

‘NOW’ AND ‘NOT NOW’

If I’m talking to someone right now, but I’m thinking and speaking about something that happened five years ago, am I living in the present or living in the past?

If I spend a lot of time daydreaming about something wonderful that happened years ago, am I wasting my time, or enriching my life?

If I can’t stop thinking about something awful that happened to me in the past, am I keeping myself down, or am I acting normally for someone who has been badly hurt?

If I always blame myself for things that go wrong, aren’t I destined to feel that way for the rest of my life because the feeling always comes over me suddenly?

If I had an abusive childhood, no matter how good my life is currently, haven’t I been damaged in some way that will always affect me and keep me from seeing others with the same level of trust as someone who had a happy childhood?

If all people have what is called innate health when they are “present” in life, then why are so many people stressed and depressed and why is it so hard for people to figure out what their innate health is and how to find it?

If I’m supposed to live in the present moment with a “free and clear mind”, then what’s the good in all the life lessons I’ve learned, all the knowledge I have, all the information in my memory? Isn’t it irresponsible to try to just live in the present, with no frame of reference and no goals?

These and questions like these arise in all of our minds when someone talks to us about “the now” as opposed to “the past” or “the future”, or when someone tells us to “clear” our heads and quiet our thinking. These and questions like these are on my “frequently asked” hit list. I used to ask them frequently, and now people ask them to me frequently.

For years, I puzzled over the idea of the present moment, and the notion of clear-headedness. They had a kind of ‘60’s “just be cool, man” and “if it feels good, do it” quality in my estimation, which I found extremely disconcerting. In addition to the unsettling connotation, these comments seemed like the inscrutable instructions that came with my first VCR. If I knew how to be truly present and clear my head, I would have tried that a long time ago, I thought. Why don’t they tell you, step-by-step, exactly HOW? The more I thought about how to test the experience of presence and clarity, the more intense became my inventory of all the things on my mind, and the more detailed

became my catalogue of whether they were related to the present, past or future - or all three. I was continually updating and evaluating the encyclopedia of my own thoughts.

Anyone who has ever done this knows what a self-defeating and paralyzing process it is. By the time you've begun to sort out yesterday, it's already tomorrow. No matter how diligently you work at it, you're immeasurable thoughts and actions behind yourself. It's like trying to figure out life by watching home movies, while trying to live life simultaneously. It's hard and complicated, and you don't know whether to look in the mirror, or stare at the screen.

At some point, I got sick of working on myself and had the idea to just *stop thinking about myself* so much. What is the purpose of self-absorption in the whole scheme of a meaningful life? It was a huge relief to relax and to stop focusing on my own thinking. I had a "vacation" feeling. No pressure, just soak in every wonderful minute of life. As soon as I looked beyond myself and beyond what was on my own mind, I was curious about what was going on in life and with other people. It was like pulling open heavy drapes to discover a gorgeous panorama, right there.

Whenever I did find myself getting absorbed in what I had been thinking, I had the idea to *leave the thoughts alone*. To me, this all came together in an answer that occurred to me while I was on a talk show in Australia, taking calls from listeners. One woman went on at length about how important she thought it was to analyze what she had been thinking about and feeling when certain things had happened in her life so she could figure out what to do now. It just popped into my mind to ask her: "Would you go outside and bring in your trash and sort through it to figure out whether you had a good week last week and what to do this week?"irate, she fumed, "Of course not!" And then she said, "Oh, my goodness. That's right, isn't it? There's no point looking there."

The definition of "clear-headedness" looked altogether different from this perspective. Rather than an action step – clearing one's head – it looked like no action. Be who you are. Clear-headedness was the simple feeling of not messing with the natural way the mind works if we don't start trying to second-guess it and make it right.

Being present or "living in the now" looked altogether different from this perspective. Rather than a place to "get to" through laborious inner work, it looked like the place we always are when we're not working on it. No wonder there are no instructions, no how-to's! We don't need an instruction manual for thinking clearly and being connected to the experience of life as it is happening any more than we need an instruction manual for circulating our blood or supplying the oxygen moving through our lungs. It's the way life is set up to work. We already "know" it. Enjoying a vibrant and healthy state of mind is innate to us; it's the operating system we arrive with to live our lives.

All those tricky questions about the past, the present and the future looked different from this perspective. Why analyze what verb tense you're using? When you see how easily the mind works, it stops mattering exactly what is on your mind or what you're doing with your thinking. You know that you're thinking and how you're creating your ideas.

A wonderful example of this came up for me as I was watching my 17-month-old grandson learn to drink from a little juice box with an inserted straw. When he started, we would hold the box and steady the straw. Eventually, we handed him the little box of juice. At first, he clutched it so tightly that juice shot through the straw and hit him right in the eye. He got frightened and cried. He had no clue what made the juice spurt out of the straw or why it hit him. He looked hurt and angry. He had no idea he had anything to do with it.

It didn't take long for him to realize the connection between how he was holding the box and what happened to the juice. Now, he's onto it. He can grip the box hard and squirt himself - or us or the cat. He can hold the box gently and sip the juice. He decides.

Whether it's apple juice or grape juice or mixed fruit juice doesn't have anything to do with the experience. The contents of the box don't matter. The way he holds the box and how he uses his own strength is the point. Now that he understands his own strength, he can do anything with any juice, and he can't scare himself, no matter what he does. Now, even if he grabs the box too tightly by accident and squirts himself in the eye, he doesn't cry, he laughs at himself. He knows what he's doing.

Once we know how something works, we're at ease with it, even when it's not working right or when we're not using it to its best advantage. I imagine, for example, that people who know how to fix their own car engines and carry all the tools and supplies they need in their trunks feel comfortable driving anywhere, any time. It doesn't matter whether the car breaks down. They understand how it works, and they have confidence they can nurse it along no matter what. So driving around is worry-free for them. They can enjoy the ride and forget about the car.

That's a simple way to see "now" – enjoying the ride of our lives without much thought about the driver or the engine. "Not now" is fretting all along the way. Is it running right? Does it sound right? Do we have extra oil? Are the spark plugs OK? What if it boils over? What's that funny noise?

The person bumping along in "not now" will be the one who says: "Beautiful farmhouse! What beautiful farmhouse? I didn't see any beautiful farmhouse. But did you hear that little ping just then? Something must be wrong with the car. We're going to get stuck out here!" The trip is no fun because they're so worried about the trip they miss it.

In the now, we are at peace and enthusiastic going wherever we're inspired to go; and we're confident we'll get there.

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