

## **The Awakened State; Living in the Fourth Degree, or the *Eternal Now***

For two years, a small man sits quietly on a park bench. People walk by, lost in their thoughts. One day someone asks him a question. In the weeks that follow there are more people and more questions. Word spreads that the man is a "mystic," and has discovered something that brings peace and meaning into our lives. It sounds like fiction, but today that man, Eckhart Tolle, is known worldwide for his teachings on spiritual enlightenment through the power of the present moment. His first book, *The Power of Now*, is an international bestseller, and has been translated into 17 languages. More than 20 years have passed since Eckhart Tolle answered his first question on that park bench. While his audience has grown, his message remains the same: that it is possible to stop struggling in your life, and find joy and fulfillment in this moment, and no other.

***Can you describe to us your own experience of spiritual awakening (and of course, can you define spiritual awakening as well)? Was there a singular event that occurred or has it been a gradual process?***

Since ancient times the term awakening has been used as a kind of metaphor that points to the transformation of human consciousness. There are parables in the New Testament that speak of the importance of being awake, of not falling back to sleep. All this implies that humans are potentially capable of living in a state of consciousness compared to which normal wakefulness is like sleeping or dreaming. This is why some spiritual teachings use terms like "shared hallucination" or "universal hypnotism" to describe normal human existence. Pick up any history book, and I suggest you begin with studying the 20th century, and you will find that a large part of the history of our species has all the characteristics we would normally associate with a nightmare or an insane hallucination.

The nature of spiritual awakening is frequently misunderstood. The adoption of spiritual beliefs, seeing visions of God or celestial beings, the ability to heal, to prophecy or other supernatural powers – all such phenomena are of value and are not to be dismissed, but none of them is in itself indicative of spiritual awakening in a person who experiences them. They may occur in a person who has not awakened spiritually and they may or may not accompany the awakened state.

Every morning we awaken from sleep and from our dreams and enter the state we call wakefulness. A continuous stream of thoughts, most of them repetitive, characterizes the normal wakeful state. So what is it that we awaken from when spiritual awakening occurs?

We awaken from identification with our thoughts. Everybody who is not awake spiritually is totally identified with and run by their thinking mind – the incessant voice in the head. Thinking is compulsive: you can't stop, or so it seems. It is also addictive: you don't even want to stop, at least not until the suffering generated by the continuous mental noise becomes unbearable. In the unawakened state you don't use thought, but thought uses you. You are, one could almost say, possessed by thought, which is the collective conditioning of the human mind that goes back many thousands of years. You don't see anything as it is, but distorted and reduced by mental labels, concepts, judgments, opinions and reactive patterns. Your sense of identity, of self, is reduced to a story you keep telling yourself in your head. "Me and my story": this what your life is reduced to in the unawakened state. And when your life is thus reduced, you can never be happy for long, because you are not yourself.

Does that mean you don't think anymore when you awaken spiritually? No, of course not. In fact, you can use thought much more effectively than before, but you realize there is a depth to your Being, a vibrantly alive stillness that is much vaster than thought. It is consciousness itself, of which the thinking mind is only a tiny aspect. For many people, the first indication of a spiritual awakening is that they suddenly become aware of their thoughts. They become a witness to their thoughts, so to speak. They are not completely identified with their mind anymore and so they begin to sense that there is a depth to them that they had never known before.

For most people, spiritual awakening is a gradual process. Rarely does it happen all at once. When it does, though, it is usually brought about by intense suffering. That was certainly true in my case. For years my life alternated between depression and acute anxiety. One night I woke up in a state of dread and intense fear, more intense than I had ever experienced before. Life seemed meaningless, barren, hostile. It became so unbearable that suddenly the thought came into my mind, "I cannot live with myself any longer." The thought kept repeating itself several times. Suddenly, I stepped back from the thought, and looked at it, as it were, and I became aware of the strangeness of that thought: "If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me – the I and the self that I cannot live with." And the question arose, "Who is the 'I' and who is the self that I cannot live with?" There was no answer to that question, and all thinking stopped. For a moment, there was complete inner silence. Suddenly I felt myself drawn into a whirlpool or a vortex of energy. 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. Suddenly, all fear disappeared, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.

The next morning I awoke as if I had just been born into this world. Everything seemed fresh and pristine and intensely alive. A vibrant stillness filled my entire being. As I walked around the city that day, the world looked as if it had just come into existence, completely devoid of the past. I was in a state of amazement at the peace I felt within and the beauty I saw without, even in the midst of the traffic. I was no longer labeling and interpreting my sense perceptions – an almost complete absence of mental commentary. To this day, I perceive and interact with the world in this way: through stillness, not through mental noise. The peace that I felt that day, more than 20 years ago, has never left me, although it has varying degrees of intensity.

At the time, I had no conceptual framework to help me understand what had happened to me. Years later, I realized that the acute suffering I felt that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from identification with the unhappy self, the suffering "little me," which is ultimately a fiction of the mind. This withdrawal must have been so complete that the suffering self collapsed as if the plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left was my true nature as the ever present "I AM": consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form. You may also call it pure awareness or presence.

***In your own life story there seems to have been a relationship between intense personal suffering and a breakthrough spiritual experience. Do you believe that for all people there is some connection between personal suffering and the intensity that is needed for a spiritual breakthrough?***

Yes, that seems to be true in most cases. When you are trapped in a nightmare, your motivation to awaken will be so much greater than that of someone caught up in a relatively pleasant dream. On all levels, change occurs in response to a crisis situation, not infrequently a life-threatening one, when the old structures, inner or outer, are breaking down or are not working anymore. On a personal level, this often means the experience of loss of one kind or another: the death of a loved one, the end of a close relationship, loss of possessions, your home, status, or a breakdown of the external structures of your life that provided a sense of security. For many people, illness – loss of health – represents the crisis situation that triggers an awakening. With serious illness comes awareness of your own mortality, the greatest loss of all.

For many people alive at this time, loss is experienced as loss of meaning. In other words, life seems to lack purpose and doesn't make sense anymore. Loss of meaning is often part of the suffering that comes with physical loss, but it can also happen to people who have gained everything the world has to offer – who have "made it" in the eyes of the world – and suddenly find that their success or possessions are empty and unfulfilling. What the world

and the surrounding culture tells them is important and of value turns out to be empty and this leaves a kind of painful inner void, often accompanied by great mental confusion.

Now the question arises: What exactly is the connection between suffering and spiritual awakening? How does one lead to the other? When you look closely at the nature of human suffering you will find that an essential ingredient in most kinds of suffering is a diminishment of one's sense of self. Take illness, for example. Illness makes you feel smaller, no longer in control, helpless. You seem to lose your autonomy, perhaps become dependent on others. You become reduced in size, figuratively speaking. Any major loss has a similar effect: some form that was an important part of your sense of who you are – a person, a possession, a social role – dissolves or leaves you and you suffer because you had become identified with it and it seems you are losing yourself or a part of yourself. In reality, of course, what feels like a diminishment or loss of your sense of self is the crumbling of an image of who you are held in the mind. What dissolves is identification with thought forms that had given you your sense of self. But that sense of self is ultimately false, is ultimately a mental fiction. It is the egoic mind or the "little me" as I sometimes call it. To be identified with a mental image of who you are is to be unconscious, to be unawakened spiritually. This unawakened state creates suffering, but suffering creates the possibility of awakening. When you no longer resist the diminishment of self that comes with suffering, all role-playing, which is normal in the unawakened state, comes to an end. You become humble, simple, real. And, paradoxically, when you say "yes" to that death, because that's what it is, you realize that the mind-made sense of self had obscured the truth of who you are – not as defined by your past, but timelessly. And when who you think you are dissolves, you connect with a vast power which is the essence of your very being. Jesus called it: "eternal life."

Now, does this mean that if you haven't experienced intense suffering in your life, there is no possibility of awakening? Firstly, the fact that you are drawn to a spiritual teaching or teacher means you must have had your share of suffering already, and the awakening process has probably already begun. A teacher or teaching is not even essential for spiritual awakening, but they save time. Secondly, humanity as a whole has already gone through unimaginable suffering, mostly self-inflicted, the culmination of which was the 20th century with its unspeakable horrors. This collective suffering has brought upon a readiness in many human beings for the evolutionary leap that is spiritual awakening. For many individuals alive now, this means: they have suffered enough. No further suffering is necessary. The end of suffering: that is also the essence of every true spiritual teaching. Be grateful that your suffering has taken you to this realization: I don't need to suffer anymore.

***Your teaching about "the power of now" seems so simple. Is that really our primary spiritual task – to fully engage the present moment?***

Identification with thoughts and the emotions that go with those thoughts creates a false mind-made sense of self, conditioned by the past: the "little me" and its story. This false self is never happy or fulfilled for long. Its normal state is one of unease, fear, insufficiency, and nonfulfillment. It says it looks for happiness, and yet it continuously creates conflict and unhappiness. In fact, it needs conflict and "enemies" to sustain the sense of separateness that ensures its continued survival. Look at all the conflict between tribes, nations, and religions. They need their enemies, because they provide the sense of separateness on which their collective egoic identity depends. The false self lives mainly through memory and anticipation. Past and future are its main preoccupation. The present moment, at best, is a means to an end, a stepping stone to the future, because the future promises fulfillment, the future promises salvation in one form or another. The only problem is the future never comes. Life is always now. Whatever happens, whatever you experience, feel, think, do - it's always now. It's all there is. And if you continuously miss the now – resist it, dislike it, try to get away from it, reduce it to a means to an end, then you miss the essence of your life, and you are stuck in a dream world of images, concepts, labels, interpretations, judgments – the conditioned content of your mind that you take to be "yourself." And so you are disconnected from the fullness of life that is the "suchness" of this moment. When you are out of alignment with what is, you are out of alignment with life. You are struggling to reach a point in the future where there is greater security, aliveness, abundance, love, joy ... unaware that those things make up the essence of who you are already. All that is required of you to have access to that essence is to make the present moment into your friend. And you may realize that most of your life you made the present moment into an enemy. You didn't say "yes" to it, didn't embrace it. You were out of alignment with the now, and so life became a struggle. It seemed so normal, because everyone around you lived in the same way. The amazing thing is: Life, the great intelligence that pervades the entire cosmos, becomes supportive when you say "yes" (Fiat) to it. Where is life? Here. Now. The "isness" of this moment. The now seems so small at first, a little segment between past and future, and yet all of life's power is concealed within it. When there is spiritual awakening, you awaken into the fullness, the aliveness, and also the sacredness of now. You were absent, asleep, and now you are present, awake. The secret of awakening is to unconditionally accept this moment as it is. Some people do it because they can no longer stand the suffering that comes with nonacceptance of the isness of this moment. They are almost forced into awakening. Others have suffered enough and are ready to voluntarily embrace the now. When you become present in this way, the judgments, labels, and concepts of your mind are no longer all that important, as a greater intelligence is now

operating in and through you. And yet the mind can then be used very effectively and creatively when needed.

Now the question may arise: Would there be anything left to strive for when you are so present in the now? Wouldn't you become passive in that state? Many meaningless activities may fall away, but the state of presence is the only state in which creative energy is available to you. When your fulfillment and sense of self are no longer dependent on the future outcome, joy flows into whatever you do. You do what you do because the action itself is fulfilling. Whatever you do or create in that state is of high quality. This is because it is not a means to an end, and so a loving care flows into your doing.

***Being "in the present" sounds so obvious, and yet is quite hard to sustain. Do you have any practical tips for people for maintaining awareness of the present moment?***

Although the old consciousness or rather unconsciousness still has considerable momentum and to a large extent still runs this world, the new awakened consciousness – presence – has already begun to emerge in many human beings. In my book *The Power of Now*, I mention ways in which you can maintain present moment awareness, but the main thing is to allow this new state of consciousness to emerge rather than believe that you have to try hard to make it happen. How do you allow it to emerge? Simply by allowing this moment to be as it is. This means to relinquish inner resistance to what is – the suchness of now. This allows life to unfold beautifully. There is no greater spiritual practice than this.

***On your video *The Flowering of Human Consciousness*, you talk about a "new" consciousness that is emerging in our time. What do you mean? Hasn't the present moment always been available to genuine seekers? What's new about our current time in history? Are you pointing to a certain developmental process – an acceleration in human spiritual development?***

Yes, the present moment has always been available to spiritual seekers, but as long as you are seeking you are not available to the present moment. "Seeking" implies that you are looking to the future for some answer, or for some achievement, spiritual or otherwise. Everybody is in the seeking mode, seeking to add something to who they are, whether it be money, relationships, possessions, knowledge, status – or spiritual attainment. "Seeking" means you need more time, more future, more of this or that. And there is nothing wrong with it. All that has its place in this world. To make money, to gather knowledge, to learn a new skill, to explore new territory, even to get from A to B – for all these things you need time. For almost everything you need time, except for one thing: to embrace the present moment. You need no time to open yourself to the power of now and so awaken to who you

are beyond name and form and realize that in the depth of your being, you are already complete, whole, one with the timeless essence of all life. For that you not only need no time, but time is the obstacle to that realization, seeking is the obstacle, needing to add something to who you are is the obstacle. The story of your life, how it all unfolds, whether you succeed or fail in this world...Yes, it matters, yes, it's important – relatively, not absolutely. Only one thing is of absolute importance and this is it. If you miss it, you miss the deeper purpose of your life, which I call the flowering of human consciousness. And ultimately nothing else will satisfy you.

Some of the first human beings in whom the new consciousness emerged fully became the great teachers of humanity, such as Jesus, although their teachings were greatly misunderstood, especially when they turned into organized religion. They were the first manifestations of the flowering of human consciousness. Later others appeared, some of whom became famous and respected teachers, whereas others probably remained relatively unknown or perhaps even completely unrecognized. On the periphery of the established religions, from time to time certain movements appeared through which the new consciousness manifested. This enabled a number of individuals within those movements to awaken spiritually. But those men and women who awakened fully were always few and far between – rare flowerings of consciousness. Until fairly recently, there was not yet a need for large numbers of human beings to awaken. For the first time in human history, a large-scale transformation of consciousness has now become a necessity if humanity is to survive. Science and technology have amplified the effects of the dysfunction of the human mind in its unawakened state to such a degree that humanity, and probably the planet, would not survive for another hundred years if human consciousness remains unchanged. As I said earlier, change usually occurs in response to a crisis situation, and we now are faced with such a crisis situation. This is why there is indeed an enormous acceleration in the awakening process of our species.

This new large-scale spiritual awakening is occurring primarily not within the confines of the established religions, but outside of those structures. Some of it, however, is also happening within the existing churches and religious institutions wherever the members of those congregations foster a sense of separation on which the egoic mind structures depend for their survival.

***How much time and effort is required to realize "the power of now?" Can this really occur in an instant or is this the work of a lifetime?***

The power of now can only be realized now. It requires no time and effort. Effort means you're trying hard to get somewhere, and so you are not present, welcoming this moment as it is.

Whereas it requires no time to awaken – you can only awaken now – it does take time before you can stay awake in all situations. Often you may find yourself being pulled back into old conditioned reactive patterns, particularly when faced with the challenges of daily living and of relationships. You lose the witnessing presence and become identified again with the "voice in the head," the continuous stream of thoughts, with its labels, judgments and opinions. You no longer know that they are only labels, judgments, and mental positions (opinions) – but completely believe in them. And so you create conflict. And then you suffer. And that suffering wakes you up again. Until presence becomes your predominant state, you may find yourself moving back and forth for a while between the old consciousness and the new, between mind identification and presence. "How long is it going to take?" is not a good question to ask. It makes you lose the now.

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. . . After this, my beloved Jesus added, but with such unspeakable tenderness that I felt my heart breaking: "My good daughter, if everyone knew what I am telling you about all that my Will does with the creature and how It lives with her, they would all throw themselves into Its arms, never to leave It again. You must know that my Will is like a true Mother for the creature: It creates her with Its hands, It conceives her inside Its maternal womb, and never leaves her alone - not even one instant - in this maternal womb; as if inside a sacrarium. It forms her, giving her the use of her members; It rears her with Its breath; It gives her warmth, and once she has been well formed, It delivers her to daylight. But It never leaves her alone. More than a Mother, It hovers always over her - watching over her, assisting her, giving her the motion, the articulation of her members, the breathing, and the heartbeat; and as she grows, It gives her the use of the word, the step to her feet... There is nothing that the creature does, which my Will does not do together with her, to give her full use of the human life. Therefore, the principle of the human life, of the soul as well as of the body, is formed entirely by my Will, which remains in it as if inside Its refuge, to give it perennial life.