

On Doing Here Now
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I just finished reading Ram Dass' latest book, *Polishing the Mirror: How to Live from Your Spiritual Heart*, published in 2013,¹ and had a markedly different response to it than I would have had in years past.

Ram Dass was born Richard Alpert in 1931. He and his Harvard colleague Timothy Leary were dismissed from their faculty positions in 1963 for their connections with hallucinatory substances.² A couple of years later, Alpert went on a pilgrimage to India and came back reborn, as it were, with a new name, Ram Dass, and a new message. The new message was captured in the title of his phenomenally successful book, published in 1971, *Be Here Now*. I'm old enough to have read it when it came out and was mightily impressed with it. The point of this thought is that I'm not impressed with it now.

Ram Dass is now in his 80s and although slowed by the effects of a serious stroke still preaching the gospel, which is encapsulated in the first page of his introduction to *Polishing the Mirror*.

Being here now sounds simple, but these three words contain inner work for a lifetime. To live in the here and now is to have no regrets about the past, no worries or expectations about the future. To be fully present in each moment of existence is to reside in a different state of being, in a timeless moment, in the eternal present. . . . There's nothing to do, nothing to think about. Just be here now.

That sentiment sounds great on the face of it . . . if you don't think about it too much. As I say, it went over big with me in days of yore, when nothing characterized me more than not thinking too much about anything. These days, when I think things through for myself more, I beg to differ with this message. I'll get at the bases for that disagreement by, sentence-by-sentence, commenting on this Ram Dass quote.

Being here now sounds simple, but these three words contain inner work for a lifetime.

Yes, these three words do sound simple, but I've decided they are *too* simple. Life is more complicated than what is implied here, that the central task of life is managing one's subjective, phenomenological state, one's awareness, one's consciousness. Indeed, inner work, so-called, is crucially important, but it is primarily in service of what is most important, and that's outer work: *getting good things done in our worlds while we have the gift of life and thus the opportunity to do so.*

To live in the here and now is to have no regrets about the past, no worries or expectations about the future.

Living in the here and now is fine and good. But so are regrets about the past fine and good if we use those regrets as a means of learning how to do things better now than we did before. Worries or expectations about the future are also fine and good if used as a way to create wisely and diligently and to anticipate and prepare for what might occur ahead. To be sure, regrets and worries are not pleasant, but if we try to erase the unpleasant in our lives, we also erase reality and the lessons it can impart, and not stay on the case of what we are trying to get done as much as we could and should. The same is true for expectations—what could happen, all the possible future outcomes and how these various outcomes can be brought about. Expectations can help in setting goals, and informing how to proceed from here to achieve them. There is no reason to run from regrets, worries, and expectations, or mask them or deny them, they aren't going to kill us; in fact, they are going to make us more alive. Being peaceful and blissed out, as does being drunk or high, comes at a big cost. *We should use regrets and worries and expectations to become clearer and more purposeful and to get our lives done better.*

To be fully present in each moment of existence is to reside in a different state of being, in a timeless moment, in the eternal present.

Being fully in the moment should not be set off against living with awareness and understanding of the continuity of the past, present, and future. The past happened as it did, and that matters in itself—what was created, what people experienced back then,

what happened to them, counts—and it matters because it contributed to shaping the current circumstance. By definition, the future will become a reality—it's not merely an abstraction in our heads—and that reality will be affected by what happens in the present, including what we do. We need to look back and learn from it, and we need to look ahead and do what will get us the futures we most want. The moment is not in fact timeless for any of us: it is here and then it is gone, replaced by another moment, and another and another and another and another, and then our moments run out, we die, it's over for us. *The work of life is to be responsible to our moments while we are still alive and conscious and volitional.*

There's nothing to do, nothing to think about.

There are all kinds of things to do! Nothing defines our humanity more than what we do. *We need to figure out which things to do that are most worth our finite time and get on with doing them.* There are all kinds of things to think about! We need to *figure out what's most worth thinking about and get about the business of thinking about it, and to do it hard (not like me in 1971).*

Just be here now.

Both being and doing matter, we don't need to dichotomize them, make it an either-or. But if has to be just one or the other, I'll go with *Just do here now.*

Notes

1. Ram Dass, *Polishing the Mirror: How to Live from Your Spiritual Heart* (Sounds True, 2013).
2. If you don't know about Timothy Leary, I strongly recommend that you look into him. A remarkable character, and exceedingly prominent and influential in the 1970s. He was more complicated, and sophisticated than his public image, which was as the LSD guru. Reading about Leary is a good way to get a handle on what was going on the '60s and '70s, and, assuming that if you are younger than 50 and you've never heard of Leary, it's a good lesson about who and what gets dropped down the memory hole of history, made to disappear. People in power nowadays

don't want you attending to Leary or what he talked about. If you know of him at all, they want you to dismiss him as a buffoon, which he most certainly wasn't. A good place to start finding out about Leary is this biography: Robert Greenfield, *Timothy Leary: A Biography* (Harcourt, 2006).