 4, 1924 lecture.

<sup>60</sup> Luigi Morelli, *Journey of Spirit Recollection Handbook*, at <https://millenniumculmination.net/spirit-recollection-journey.pdf>

When we look at the first panel of the Foundation Stone Meditation, some other elements of concordance emerge. The first lines of the stanza say: "Human soul thou livest in the limbs which lead you from the realms of space into the ocean being of the spirit." The "ocean being of the spirit" signals our move from the physical into the etheric space. This is what Tolle wants the human being to experience. He expresses it in two ways, which are equivalent: moving our focus from the physical body, the outer shell to the inner body, which we saw is the etheric body. He further asserts that in the Now the currents of past and future meet, but it is only when we make room for both with equanimity that we can experience both without giving way to either; not dwell in the past, not anticipate the future and miss the present. And the result is "truly living" with which the first half of the stanza closes: "that from the ground of the being of man thou will truly live."

The paths predicated in the first three stanzas of the Foundation Stone Meditation have in a broad sense the scope of strengthening each soul force. For this to happen we have to separate the single soul force from the others, strengthen it and purify it before reintegrating it anew in the whole. What Tolle offers us is one part of the whole: the separation of the will from the interfering emotions and repetitive thinking.

Once this separation has been achieved to the extent of the possible, we have purified a will that we can reintegrate within the forces of the soul. Clearly our willing cannot be transformed as fully as we can transform our thinking in the present time of the Consciousness Soul, but we can constantly keep at bay what interferes with it. Thus it remains an ongoing enterprise. It is not surprising in last analysis that this is what Tolle has to offer to the West that he has made his home, even though his message spills from here to other parts of the world.

What surprised me most in reading Tolle's books, looking at his exercises and listening to his videos came as the realization that he goes right to the center of it all, where the lived experience and its recollection collapse into one, or come very close to one another, in the Now. It reminds me of what Steiner describes above—" [one] succeeds in being active in the world while the soul remains quiet; carries activity, and at the same time quietly observes it." I can see now that Tolle capitalized on the lesson of his spiritual experience to make it available to others. And a little like all of us, but all-the-more so in pioneers, his approach is a one-sided approach to spirituality, but a wonderfully one-sided one, from which you can potentially reap great benefits. Just keep in mind that it is one-sided, that it really applies to what Steiner calls Spirit Recollection and "truly living."

## **Living in the Now in the Midst of Trauma**

“Cultivating body awareness is a way to tap into living in the ‘now’ and breed a higher sensitivity to our own needs.”

Kelly Mullan

This section explores the universality of Eckhart Tolle’s approach even in most extreme situations. It addresses what Tolle predicates when the pain body is very strong as is often, if not always, the case in traumatic after-effects. Here it seems the double, or pain body, is so constantly activated that the physical body can be perceived as an enemy. Feelings may be overwhelmed to such a point that a person may not be able to identify their finer shades. Making sense of experiences becomes impossible because every external trigger can be identified as an alarm bell. It seems the astral body has overwhelmed the etheric body, and lessened its resilience, in such a way that the double continuously imprints itself on the etheric and physical bodies. What was previously a rhythm of ebb and flow is now an uninterrupted presence.

When identification with the double is complete, Tolle predicates the need to bring consciousness into it before reaching the inner body. When we are free of the compulsion of the double we can remain focused on the inner body.

Very much in agreement with Tolle, Bessel van der Kolk, a leading authority on trauma-informed therapy, predicates that trauma survivors need to “learn to simply notice [the demons from the past] without judgment and observe them for what they are: signals to activate inborn motor action programs. Following their natural course will help rearrange our relationship to ourselves.”<sup>61</sup> However, when the person is overwhelmed this new capacity has to be supported by the therapist before the patient herself is empowered.

### Body and Trauma

In his doctoral dissertation William Bento offers us an understanding of the correlation between personality disorders and spatial orientation in the frontal, horizontal and sagittal planes. He correlates four kinds of movements in each one of them. The hypothesis of Bento’s work is that the stimulation of the motor/sensory system in movements through various spatial planes impacts the perceptions of self, others, and the world, and that once there is a fixed, incomplete movement we will also find fixations in the personality. “Within an anthroposophic perspective this formation of personality [roughly the astral body] rests upon the physical body accessing certain experiences from the specific dimensions in space and the

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in Search for the Living Past*, xvi.

etheric body's capacity to remember these experiences in a kinesthetic way."<sup>62</sup>

For each of the three planes Bento recognizes four movement fixations. An example: in the frontal plane one can emphasize the forward motion, the backward space, a swinging or rocking between the two, or a movement stuck between the two. Having shown the relationships between movement patterns and personality disorder, Bento points to the interconnection between and bi-directionality of movements and disorder patterns : "The movements may result from the disorder pattern, and they may cause these patterns. In either case, we can see the somatic component as very important to character, to individuality and to disorder."<sup>63</sup> In what follows we will look at this inter-relationship through the work of Peter Levine and his so-called "somatic experiencing." To deepen the topic we will first look at the place that memory plays on our life experience through the etheric body.

#### Four Kinds of Memories

"The past is never dead" comments W. Faulkner, "It's not even past." In effect it continuously lives in the present if we haven't exposed it to the light of consciousness, or if trauma has overwhelmed our capacity to do so. By updating our memories we will see that we can "change the past." How we live in the present depends on the interdependence of the more accessible types of memory—explicit memories—and those that are lodged in the unconscious and even at the bodily level—implicit memories.

Explicit Memories are either declarative or episodic. Declarative (narrative) memories can be compared with a catalogue of data that have beginnings, middles and endings. They are objective, detailed and devoid of emotions, orderly, cold and factual.

Episodic memory—also called autobiographical—is warm and textured, infused with feeling tones and vitality, and is most often assessed as positive or negative. It is often dreamlike, encompasses ambiguity and nuance and has a vivid, lifelike quality. It helps us make sense of our lives and is essential in moving from trauma to a freer future.

From cold (declarative) to warm (episodic) we move into hot and powerfully compelling implicit memories, that cannot be called up deliberately. They arise as an ensemble of sensations, emotions, and behaviors. They are organized around strong emotions, and/or "procedures," action patterns that the body repeats automatically.

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<sup>62</sup> William Bento, Edmund Knighton, Roberta Nelson, David Tressemer, *The Counselor ... As if Soul and Spirit Matter; Inspirations from Anthroposophy*, Chapter 7: Personality Disorders Reconsidered, 172.

<sup>63</sup> William Bento et alia, *The Counselor*, 195.

Emotional memories are experienced in the body as physical sensations. They are triggered in present situations when we experience similar types and intensities of emotions as in the past. In the past these may in fact have been linked to procedural memories closely associated with survival action patterns. When apprehended with detachment, emotions serve to inform us about what we need; they help us navigate our relationships to self, others and world. They connect us with our aliveness, vitality and sense of purpose.

At an even deeper level procedural memories can be “positive” or “negative.” Peter Levine divides these in three categories:

- Learned motor actions: generally-speaking these are all our acquired physical skills
- Fundamental organismic response tendencies of approach or avoidance, attraction or repulsion. Avoidance mechanisms include stiffening, retracting and contracting. Among approaching mechanisms we find expanding, extending, reaching.
- emergency responses: they call upon our survival instincts. Such are bracing, contracting, retracting, fighting, fleeing, and freezing. They are crucial in the formation and resolution of traumatic memories.<sup>64</sup>

The second and third kinds of memories engage together in innate movement programs, similar to what William Bonto describes in his typology of personality disorders. They are associated with two dysregulated states of the autonomic nervous system: hyperarousal/overwhelm or hypoarousal/shutdown and helplessness. On one hand the fight or flight reflex, on the other the freeze response.

### The Three Steps of Memory Reconsolidation

Memory and its reorganization play a central role in healing from trauma, as it has been confirmed by the findings of neuroscience. So-called “memory reconsolidation” plays out in three archetypal steps, which can then be further broken down:

- Gradually and gently activate the memories; verbalize the feelings, bringing them to the surface of the mind. A memory can't further evolve until it emerges from the subconscious. Once you see the “demons of the past” for what they are, then you can start working on them.
- Introduce a different emotional model and experience at variance with the original personal assumptions. Since the traumatic reactions most often don't make sense in normal life, you can begin to realize that the present emotions keep you trapped in dysfunctional adaptive

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<sup>64</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory*, 25-26.



mechanisms. The mind can gradually decide to modify and discard past procedural memories and their reaction mechanisms.

- In the therapeutic setting new experiences can be facilitated that erase or defuse the original emotions, producing a more life-affirming set of memories. As the new paradigm gains strength, the emotional effects of the old memory patterns start to fade, lightening the person of the previous burdens.<sup>65</sup>

### Getting into Trauma and out of It

The sequence of activation of trauma on the body is the following:

- Arrest and alert
- Stiffen and orient (focused attention, interest and preparedness)
- Assess between interest and repulsion
- Approach or avoid based on pleasure or displeasure
- Fight or flight (fear), supported by the sympathetic-adrenal system.
- Freeze (terror), supported by an intensification of sympathetic-adrenal arousal
- Fold and collapse (helpless/hopeless terror), mediated by the "so-called primitive branch of the parasympathetic nervous system."<sup>66</sup>

What some call memory reconsolidation is called "renegotiation" in Peter Levine's "Somatic Experiencing." Renegotiation is the gradual, rhythmic revisiting of various sensory motor elements comprising a particular trauma configuration of procedural memories deriving from various experiences. Renegotiation reverses the sequence of the biological action in response to threat seen above. The Somatic Experiencing therapist looks for voluntary gestures, emotional/ facial expressions, posture, autonomic signals (cardiovascular and respiratory systems), involuntary gestures or postural shifts, and even so-called "visceral behavior" (e.g., changing sounds in the gut).

The therapist works in the mental-emotional space where presence in the 'Now' is still possible. In so doing, she walks a fine line between hyper-arousal and suggestibility, leading to the creation of false memories, or hypo-arousal via memory suppression—possible chemically—with its attendant driving of procedural memories deeper into the unconscious.

Renegotiation strengthens the observer consciousness that Tolle indicates as essential to a life lived in full presence. When the patient's bodily responses are recalibrated and become conscious in the safety of the therapeutic environment, the procedural memories leave room to a corrective

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<sup>65</sup> See <https://therapistuncensored.com/episodes/tu112-the-life-changing-science-of-memory-reconsolidation-with-guests-bruce-ecker-tori-olds/>

<sup>66</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory*, 44-45.

experience leading to resolution. The light of consciousness drives out the darkness of instinctual reactions.

### Reclaiming the Body to Truly Live

Key to the working of a great variety of somatic approaches to healing is the notion of the "felt sense," the calm awareness of what's going on within our body and soul. It lends attention to inner sensations and subtle movements, in fact a deeper awareness of the more bodily senses known to spiritual science. This approach speaks, in terms that can be partly overlapping, of:

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At times the last two are lumped together in the term interoception used in contrast to exteroception. The higher senses of thought, ego and word obviously cannot be accessed in proximity to trauma.

Let us get closer to the healing process by looking at how the work is carried out in practice. Exploring a problematic physical sensation from the felt sense means not thinking about it, but purely observing. The therapist may ask how a part of the body feels in certain gestures/body movements. In the case of a hand forming a fist the patient may report the felt sense that "My fist feels strong, like I can stand up for myself," rather than "I feel that I can stand up for myself." The first one is the perspective from the felt sense.

The exploration may continue for a while in the body. When the person starts to feel empowered, memories arise, as if released by newly recovered body movements, and the therapist will help the patient face the emotional challenge she encounters. The body's felt sense is thus the physiological gateway to procedural memories.

The movement from body to life issue will go back and forth in "pendulation," a continuous, bodily rhythm of contraction and expansion to overcome the traumatized person's constant state of contraction, in which the body is often felt as the enemy. Left to herself the individual fears what comes from the body and remains stuck in her trauma. Through the steps

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of Somatic Experiencing, after an expansion there will be a new contraction, but not a return to the original state. There will be slow but steady progress and trauma will get eased in cycles. The therapist knows he's on the right track when he can detect in the patient "healthy aggression," the capacity to stand up for herself, to mobilize and direct life energy toward the satisfaction of her needs.

What pendulation is for the whole process, "titration" is for the therapeutic movements themselves. It means taking a movement to a point of resistance and then relaxing it, repeating it gently for a number of times with rests between sets of movements.

When there is a soul movement of progress the therapist can invite other body movements and explore their felt sense. When new issues emerge the patient will probably be able to see them with progressively higher detachment. The net result is a shift from procedural memories to emotional and episodic ones. Finally the recovering individual learns how to take the process in her own hands.

The subtitle of Peter Levine's book is "Search for the Living Past." And in relation to his therapeutic intervention he speaks of helping the patient "contact his life force, his elan vital" or "connect with [the] vital energy center in [the] abdomen." In other places he qualifies this life force as what is supporting the "innate drive for perseverance and triumph."<sup>68</sup>

Once more we see confirmed by sources other than Tolle that living in the present, in the Now, is what puts us in touch with the etheric body and a different perception of time present or past. Even trauma can be overcome through a gentle reminder and support to living in the now. Healing takes place through the emergence of memories, their re-elaboration and further evolution. In sum another way of expressing Spirit Recollection, which in effect leads us to the experience of "truly living."

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory*, 107-08, 65.

## **Appendix: Living in the Now in the Midst of Trauma**

Cultivating body awareness is a way to tap into living in the 'now' and breed a higher sensitivity to our own needs.

Kelly Mullan

This section explores the universality of Eckhart Tolle's approach even in most extreme situations. It addresses what Tolle predicates when the pain body is very strong as is often, if not always, the case in traumatic after-effects. Here it seems the double, or pain body, is so constantly activated that the physical body can be perceived as an enemy. Feelings may be overwhelmed to such a point that a person may not be able to identify their finer shades. Making sense of experiences becomes impossible because every external trigger can be identified as an alarm bell. It seems the astral body has overwhelmed the etheric body, and lessened its resilience, in such a way that the double continuously imprints itself on the etheric and physical bodies. What was previously a rhythm of ebb and flow is now an uninterrupted presence.

When identification with the double is complete, Tolle predicates the need to bring consciousness into it before reaching the inner body. When we are free of the compulsion of the double we can remain focused on the inner body.

Very much in agreement with Tolle, Bessel van der Kolk, a leading authority on trauma-informed therapy, predicates that trauma survivors need to "learn to simply notice [the demons from the past] without judgment and observe them for what they are: signals to activate inborn motor action programs. Following their natural course will help rearrange our relationship to ourselves."<sup>69</sup> However, when the person is overwhelmed this new capacity has to be supported by the therapist before the patient herself is empowered.

### **Body and Trauma**

In his doctoral dissertation William Bento offers us an understanding of the correlation between personality disorders and spatial orientation in the frontal, horizontal and sagittal planes. He correlated four kinds of movements in each one of them. The hypothesis of Bento's work is that the stimulation of the motor/sensory system in movements through various spatial planes impacts the perceptions of self, others, and the world, and that once there is a fixed, incomplete movement we will also find fixations in the personality. "Within an anthroposophic perspective this formation of personality [roughly the astral body] rests upon the physical body accessing certain experiences from the specific dimensions in space and the

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in Search for the Living Past*, xvi.

etheric body's capacity to remember these experiences in a kinesthetic way."<sup>70</sup>

For each of the three planes Bento recognizes four movement fixations. An example: in the frontal plane one can emphasize the forward motion, the backward space, a swinging or rocking between the two, or a movement stuck between the two. Having shown the relationships between movement patterns and personality disorder Bento points to the interconnection between, and bi-directionality of movements and disorder patterns : "The movements may result from the disorder pattern, and they may cause these patterns. In either case, we can see the somatic component as very important to character, to individuality and to disorder."<sup>71</sup> In what follows we will look at the work of Peter Levine and his so-called "somatic experiencing." To deepen the topic we will first look at the place that memory plays on our life experience through the etheric body.

### **Four Kinds of Memories**

"The past is never dead" comments W. Faulkner, "It's not even past." In effect it continuously lives in the present if we haven't exposed it to the light of consciousness, or if trauma has overwhelmed our capacity to do so. By updating our memories we will see that we can "change the past." How we live in the present depends on the interdependence of the more accessible types of memory—explicit memories—and those that are lodged in the unconscious and even at the bodily level—implicit memories.

Explicit Memories are either declarative or episodic. Declarative (narrative) memories can be compared with a catalogue of data that have beginnings, middles and endings. They are objective, detailed and devoid of emotions, orderly, cold and factual.

Episodic memory—also called autobiographical—is warm and textured, infused with feeling tones and vitality, and is most often assessed as positive or negative. It is often dreamlike, encompasses ambiguity and felt nuance and has a vivid, lifelike quality. It helps us make sense of our lives and is essential in moving from trauma to a freer future.

From cold (declarative) to warm (episodic) we move into hot and powerfully compelling implicit memories, that cannot be called up deliberately. They arise as an ensemble of sensations, emotions, and behaviors. They are organized around strong emotions, and/or "procedures," action patterns that the body repeats automatically.

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<sup>70</sup> William Bento, Edmund Knighton, Roberta Nelson, David Tressemer, *The Counselor ... As if Soul and Spirit Matter; Inspirations from Anthroposophy*, Chapter 7: Personality Disorders Reconsidered, 172.

<sup>71</sup> William Bento et alia, *The Counselor*, 195.

Emotional memories are experienced in the body as physical sensations. They are triggered in present situations when we experience similar types and intensities of emotions as in the past. In the past these may in fact have been linked to procedural memories closely associated with survival action patterns. When apprehended with detachment emotions serve to inform us about what we need; they help us navigate our relationships to self, others and world. They connect us with our aliveness, vitality and sense of purpose.

Procedural memories can be "positive" or "negative." Peter Levine divides these in three categories:

- Learned motor actions: generally-speaking these are all our acquired physical skills
- Fundamental organismic response tendencies of approach or avoidance, attraction or repulsion. Avoidance mechanisms include stiffening, retracting and contracting. Among approaching mechanisms we find expanding, extending, reaching.
- emergency responses: they call upon our survival instincts. Such are bracing, contracting, retracting, fighting, fleeing, and freezing. They are crucial in the formation and resolution of traumatic memories.<sup>72</sup>

The second and third kinds of memories engage together in innate movement programs, similar to what William Bonto describes in his typology of personality disorders. They are associated with two dysregulated states of the autonomic nervous system: hyperarousal/overwhelm or hypoarousal/shutdown and helplessness. On one hand the fight or flight reflex, on the other the freeze response.

### **The 3 steps of memory reconsolidation**

Memory and its reorganization plays a central role in healing from trauma, as it has been confirmed by the findings of neuroscience. So-called "memory reconsolidation" plays out in three archetypal steps, which can then be further broken down:

- Gradually and gently activate the memories; verbalize the feelings, bringing them to the surface of the mind. A memory can't further evolve until it emerges from the subconscious. Once you see the "demons from the past" for what they are, then you can start working on them.
- Introduce a different emotional model and experience at variance with the original personal assumptions. Since the traumatic reactions most often don't make sense in normal life, you can begin to realize that the present emotions keep you trapped in dysfunctional adaptive

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Levine, *Trauma and Memory*, 25-26.

mechanisms. The mind can gradually decide to modify and discard past procedural memories and their reaction mechanisms

- In the therapeutic setting new experiences can be facilitated that erase or defuse the original emotions, producing a more life-affirming set of memories. As the new paradigm gains strength, the emotional effects of the old memory patterns start to fade, lightening the person of the previous burdens.<sup>73</sup>

### **Getting into Trauma and out of it**

The sequence of activation of trauma on the body is the following:

- Arrest and alert
- Stiffen and orient (focused attention, interest and preparedness)
- Assess between interest and repulsion
- Approach or avoid based on pleasure or displeasure
- Fight or flight (fear), supported by the sympathetic-adrenal system.
- Freeze (terror), supported by an intensification of sympathetic-adrenal arousal
- Fold and collapse (helpless/hopeless terror), mediated by the "so-called primitive branch of the parasympathetic nervous system."<sup>74</sup>

What some call memory reconsolidation is called "renegotiation" in Peter Levine's "Somatic Experiencing." Renegotiation is the gradual, rhythmic re-visiting of various sensory motor elements comprising a particular trauma configuration of procedural memories deriving from various experiences. Renegotiation reverses the sequence of the biological action in response to threat seen above. The Somatic Experiencing therapist looks for voluntary gestures, emotional/ facial expressions, posture, autonomic signals (cardiovascular and respiratory systems), involuntary gestures or postural shifts, and even so-called "visceral behavior" (e.g., changing sounds in the gut).

The therapist works in the mental-emotional space where presence in the 'Now' is still possible. In so doing, she walks the fine line between hyper-arousal and suggestibility, leading to the creation of false memories, or hypo-arousal via memory suppression—possible chemically—with its attendant driving of procedural memories deeper into the unconscious. Renegotiation strengthens the observer consciousness that Tolle indicates as essential to a life lived in full presence. When the patient's bodily responses are recalibrated and become conscious in the safety of the therapeutic environment, the procedural memories leave room to a corrective

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experience leading to resolution. The light of consciousness drives out the darkness of instinctual reactions.

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