

"Be Here Now" - Perfecting the Practice of Presence

by Daniel Reid

A lament often heard from modern Western novices on ancient Eastern spiritual paths soon after receiving their first introductions to the depth and complexity of the practices is, "Why is it all so complicated!" This is particularly true of those who choose the highly disciplined practice paths designed to awaken awareness, such as the "Complete Reality" (chuan jen) branch of Chinese Taoism and the "Great Perfection" (dzogchen) path of Tibetan Buddhism.

Years ago, at a retreat in India with my first Tibetan teacher, the great Kagyupa meditation master Kalu Rinpoche, someone asked the venerable lama why the foundation practices he taught were all so complicated. His reply crackled with the swiftness and clarity of lightning: "Because the human mind is so complicated, that's why! It takes complex methods to dismantle the complex delusions the ego constructs to blind the mind to the light of truth. Truth itself is as simple and clear as the morning sun. In fact," he said, sweeping his hand around the room, "the truth is right here in front of you, right now, this very moment, but you just don't have the eyes to see it!"

It's true: the Tao of "Complete Reality" and the "Great Perfection" of the awareness which reflects it like a mirror are utterly simple, self-evident, and ever-present, here and now. There is nothing to seek: all we need is the vision to see. It's our human minds that are complex and tricky, not awareness and reality. Both Buddha and Lao-tze stated very clearly that the disciplines they taught were designed to awaken the ignorant and enlighten the blind; those who know the truth and see how simple it is don't need the discipline of practice.

Most of us, however, spend a lot of time and energy weaving elaborate veils of illusion around our minds, like silkworms in their cocoons, to protect our delicate egos and desires from rupturing in the radiant light of awareness which we keep locked deep inside our hearts. Despite our barriers of doubt and fear, it's always here within us, each and every moment, a treasury of wisdom, love, and power waiting for us to claim it by awakening to its luminous presence. Depending on how deep asleep we are in our dream worlds, the work of waking up can be easy or difficult, fast or slow. Either way, the first step is to dodge the tricks our egos play to distract our attention from practice and lull us back to sleep, and find a way to steer our minds directly to the luminous clarity of our original awakened state.

The entire corpus of complex practices taught in the traditional schools of Taoist and Buddhist cultivation boils down to a single simple teaching that can be summarized in three words: "Be here now." This is the keystone that supports the entire foundation of all the practices. This precept has become such a popular "New Age" slogan that it's usually dismissed as a trite cliché, but it nevertheless remains the essential link connecting all the major Eastern practice lineages, and it holds the key that unlocks the gate to success in them all. Let's take a closer look at this supreme yet simple teaching, word by word, and see how it works.

"To Be or Not to Be..."

That's the basic question in the quest for enlightened awareness: to be aware or not to be aware. It's also the choice one makes when choosing to follow the Taoist and Dzogchen paths of practice, which are designed to awaken the practitioner to a direct experience of being present in the primordial state of awareness. This is a state of being that can only be experienced when you stop doing. That means withdrawing the energies of body, breath, and mind from their ordinary expressions of "doing" in activity, speech, and thought, and resting instead in the stillness and silence of simply "being." In Taoist tradition, the deliberate withdrawal of energy from the active state of doing into the still state of being in order to experience the nature of awareness is called wu wei ("not doing"). In Buddhism, this basic meditation practice is known as shamatha ("dwelling in tranquility"). Disdained in modern life as a waste of time, "sitting still doing nothing," which is the Chinese term for "meditation," is in fact an indispensable condition for all spiritual discovery. Meditation is your ticket for a front-row seat in the theater of complete reality, where the curtain doesn't rise until you sit still and be quiet.

Life in the world today spurs us into a constant gallop of non-stop activity and traps our attention with a relentless onslaught of sensory distractions, allowing us little chance to slow down, stop moving, stop talking, stop thinking, and simply savor the essential flavor of being alive, being aware, and being present in the moment. "Being" involves a totally different state of mind than "doing." It's a totally different expression of energy that reveals a completely different dimension of experience. Doing manifests our energy in a dynamic state of activity—action, speech, and thought—hooking our attention in the temporal dimension of linear time and space. Doing always has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and activity always manifests in a finite field of space and time. When you stop doing and just be, your energy remains at rest in its original potential state, permitting your attention to experience the still depths of your mind in its basic state of awareness. Energy at rest abides in a state of infinite potential, and stillness is the boundless crucible of all creation. This is the immortal dimension of pure awareness, the primordial source from which all temporal form and activity arise and to which they all return, like waves rising and falling on the ocean. If the mind is like an ocean, then awareness is like the water: always calm and quiet deep down inside, but constantly rippling with waves of activity on the surface. In order to experience the nature of the ocean's water before it forms itself into waves, you must sink down below the surface and submerge yourself in its depths.

All forms of doing—activity, speech, and thought—give rise to movement, and all movement creates the illusion of linear time, with a beginning, middle, and end. Not doing (wu wei) makes time collapse in the infinite stillness and radiant space of being in primordial awareness, which has no beginning, middle, or end. When you stop moving, speaking, and thinking, time stops and awareness expands into infinity, dissolving all dualistic boundaries between self and other, here and there, now and then. What you realize in this still and silent state of awareness is that everything arises from and returns to its original source—the empty, luminous, infinite potential energy of the primordial state. Here's how Lao-tze expressed it in the Tao Teh Ching:

Something formless yet complete
That existed before heaven and earth,
Without sound, without substance,
Dependent on nothing, unchanging
All pervading, unfailing. . .

It's true name I do not know :
"Tao" is the nickname I give it.

The nickname the Buddha gave it is "Dharmadatu:" "the way things are."

"To be or not to be" is therefore the first choice you make when embarking on the path of cultivating awareness. There is nothing particular to do to reach the primordial state of enlightened awareness, because you're already there before you start. However, it takes a lot of practice stop interfering with it and simply let it be. You must arrive at the realization that it's already here within you, right now, and learn to recognize its radiant light. This is the path as well as the goal of all the practices taught by the masters of the Tao and the Dharma - to be present in awareness.

"Here , There, and Everywhere. . ."

Taoists refer to body, breath, and mind as the "Three Treasures" of life. Buddhists call them the "Three Gates" of energy. Keeping these three vehicles of our life force working together in harmony, rooted in the same ground of being and doing, is an essential point of attention on the path of awareness. This seems simple enough in principle, but in practice it's not so easy because the human mind is like a monkey: it hops here, there, and everywhere, leaving body and breath elsewhere. Training the mental monkey to sit still and pay attention to where your body is here and now, is a primary task of practice that takes time and patience.

Body and breath are always right here, firmly rooted like flagpoles at your present location. Where else could they possibly be? It's the mind that's always drifting away to another place and time, floating to and fro like a leaf in the wind. Left unattended, the mental monkey is always hopping around out "there," leaving body and breath stranded like a car without a driver in the traffic of life. As the monkey wanders off to worry about the future, romp through the past, chase fantasies, chat with phantoms, and meander through mental mazes far removed from the present locus of body and breath, it takes along a big supply of your vital energy, burning it frivolously in the bonfires of random thought and robbing your body of its essential fuel of life. The breath grows shallow and irregular, the body loses balance, and vital functions stagnate, while the mind fritters away the energy upon which the whole system depends.

The solution to this problem is to focus the spotlight of attention on your breath, and to shift your breathing from autonomic to voluntary control. Since breath and body are inseparably linked, conscious breathing keeps the mind firmly grounded in the body, here and now. All you need to do to make this transition is summon the intent to steer your attention away from the monkey's madcap maneuvers and lock it onto the perpetual flow of breath in and out of the body, and to feel the body's rhythmic response to the movement of the breath. Follow the breath in, follow the breath out; feel your belly rise, feel your belly fall. Your breath and your belly are completely real, and they are both always right here at home in your body. You may therefore use the breath and the belly as buoys to keep your mind anchored in reality, rather than letting it wander away with the monkey. That's why conscious abdominal breathing is such an important foundation practice in both Taoist and Buddhist systems of cultivating awareness.

All this may sound, as they like to say in Australia, "too easy, mate!" And in fact it is easy, once you get the hang of it, but like everything else in life that's worth doing well, it takes practice to get it

right. Verily it is said, "practice makes perfect," but the practice does not always need to be so complicated. It can be as easy yet profoundly effective as breathing, if you pay attention to the way you're doing it. The Great Perfection of enlightened awareness is only a breath away, but to realize that you must pay attention to your breathing and not get distracted by the monkey's mental marvels. The Taoist adept Liu I-ming clarifies this point in *Awakening to the Tao*:

The Tao is simple and convenient. There is no need to seek afar, for it is right here at home ... It is utterly simple, utterly easy, there is no difficulty involved ... The ridiculous thing is that foolish people seek mysterious marvels, when they do not know enough to preserve the mysterious marvel that is actually present ... So many Taoists seek at random, all the while casting aside the treasure at hand.

"It's Now or Never..."

The "treasure at hand," described by Taoists as the "precious pearl" and by Buddhists as the "wish-fulfilling gem," is the luminous, infinite potential energy of fully awakened awareness. This jewel is always shining right here within our own mind and body from the day we are born until the day we die. It's not something we must seek elsewhere. "What is of real value is in ourselves," writes Namkhai Norbu in *The Mirror*, "in our own original state: this is our wealth." This original state of awareness is known in Buddhism as *bodhicitta* ("awakened mind") and in Taoism as *wu-dao* ("realization of truth"), and it's our most precious possession in life, an infinite source of wisdom, compassion, and power waiting for us to reclaim it. However, because we look for truth in "mysterious marvels" outside ourselves, rather than turning to the infallible source within, and because we habitually mistake material possessions for wealth and force for power, most of us go through life without ever discovering the real treasure of truth, vision, and infinite potential which we all carry within us every moment.

The moment itself is the ultimate marvel, and presence in the moment paves the way to mastery of all mysteries. What could be more marvelous than the infinite energy of creation that unfolds each moment in all the myriad forms of the universe, pulsing like a heartbeat from the twinkle of distant stars to the murmur of the sea, from the wind in the trees to the hum of the bees, from the radiance of a rainbow to the glow of a candle. The light of pure awareness reflects all the manifold creations of universal energy right here within our own minds, moment by moment, as clearly and unconditionally as a mirror. Since everything manifests from the same basic energy, every moment reveals the fundamental mechanism of creation and vibrates with the mysterious marvel of life. In order to become aware of all this, we must keep our attention on the mirror of the moment and practice the perfection of presence. Presence of mind in the immediate moment permits us to experience the infinite marvels of the eternal present. After we've learned to anchor our minds here in our bodies by using breath as a buoy, we must then free our minds from the trap of linear time by realizing that it's always "now," and that the present moment is therefore timeless and eternal. A single moment of direct experience in the eternity of the present teaches us more about the true nature of time and reality than a lifetime of study and thinking.

Most people spend their entire lives roaming across the frozen mindscapes of a dead past and unknown future, completely ignoring the vibrant present, except for those rare moments when reality suddenly grabs their attention with the proverbial Zen slap in the face. The fragmented segments of linear time as measured by the tick-tock of the clock produce the artificial mental paradigm of a

chronological past and an imaginary future that stretch infinitely in opposite directions from the fleeting moment of a swiftly passing present. Presence in the stillness of the eternal moment produces the opposite effect—a direct experience of indivisible whole time in the seamless eternity of now. This experience awakens awareness of the timeless present as the only reality, and shatters the illusion of past and future projected through the lens of linear time. What we learn from the practice of presence is that the only “real time” is now and that the present is the dimension of eternity.

It’s always “now,” and the present is always here where we experience it, reflecting the whole universe in the mirror of the eternal moment. The only reason most people are blind to the vision of complete reality which every moment reflects is because they rivet their attention on the express train of thought that’s constantly running through their heads, rather than dwelling tranquilly in the stillness of the timeless present. Someone once wrote, “Time is space thinking.” Since the mind is essentially empty, like space, it follows that “time is mind thinking,” which is the mental form of “doing.” When mind stops thinking, i.e. “doing,” and dwells instead in the stillness of “not doing” (wu wei), time stops, and mind experiences the timeless state of presence in the eternal moment, i.e. of “being here now.” Stillness doesn’t do, it just is. Stillness is therefore the master of presence: it teaches you how to “be here now” and experience Complete Reality in the Great Perfection of awareness in the eternal moment. In Carlos Casteneda’s books, Don Juan teaches Carlos essentially the same lesson when he says that we can “stop the world” and experience the pulse of eternity simply by stopping the “internal dialogue” in our heads.

We are always in the present moment, here and now, and it provides the only view of the world that’s not imaginary. The past and future are mental constructs, but the present is the living ground of awareness and the cradle of creation. In “The Way of the Peaceful Warrior”, Dan Millman states that the most profound lesson his teacher ever taught him was contained in the declaration, “There are no ordinary moments.” Every moment is extraordinary because it always reflects a complete and perfect picture of the whole universe, like a flawless gem of awareness. However, in order to perceive reality with the flawless vision of the moment, we must perfect the practice of presence.

As we begin to awaken to the infinite potential of presence in the eternal moment, we also begin to realize that the primordial awareness through which we experience presence is as immortal as the moment---that our awareness is something that “is not born and does not die.” We realize that the infinite luminous energy of awareness is the very source of the world which we perceive through our senses, and that we are always the authors of our own lives, free to set the stage and write the script as we wish. That’s why Tibetan teachers describe the “Clear Light” of primordial awareness as a “wish-fulfilling gem.”

The Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu refers to the experience of undistracted awareness in the moment as “instant presence.” When you practice instant presence, you experience the waves of the world rising and falling in the infinite ocean of awareness, and you realize that the world you perceive is never separate from the awareness which perceives it, just as the images reflected in a mirror are inseparable from the mirror which reflects them, and the waves rippling and roaring on the surface of the ocean are inseparable from the still and silent water in the depths from which they arise. The world we experience is a product of our awareness, not a separate reality. It’s very important to recognize the distinction between the reflections and the mirror, and to realize that the waves on the ocean are just a fleeting form of the water below, for one is impermanent and inconstant while the other is immutable and immortal. In order to enjoy the ephemeral play of life’s energies, we must

avoid attachment to their passing forms and not mistake the servant for the master, for it is not the impermanence of things in life that causes us sorrow, but rather our attachment to impermanent things. Instant presence makes this distinction clear, for it teaches us to value the treasure that we can never lose—the luminous pearl of primordial awareness.

Taoist and Dzogchen teachings place such strong emphasis on being aware of our real condition, as it is here and now in the present moment, because this is where we've always been and always will be—in the very center of our experience of the universe, which unfolds like a flower from the luminous heart of our awareness. Our experience of the world is always complete and perfect just as it is at the moment. In real time, there is no past or future, only the eternal present, and as soon as we stop thinking, the timeless perfection of the moment blossoms. When we rest our minds tranquilly in stillness (shamatha), the moment is all there is. In an interview in the Winter 2003/04 issue of *Dragon Mouth*, Liu Ming notes this point as follows: "Rather than offering transcendence, the teaching introduces us to where we actually are. . . the place we really are is the place we'll be forever. There's nothing missing in the experience we're in."

It's also important to realize that the Great Perfection of awareness in the present moment can only transform our lives and liberate our minds from illusion if we learn to apply it in the active "doings" of daily life as well as in the still "non-doing" of meditation. Otherwise it's just a formal exercise that ends with each meditation session and has no practical value in daily life. Even when the body is busy doing something, the mind should experience the activity with the instant presence of awakened awareness. The whole point of cultivating awareness in the non-doing stillness of meditation is to bring the awakened state of presence into the doings of daily activity. "In order to realize the inseparability of meditation and daily activities," states Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu, "we must apply the practice twenty-four hours a day."

This means, for example, practicing instant presence while frying a fish, pouring a cup of tea, driving a car, or embracing a partner in sexual union. To do this, you must keep your attention fully focused on the nature of the activity your body is doing in the present moment and be aware of how your energy is manifesting in that activity, here and now, on the spot. Feel the sizzle of the frying fish in the handle of the pan; observe the hydrodynamics of the tea pouring from the pot; be alert to the manifold mechanics of operating the car; experience the energy of your partner in sexual embrace rising like a tide on the sea.

While meditation allows us to experience our energy in its still state, the activity of daily life lets us experience the way our energy manifests in movement. Both aspects are equally real and equally important, and instant presence is the key to experiencing the nature of both as they manifest in the perfection of the moment. "A true practitioner," writes Namkhai Norbu in *The Mirror*, "can appear to drink and laugh like others in a pub, but we can be sure that, without assuming the meditation posture, he is continuing in his state of presence."

Both Taoist and Dzogchen teaching include specific methods that help the practitioner learn how to maintain the state of instant presence in the midst of ordinary activity. Often referred to as "moving meditation," these practices are designed to integrate inner stillness of mind with outer movement of body, and to unify the states of "being" and "doing," awareness and action. In Taoist tradition, various forms of chi-gung such as Eight Brocades, Tai Chi, and Pa Kua are practiced to harmonize body, breath, and mind in smooth rhythmic movements of the body synchronized with the

natural flow of the breath, all balanced by presence in a meditative state of mind. Chi-gung develops the ability to engage naturally in the external activities of daily life while remaining in a calm state of awareness inside.

In Dzogchen, yantra yoga is practiced as a form of "moving meditation" to bring body and mind into a balanced state of awareness that fuses inner stillness with outer movement. Chi-gung and yantra yoga train practitioners to integrate stillness with movement, and to experience the mind's essential emptiness as well as its intrinsic energy, without getting distracted by either. Moving meditation should be applied to ordinary activities "until," as Namkhai Norbu notes, "there is no longer any distinction between meditation and life."
"The Precious Human Existence"

In Western religions, people generally disdain their bodies as obstacles to salvation and view the world we live in as a sink of sin and corruption, far removed from a future paradise to which they hope to gain entry after death by behaving in a way prescribed by clerics during life. This view rejects our own experience of life in this world as a valid source of truth and instead demands faith in unproven dogma in exchange for a dubious promise of eternal bliss in an uncharted heaven that can only be reached in death. This is not a good bargain and a highly risky investment of our faith.

Better by far to work with the resources life has given us, here and now. Never dismiss your body as a viable vehicle for reaching the goal of enlightened awareness, for without it you don't stand a chance of success. Your body is the only anchor that keeps your mind grounded in reality and lets you to learn the lessons life has to teach you. By paying close attention to your body and its experience of the world, you prevent your mind from wandering off into false realms of fantasy and dissipating your energy in illusory distractions. Always utilize your breath as a bridge to keep your mind and body linked together in the present moment by breathing consciously at all times, not just while practicing meditation, chi-gung or yoga. Breath is the most effective tool we have for keeping our minds aware of what our bodies are doing in the present moment, and for synchronizing the microcosmic pulse of our personal energy with the macrocosmic pulse of universal energy. By using breath as a metronome, we can harmonize body, breath, and mind in an integrated state of awareness that allows us to experience the real time of the eternal present rather than the artificial time of past and present conjured by linear thinking.

The "bottom line" is this : if we wish to attain the Great Perfection of enlightened awareness and understand the Tao of Complete Reality, we must do it here and now, in this body, in this life, while we still have the "precious pearl" of primordial light to illuminate our way. We must always remember that the Clear Light of immortal awareness resides only in the hearts of living beings, and that at death the spiritual Light in our hearts returns to its original source in the primordial heart of the universe. The Light does not illuminate the dark night of death, so unless we merge our minds with the immortal Light in life, while we still have the chance, we will die with minds still clouded in illusion and wander aimlessly through the dark corridors of the illusory astral realms. Known in Tibetan Buddhism as the bardo ("in-between state") and in Chinese Taoism as chung-yin ("middle shade"), these astral realms include all of the heavens, hells, and "other worlds" ever imagined by the human mind, and after death they trap the unenlightened minds of those who invested belief in their falsehood during life. The only way out of these shadowy realms of delusion is to get another chance at winning the prize of immortal awareness by getting another life and another body with a heart of Light to serve as a vehicle for practice. Tibetan teachers compare the chance of gaining another

human body to the chance that a blind turtle swimming aimlessly in the bottom of the ocean will rise to the surface and stick its head through a ring tossed randomly into the water. Those aren't very good odds, which is why Tibetan masters always refer to this life we have here and now as the "precious human existence:" because it offers us the precious opportunity to receive the teachings and gives us the vehicle of a human body to practice the methods which can lead us directly to the radiant treasure of enlightenment and the "precious pearl" of immortality.

The Great Perfection of awakened awareness is not attained by rejecting, transforming, or transcending the human condition. It can only be discovered through direct experience of the world as it is, here and now. When you practice instant presence in all aspects of your life, each and every moment has the extraordinary potential to reflect the whole truth of reality in the mirror of your mind and awaken you to the Great Perfection of your own enlightened awareness. There is nothing to reject, nothing to transform, nothing to transcend, and nothing particular to do, because the Clear Light of awareness is always shining here and now in your own heart. All you need to realize it is presence.

In closing, I would like to quote the last line of my favorite Tibetan prayer. It's a call to all one's teachers to ask for their blessings on the path of practice, and it neatly summarizes the essence of everything written above:

"Grant us your blessings that we may attain
the supreme accomplishment of being aware
in the Clear Light of Great Perfection,
right now, immediately, here in this very place!"