

# **“Simple Presence”**

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We've heard of new age gurus speak of being present, living in the now. If you walk through the self-help section of any bookstore you'll see titles imploring you to "Be Here Now!" and "Present Moment, Wonderful Moment" and proclaiming the "Power of Now!"

But what does all that really mean? What is the difference between being present and not being present? How can I possibly not be present if I'm here?

Most of us have had days we rushed through – looking back at the end of the day we realized we never really connected with anyone, we were barely there – just along for the ride. The day flew by - a blur of faces, appointments, traffic, brisk conversations... When days like this stack up, our life is passing us by, or rather, we are passing it by.

There's a bumper sticker that says: "Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans."

But life is so short. When we let days rush by that turn into weeks and then months and years... before we know it we may find ourselves in our final moments, wondering where our life went.

I know when I am simply present my mind is clear. The frenzy of thoughts of the past and worries of the future have taken a break. I feel calm and at peace.

I am simply experiencing the present moment just as it is – whatever is going on. There are no words rushing through my head attempting to interpret or make sense of what I am experiencing.

The times when I feel the most intense sense of presence have been when I have stood, dwarfed, in a redwood forest, surrounded by those giant trees that have watched thousands of winters turn into spring.

Every time I am there I feel a profound sense of connectedness to the earth and all of her creatures. The day-to-day frustrations and worries I get so used to lugging around dwindle to irrelevance.

I realize that I belong to the earth in a way that my thoughts don't quite understand but my body and emotions know instinctively.

When I walk to work each morning, and am practicing being present, I try to notice the sound of my steps on the sidewalk. I feel the wind and the sun on my skin. I hear all the different barks of all the neighborhood dogs.

I imagine that all my senses are dry sponges and I try to saturate them with the colors and sounds and smells of the neighborhood.

Being simply present means learning to notice and quiet the incessant mental noise – some call it the “monkey-mind” – the constant chatter that we've come to accept as normal waking consciousness.

Many people throughout the ages have tried to understand this relationship of our thinking mind to our soul from different perspectives.

I think Descartes was wrong when in the 15<sup>th</sup> century he declared: "Cogito ergo sum". "I think, therefore I am." There seems to be a tendency to confuse thinking with being. Equating who we are – our identity - with our thinking mind.

Because if I can notice my thoughts as they arise in my consciousness, who or what is doing the noticing?

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century St. Francis of Assisi said: "What we are looking for is what is doing the looking."

Sages from many traditions seem to have very similar things to say about the mind and being in the present. Many speak about the sense of timelessness and feeling of joy and oneness that they discovered in the process of their meditation or spiritual practice.

And most of their teachings tend to point to the fact that we all have access to a deep current of timeless awareness.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Buddha – who's name means "the awakened one" – encouraged people to become aware of the limits of our normal consciousness. He said if

we awakened to the greater truth, our suffering would end.

Jesus often spoke of “eternal life” that was available to all.

600 years before Jesus, Lao Tse spoke of the *Tao*, or the *Way*, which is reality that naturally exists prior to and gives rise to all other things such as the physical universe and all things in it. The *Tao* can be found by experiencing the oneness in all things.

The essence of many of the world’s spiritual teachings on the mind and consciousness is very similar. They seem to agree there is much more to existence than our thinking minds.

Practicing being in the present is not only for saints and mystics and ministers. There are many benefits of mindfulness – of being in the present moment. Everyone can benefit from making a habit of noticing where his or her attention is – and consciously bringing it back into the present moment.

Mindfulness can make your body healthier. The act of quieting the mind has been found to be directly related to the health of the body. Medical Doctors are now encouraging their patients to practice non-traditional forms of treatment like meditation and guided imagery to help reduce stress and speed the healing process.

Too often we don't really see our children, spouse or friends. We see our ideas of them. We project onto them things that are not really who they are but who we think they are. When people seem like they are letting us down it may be because they are not living up to our ideas of who they are.

It may be easier to notice when other people are not seeing you but are seeing their ideas of you.

To really see another person requires being totally present. This mindfulness creates a space between direct experience and interpretation. It is in this space where something new and unexpected can happen.

Practitioners of Zen Buddhism strive to achieve what they call "Beginners mind" - a state of openness and receptivity that experts tend to lose.

It is a challenge to be in the present. There is often resistance. When a friend tells me about something that is really upsetting her, my thoughts often jump to what she should do to fix the situation.

But I know how frustrating it is when I want to share my feelings with someone only to have them start problem-solving with me. I usually just want someone to listen to me.

Something healing happens when I know someone else really hears me and understands what I am going through.

But sometimes, when the feelings are really heart wrenching, it can be extremely hard to be simply present to another person.

Several years ago I was trained to work as a Hospice volunteer. A friend I had met in the training asked me if I would visit her client, Dan, for a couple of weeks because she was going out of town for the Christmas holidays. She was very ambivalent about leaving town because he was getting so close to death and she had grown quite attached to him.

She said that before I agreed she wanted me to know a little about him and his condition. Dan was in his mid 50's and had been a UC Berkeley professor. He had ALS - also called Lou Gehrig's disease.

This is the horrible neuromuscular disease that Morrie had in the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. It is where the body slowly breaks down and eventually becomes paralyzed. It usually begins from the feet and works its way up until the person can no longer breathe and their heart eventually stops. The worst part is that the person's mind remains completely sharp while their body is dying before their eyes.

My friend had been massaging Dan twice a week for a few months. Knowing I was also a massage therapist, she asked if I could step in just until she got back.

I took a deep breath, and I told her I would.

The first time I visited Dan I was very nervous. I wasn't sure what to expect.

I walked into the living room and saw him in his specialized reclining wheelchair. He was unable to hold his head up. He had lost the ability to talk over a month before and was being fed through a tube in his stomach.

I was even more nervous. How was I going to communicate with him? – but, not wanting to appear like the terrified, amateur hospice worker that I was, I smiled, introduced myself to him and proceeded to roll up his pant leg and remove his shoes and socks to begin the massage. I quickly settled into the rhythm of the massage giving his wasted muscles some needed care and circulation.

At some point I realized that I was not paying my full attention to what I was doing. I was not being present with him. While my hands were massaging his leg, my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking about what I might pick up for dinner, I was thinking about the Christmas presents I still had to buy...I was worrying about the papers that were due soon for school.

My thoughts seemed to be anywhere and everywhere else - except on the man whose disintegrating body I was touching. Once I recognized that was happening, I brought my attention back to Dan, and this tragic situation.

I glanced around the room and saw a picture of Dan laughing with his wife and daughters on a river-rafting trip. I guessed that it must have been only about a year and a half ago.

A huge, heavily decorated Christmas tree loomed in the corner of the room – wrapped packages in piles beneath it.

“Joy to the World” was playing softly on their stereo in the background.

His wife, on the phone, speaking in hushed tones in the kitchen.

As I let the horrible sadness of Dan and his family’s grief seep in, tears began to well up in my eyes and my throat tightened.

The reason I had such a difficult time keeping my mind present was because I did not want to feel the pain and terrible grief that infused everything in that house. My mind wanted to protect me with its distractions.

During each of my visits I struggled to give Dan my full presence. It became something of a spiritual practice for me. As I would notice thoughts come into my mind I would gently bring my attention back into the room, back to Dan's flesh under my hands. I had to do this over and over again.

But it felt somehow very important to do. Dan deserved my full attention.

At the end of my last visit Dan indicated that he had something to say to me. I got his caregiver and with her help Dan spelled out the words "Thank you. Merry Christmas!"

I looked into his eyes and I said, "You're welcome."

He died the next week.

Sitting with and touching a dying man was not comfortable. There was nothing easy about it. But it felt so important to give him my full presence. What else matters at that point? What could possibly be more important? And the truth is - I needed it too. I have changed because of that experience.

How many times in the past have I not been present with someone who was reaching out to me?

Who am I not really hearing or really seeing right now in my life?

Am I being truly present with myself? Or is there something I'm missing that the deepest part of myself is trying to communicate?

How do I learn to listen more genuinely to my own truest self and to that of others?

From my own experience, I know this much: To be 'simply present' either alone or with another person requires some courage. It requires a willingness to *not* be in control – to remain open to possibility. It means letting go of any outcome.

"Meditation" is the name of the formal spiritual practice of being present – and it is about simply being aware.

It's not necessarily about sitting in lotus position and chanting 'om' – although I've done that and it's nice. There are many different techniques, and classes and books and gurus but you don't need to subscribe to any of that stuff.

You can practice mindfulness – or being aware of your mind – while you do the dishes or brush your teeth. It is just about paying close attention to what you are doing, and noticing your thoughts and feelings.

Learning to be present is not about retreating from the complexity and brokenness of the world - Quite the contrary - its about being able to embrace it more fully.

Because when we pull our attention away from all the mundane distractions that normally occupy us and see injustice – are really present to it – we are motivated from a deeper, more powerful place within to work to correct it.

It is from the place of centeredness and mindfulness that we have more power to effect change in the world.

Being present in each moment in your life is simple. Which is not to say that it is easy. It is sometimes really hard to do. But with practice becomes easier.

Mary Oliver asks us; “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Life is so very short. Don't miss it.

Pay attention to what matters most. Live boldly. Love fiercely.

Henry David Thoreau ends *Walden* with the statement: “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.”

May we each be wide awake and present to all the many dawns in our lifetime.

May it be so.