

HOW TO
LIVE
IN THE
NOW

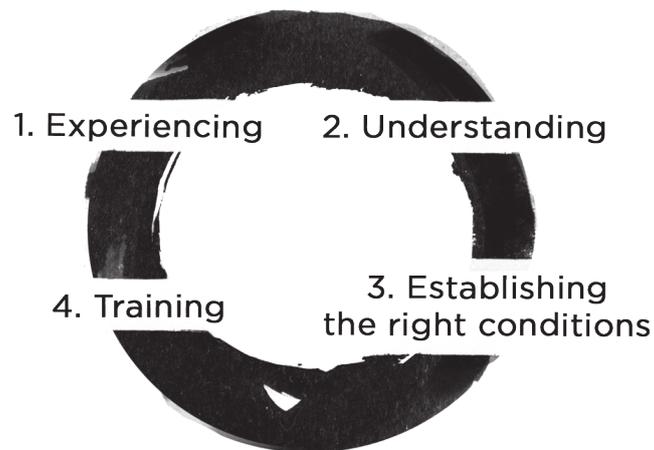
A Practical Guide to
Living in the Present Moment

**SUMMARY OF
THE PRACTICAL WORK**

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SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICAL WORK

In this final section I've included a summary of the practical training. It's meant as an overview of the subjects and methods covered in the book, which you can use as a quick reference after you've finished reading.



As I said earlier, I've chosen to divide the journey towards becoming present into four phases, but let me again point out that in the real world every process is an organic whole that unfolds on its own terms and without abrupt transitions. Every division of a process is an illusion that forces us to see one particular pattern and emphasizes certain aspects at the expense of others.

I use the word 'phases' because when we start out it is useful to describe them as following each other. But once you've finished the introductory experiments, you'll simply be left with four areas you can work on simultaneously.

SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICAL WORK

EXPERIENCING (1) AND UNDERSTANDING (2)

The experience of being mentally present in the now (or the reverse) and reflecting on this experience is the natural starting point of a journey towards greater presence. Yet at the same time this experience is also the goal - because the goal is, of course, to experience more presence. So the end point and the starting point are the same, and the process is therefore an endless cycle. The more present we become, the more we understand what it means to be present, and the more present we can therefore be.

ESTABLISHING THE RIGHT CONDITIONS (3)

Becoming more present in the now is a matter ourselves and - just like changing your handwriting - this requires a period of time when you expend energy on something you don't usually expend energy on. This energy has to come from somewhere, so most of us will need to make some adjustments so that we get a bit more breathing space in our everyday lives to recharge our batteries and reflect on what we learn. Nobody can actively embark on making this kind of change when they're tired and stressed. It takes time and energy.

TRAINING (4)

Acceptance

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Accepting the inevitable (p. 138)
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Giving Up the Struggle for Identity

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ACCEPTANCE

First Phase: Accepting What Cannot Be Changed

ACCEPTING THE INEVITABLE

The first step in your basic training is to learn how to accept what cannot be changed.

The best way of coming to terms with a situation you find difficult is to focus on the opportunities it presents rather than those it shuts down. We all tend to establish extremely simplified causal connections when we think about our lives, and this means we can become completely obsessed by one version of events. Imagine, for example, you're just about to get your hands on the perfect house, absolutely certain this is the place you'll move into. Then it's sold to someone else.

Your whole vision of the future was built on living in that house and it hurts so much to lose it because you lose the vision at the same time.

But life is much more complex than just one version. There are always thousands of parallel opportunities, and we're quite simply unable to take them all in at one time. No, we did not get this house, but that just means the world lies open before us once again. Perhaps we will move to a completely new town. Maybe even a completely new country. And yes, the plate is broken, but we had been using that same plate for ten years. It might actually be fun to try something new. What about eating off shocking green plates for a while? Or out of wooden bowls? How many times has something not worked out for you and, although it

seemed like a disaster at the time, you've ended up saying, 'It's a good thing that happened. Otherwise I would never have ...xyz!' Life – the now, what is – is in a constant state of flux, offering many different opportunities. Every time one door closes, a hundred new ones open.

So when you're faced with something inevitable – something that has happened, or something that you cannot change – focus on the doors that are opening. Come up with at least three constructive opportunities this could lead to. Say them out loud and make sure you always come up with at least three. If you spill some milk on the floor, what opportunities can this create? Finding a fun way of mopping it up while trying to make patterns in it. Using the cloth that needed washing anyway but which you just never seem to have gotten around to putting in the laundry. Letting the children help and making a fun game out of it. And if you spill it on a carpet? Maybe there will be a big stain on the carpet and it will need replacing! Then you'll get a new splash of color in your home. Perhaps new carpets are so expensive that you will have to sell the car! Then you can cycle a bit more and this might add five years to your life. Perhaps there will not be a stain – then you can just wait a bit to clean it up and train your imagination by picturing three fantastic animals in the shape of the spill.

ACCEPTANCE

Second phase: not changing things that can be changed

NOT INTERFERING

The second step in your basic training is to release your desire to interfere.

Pick at least one day a week when you will accept everything that happens to you. You cannot tell anyone you've done this or make a big deal of it. You just have to know in yourself that on that day you will not interfere with what happens. You will just go with the flow.

When you start out you can choose days when you don't need to do anything special. But as you go along you need to challenge yourself by also choosing days when you have important things on your agenda. Days when big questions are going to be discussed and decisions are going to be made that will have consequences.

When it comes to the small things, just go with the flow. Wait a moment in the traffic if someone needs to get out of a side road. Don't get caught up in the fight to be first on the bus and get a decent seat. With bigger things, like when joint decisions need to be taken which will also involve you, you should not suppress

your point of view. Explain how you see things, but do this without disaccord. Wait and let others talk first. Don't interrupt or be too insistent. Just make sure you're heard and understood, and then don't fight any more for your opinion. Make a point of expressing the fact that you'll accept joint decisions and make sure you do when these decisions are taken. Everyone who is used to insisting on and discussing everything will find this a huge relief.

Once you've practiced this kind of acceptance for a while, it can get harder to remember to do it. You fall back into old patterns and your natural inclinations run away with you because you no longer are fully focused on the task. In such cases it can help to keep small reminders around you. Try carrying a little stone in your pocket that you know will remind you of the exercise, putting a little sign some place where you often look, or changing the background image on your phone.

In the end, you must manage to go for a week without resisting or trying to change the important things that occur. Just accept everything that life brings as mere experiences.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Judgment

COME UP WITH THREE GOOD THINGS ABOUT EVERYTHING

An effective way out of negative thinking.

There is potential for opportunity in everything around us. The problem is that we generally walk around with a set of negative beliefs or patterns of thought, which unconsciously and completely automatically meet everything new with skepticism, and thus we tend to focus on the negative. In addition to tying up our energy and keeping us in a bad mood, this makes us think in an incredibly limited way about the things we're confronted by, as I explained in connection with the exercise with the lines and the dots.

So there's something very constructive to be gained from turning such automatic reaction patterns into something positive, both in terms

of our own mental well-being and in relation to our ability to focus on the opportunities rather than the dangers in our surroundings. You can do this quick and effective exercise anywhere, anytime you have a few minutes to yourself, and it's especially good if you catch yourself red-handed in a negative stream of thought. It has both an immediate positive effect and a long-term effect if you do it regularly.

Sit down and relax for a moment. Close your eyes and take about a minute to calm down both physically and mentally. Then open your eyes and choose something you can see. Shut your eyes again and try to find three positive things to say about the thing you chose. Repeat the process with new things, trying to learn to do it quicker and with your eyes open. When you have done this for five minutes, shut your eyes again and feel how the tone of your thoughts has changed.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

The Story of Ourselves

BEING AUTHENTIC

Stop trying to be what you're not by sharing what you're up to.

When you're with other people, stop trying to seem smarter, more relaxed, intelligent, knowledgeable, content, skillful, sensitive, busy, important or insightful than you really are. Just be there as a completely honest person, full of faults and shortcomings. And therefore authentic.

There are two levels to this honesty. The first is in relation to strangers – the other people we're sitting with on the train, the people around us in the street or in a café. We're always very busy showing them who we are so we can be sure of only attracting people and situations that fall within our action horizon.

It's as if we wear the story of ourselves as a badge so that people around us will be able to recognize it and we'll be able to avoid situations that force us into the unknown.

The second level is in relation to the people we know – colleagues, family members and friends. The longer we've known them, the stronger the active patterns in our relationships with them become and the more difficult it can be to slip out of the one-dimensional image of ourselves we've built up for them.

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In the previous chapter I described three specific areas where you could work on increasing your honesty:

- » Revealing what you've been keeping back
- » Saying what is
- » Revealing yourself

The first two pave the way for the last, which is in many ways the most difficult: every time you discover that you're distorting the image you present of yourself, that you're exaggerating or simplifying things, reveal what you're up to. Without waiting to be asked, simply admit, 'Now I'm trying to give you the impression I know more about this than I actually do,' or 'Now I'm just trying to flatter you and seem attractive', or whatever pattern it is you've caught yourself falling into. Naturally this can really test your limits if you're sitting in a train carriage, so if you cannot manage this open admission, the next best thing is to immediately stop doing whatever you were doing. At the end of the day, it's not about doing something else. It's about doing less.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Honesty About Withheld Facts

REVEALING WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN KEEPING BACK

The time has come to start cleaning up your past.

Select one of the adults who is closest to you – this could be your husband or wife, a brother or sister, one of your parents or your best friend. Make a list of the things that you should have told them but somehow never got round to. Arrange a suitable opportunity where you have time, peace and quiet and then go through the things on your list as honestly as possible and without manipulative packaging. Then move on to the next person.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Honesty About the Now

SAYING WHAT IS

Stop holding back.

In the course of a day we generally take part in a number of defined situations of varying lengths of time. Examples could be meetings, breaks, leisure activities, family time, transport time, tasks carried out with someone else, and other things like that.

Try to select at least one of these situations each day and, before it starts, make the decision that while you're involved in it, you will be completely honest about what is – both what you observe around you and what's happening inside you.

Gradually, as you gain experience, you'll get better and better at discerning the special and sometimes extremely subtle emotional tension that tells you something needs to be expressed. When they first start, most people find this a slightly odd process. It can at first

sight make these situations seem very confrontational, and it may very well be that the other people involved do react, because you've begun to change a pattern they are also part of. But if you pay attention to your own reactions, you will discover that you feel much freer and more relaxed afterwards because you're not dragging around so many withheld feelings with you as you leave the situation and go on with your day. Expressing the things you would normally withhold means that they're immediately resolved. They become mere memories, whose emotional content you do not need to come to terms with afterwards by turning the situation over in your mind or by telling other people about what has happened.

As soon as you become aware of this experience, you'll want to express what is in more and more situations, until at last it becomes a completely natural part of your dealings with others.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Honesty About Our Identity

REVEALING YOURSELF

Give up the struggle to uphold your identity.

Every time you catch yourself engaging in an activity whose aim is to puff up your identity, let the people around you know about it. Say it like it is, without dressing it up or making excuses: 'No, now I'm just trying to make a good impression on you' or 'Sorry, I was just sitting here and working hard at making myself sound important.' It will only seem embarrassing the first few times. Afterwards it simply becomes a part of your personality and then the next challenge is to stop feeling important about your ability to let everyone know that you're feeling important.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Control

ENJOYING THE UNKNOWN

Seeking out the unknown is a way of enriching your life. It's a chance to experience something you would otherwise never have experienced.

Naturally, it often feels awkward to be in an unfamiliar situation. To suddenly find yourself, for example, in an environment with people you're not socially prepared for, where you have no idea what is expected of you and what is normal behavior. But this is also an extremely educational situation, especially because it reveals all the patterns we normally use to get by but which suddenly no longer fit with our surroundings.

There's a lot to be gained from seeking out the unknown, and you'll get great pleasure from finding it's nowhere near as dangerous as you imagine. Start to play with the unknown. If you usually go to the cinema, go to the theatre instead. If you usually go to a café, go to a bar. If you usually read fiction, read a biography. If you usually cycle, walk. Seek out different kinds of people than you usually do. Get chatting with strangers at the bus stop and on the train. Make some different choices than you normally do and enjoy seeing where this leads.

The unknown contains so many gifts, but we normally just walk on past them because we're busy doing what we usually do. Practice settling into and enjoying the unknown.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Worry

STOP WORRYING

Stop your worried thoughts by consciously directing your attention elsewhere.

When you find that your thoughts are trapped in a spiral of worries and you've begun imagining scenarios about how this or that could go wrong, stop these thoughts immediately! This can take a bit of getting used to, but it's not difficult. As soon as you catch yourself worrying, think of something else. Don't feed these negative ways of thinking. Let them go.

The funny thing about the kinds of problems we worry about is that they're only problems

for as long as they are not a part of the now. So long as they only exist as thoughts and have not yet become real, they are problems we can worry about. The moment they become real, which is to say part of the now, they change and simply become tasks that need to be dealt with.

One effective way to stop the spiral of worries is therefore quite simply to ask yourself: do I have a problem right now? It will then be clear that the thing you are using so much energy on worrying about is in reality something you can do absolutely nothing about at the moment, so you may just as well stop worrying.

GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

The Quest for Validation

LETTING GO OF THE FIGHT

Give up every desire to win or be right. Train yourself in the joy of making mistakes (and thus having the chance to learn something new).

From time to time, when you get caught up in an argument, try to lean back and observe how the people around you keep getting wrapped up in the most meaningless details, getting lost in competition and hair-splitting.

And if from time to time you also catch yourself taking things too far, practice being honest. Reveal yourself and the patterns you're caught up in. Have a laugh at your own expense and at your childishness. Allow yourself to be seen as you are.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

ANCHORING AWARENESS IN THE BODY

SENSING THE BODY FROM WITHIN

Increase your present moment awareness by focusing attention on your body.

When you first do this exercise it can be helpful to do it with your eyes closed, but after a short time you'll discover that it's also no trouble doing it with your eyes open, or even while you're carrying out simple activities which do not make too many demands on your attention.

The exercise consists quite simply of turning your awareness inwards to your body – or perhaps we should say 'outwards to the body', as most people will find that when they turn their awareness inwards it will initially be centered in their heads, where our most important senses and therefore our experience of 'ourselves' is usually centered. The exercise involves letting go of this center and instead being aware of the body as a united whole, letting the experience of this feeling settle calmly over you.

You'll often find that your awareness at first moves around to specific and distinct areas of the body, in order to release muscle tension and get the body to relax. It can be an advantage to go along with this process by consciously releasing tension in the shoulders, hips, palms, soles of the feet and forehead.

But after this you must try to embrace all these areas in one united experience, resting in it by just letting it be and not intervening or trying to influence it.

Once you've achieved this experience of bodily wholeness – and it will only take a few experiments before you're able to do it in a matter of seconds – the challenge is to continue resting in the experience and to let your subsequent actions stem from it. Mentally you must allow a small part of your awareness to remain with your experience of the body, and physically you have to try to stay relaxed even when you move.

This leads to a slightly unusual, introspective state of mind, and you'll typically end up moving at a somewhat slower pace when you allow your awareness to remain with your body while you walk, get up, sit down or reach for something. But if you keep on with the exercise for at least five minutes (and preferably longer – there's in principle no upper limit for how long you can continue to rest in the body in this way), you'll notice that you've also achieved a more comfortable mental pace, that you're more firmly anchored in your body, and that your thoughts are much less likely to wander aimlessly from one thing to another.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

SETTLING INTO WHAT IS

DOING ONE THING AT A TIME

Resist the temptation to always be two steps ahead of yourself.

Doing one thing at a time – that is: allowing your awareness to rest on what you're doing right now – is a difficult but extremely rewarding exercise. It is basically a matter of splitting up the blocks of actions we usually use to think into smaller and smaller pieces.

When you have to do your shoes up, try to make that the only thing you do. Look at the shoes, feel the laces between your fingers and

don't let the automatic patterns that have done up your shoes so many times before take over. Instead keep your attention focused on every little movement.

Try doing the same thing when you eat, when you clear up the house, when you brush your teeth, when you lay the table. Intensify your awareness of all the activities you normally carry out automatically and with a minimum of conscious thought. Walking is not just walking. Walking is a number of steps following one after the other. Try to be present with every single step. Don't project yourself forward to your destination. Stay with your body all the way and take it one step at a time.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

BREATHING

BREATHING - POSITION 1

It sounds so simple but make no mistake: freeing up your breath is a step by step process and it pays to start with the absolute basics.

There are different ways you can begin to settle into your breathing. The easiest one is to lie comfortably on your back on a firm surface with a pillow or a couple of books under your head and a pillow under your knees. Your throat needs to be clear so your head should not be tipped too far back or forward and your knees should not be tensed so you can relax the whole bottom part of your body. Lay your hands on your stomach with your fingers pointing in towards the solar plexus and your elbows resting on the floor. Close your mouth and eyes, and breathe through your nose.

In this relaxed position, gently turn your awareness to your breathing. It can be hard at first to

avoid disturbing it by intentionally making individual breaths deeper or longer. But if you just remain in the role of observer and allow your deep, inborn balancing ability to do its work, your breathing will eventually find its own calm rhythm. When this happens, you'll notice that there is an unconscious layer of tensions and habits that are disturbing the body's natural rhythm. The purpose of the exercise is to uncover these tensions and, as far as is possible and without pushing, to let go of them and restore the free flow of your breathing.

When you practice this exercise, you'll also discover that your thoughts keep drifting off and taking you away from the now. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered, let go of what you have started thinking about and calmly turn your attention back to breathing and what is happening in the moment.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

BREATHING

BREATHING – POSITION 2

Going from lying down to sitting up.

If you do this exercise regularly – preferably for between five and twenty minutes every day for a month – you'll gradually get so good at relaxing that you can move to the next level, which is doing the exercise when you're sitting up.

Here you sit on a stool. Let your knees relax and fall to the side so that an angle of between 30 and 90 degrees is formed between your thighs, and place your feet so that the soles are on the floor almost directly under your knees. The angle formed between your feet should be the same as the angle between your thighs. It helps if your pelvis is slightly higher than your knees and you can do this by raising the level of the stool with a firm cushion or a book. Your hands should rest on your thighs close to the body.

In this position stretch your upper body a few times as if you were trying to reach the ceiling with the top of your head, and then relax. Next rock gently from side to side and back and forth, so you find the position that gives you the best balance in your upper body. As far as is possible, let your head, chest and stomach rest on top of each other like building bricks along your spine. When you have found the best balance in this way, relax your eyelids so

your eyes are half closed. In contrast to the exercise where you're lying down, you should still be able to sense the space immediately in front of you.

Once you've settled in, allow your awareness to rest on your breathing, like moonlight falling on a still lake. The actual exercise is simply a matter of always returning to this state of awareness of your breathing every time you get distracted or find your thoughts drifting.

You should also do this exercise for a minimum of five minutes each day, and preferably for longer. There's no limit to how long you can continue, and with regular training you'll find that you go deeper and deeper into the experience of presence and physical and mental relaxation. At some point you may consider moving on to doing this exercise standing up, but if you do, there are so many physical factors you will have to take into account that you'll almost always need to have a skilled instructor who can help you to take up the right position.

No matter whether you're doing the exercise lying down, sitting or standing, the most essential element is that you never be tense but always remain in a state of relaxation, both physically and mentally.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

STEPPING BACK FROM YOUR THOUGHTS

FINDING YOUR INNER STILLNESS

As you work with the exercises in this book, inner experiences of pure being will happen spontaneously.

Just as a sound can only exist against a background of no sound – which does not necessarily mean silence, but at least relative quietness in terms of the overall frequency range—thoughts can only exist against a background of no thought. Behind and between our thoughts there exists a kind of stillness of the mind, which is our consciousness as it is when it has not formed itself into any particular shape and simply 'is'.

There are many different ways of looking behind our thoughts and experiencing the pure being of consciousness. All of them have a few things in common.

As a starting point, the situation and your physical surroundings should only place the simplest of demands on you, so you're free to turn as much of your attention as possible towards your inner mental processes. When you do this you'll discover that your inner thoughts

do this you'll discover that your inner thoughts and the shifts in your emotions are nowhere near as clear as they often appear. You'll discover that your thoughts work on several different levels and that many have the purposeless, repetitive quality of background noise. In addition, people often find that their identity has an independent voice, which 'speaks' their thoughts, and finally that there are a number of complete and incomplete emotional and thinking processes that feed their identity's monologue (or dialogue with itself).

The challenge is to try and let go of all these thinking processes and look beneath them or in between them to the emptiness that exists there. I've chosen the word emptiness deliberately, because this is probably how you'll experience it when you succeed (only in quite short glimpses at first). We identify so closely with our different inner voices that initially we find it impossible to recognize the silence when we find it, because when our inner voice disappears we do not feel that we are there either. We experience the silence as a strange lack of thoughts, which is constantly ruined when we think, 'I've got it' and thus break the silence and start up the torrent of thoughts again.

FOUR PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

STEPPING BACK FROM YOUR THOUGHTS

Gradually, however, as you get better and better at experiencing this emptiness without breaking your attention, you'll discover that there is something else present there, something which is not a thought but rather the consciousness behind thought - what you could call your true self, the potential out of which your identity takes shape. When this happens and you come into contact with this experience of pure being within yourself, the nature of the exercise changes. It becomes a process of training yourself to transfer more and more of your recognition of yourself to this experience of being, so that *this* becomes the starting point for your thoughts and actions instead of the constantly changing processes you identified yourself with before.

Unless you have previous experience with this kind of inner observation, I wouldn't recommend that you try this exercise first. It places considerable demands on your self-perception

and often leads to quite a lot of frustration about your inability to control your mind. I've included it because, when you work with the other exercises in the book, you'll probably start having experiences on your own that are like those I've described here. Gradually, as you become more present in the now and you increasingly give up the struggle for your identity, learning instead to rest in what is, inner experiences of pure being will happen spontaneously. The moment at which this happens depends entirely on your starting point and your ability to make the exercises work in practice, but it happens to everyone sooner or later if they stay with these inner explorations.

When it does happen it's a good idea to start working consciously on looking behind your thoughts and trying to rest in the experience of the self - and by 'self' I mean not your identity but simply the realization that 'I am'.

SUGGESTED READING

Establishing The Right Conditions

Karen Kingston: *Clear Your Clutter with Feng Shui*

Saying Yes

Keith Johnstone: *Improvisation and the Theatre*

Acceptance

Lao Tzu: *Tao te Ching - A New English Version*
by Stephen Mitchell

Letting Go

Michael A. Singer: *The Surrender Experiment*

Undoing Your Identity

Ernest Holm Svendsen: *How to End the Stories that Screw Up Your Life*

Honesty

Brad Blanton: *Radical Honesty - How to Transform Your Life by Telling the Truth*

Improvisation

Stephen Nachmanovitch: *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*

Being Present

Michael Brown: *The Presence Process*

Neural Networks

Edward de Bono: *The Use of Lateral Thinking*



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