

**Why now is bliss**  
**By Claire Scobie**

**What makes Eckhart Tolle so attractive to Cher, Oprah Winfrey and Meg Ryan? The philosophy he outlined in his bestseller *The Power of Now* made them happy. Claire Scobie reports.**

For the best part of two years in the early 1980s a man in his mid-30s would sit on a park bench in Russell Square, central London, and in a state of deep bliss watch the world go by.

When winter crept in, Eckhart Tolle, a German-born linguist who had once been thought to hold great academic promise, would retreat into the University of London Library nearby and pore over esoteric books. And word spread among students that this man was no ordinary drifter but a modern mystic who had undergone an extraordinary inner transformation.

A man, indeed, who was spiritually enlightened.

Twenty years later, Eckhart Tolle (pronounced Toll-ee) says that while “there are shifts in intensity”, he remains in the same state of “bliss and peace”.

He no longer sits on a park bench but lives in a high-rise in Vancouver and teaches others how to attain enlightenment, among them Gillian Anderson of *The X Files*; Cher, who says he “has changed my life”; and Meg Ryan, who introduced Oprah Winfrey to Tolle’s first book, *The Power of Now: A Spiritual Guide to Enlightenment*.

Last year, Winfrey chose the book for her *Favourite Things* show, saying she had read it eight times and keeps it on her bedside table. Sales skyrocketed: *The Power of Now* — with an original print run of 3000 — became No. 1 on Amazon.com and spent 20 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, selling more than one million copies in North America. Released in Australia in 2000, it was still on the top 10 list this year, and has been translated into more than two dozen languages.

Tolle’s second book, *Stillness Speaks*, was released here earlier this month and publisher Hodder Headline says both books are selling well.

When I first met Tolle — a slight man with soft, grey-blue eyes and a goatee beard — he by no means exuded charisma. Rather, the air of a shy professor. He spoke with a faint German accent, his conversation frequently punctuated by staccato laughs so fierce as to make his shoulders shake. Nothing, it seemed, was to be taken too seriously — least of all his international success.

The essence of his teachings, he says, is that the present moment is the most meaningful in life. By aligning with “the now”, he says, “you are also aligned with life itself. You experience coincidences.

“Suddenly just the right thing happens at the right moment. Or you become more intuitive, more

creative. Many deep insights and realisations come out of being present.”

Written in a question and answer format, *The Power of Now* explores perennial spiritual problems: how to overcome the feeling of separation, the meaning of surrender, how to avoid pain. It requires the reader to let go of preconceived ideas and focus less on what he or she does and more on being.

Tolle asks the reader “not to stop thinking, but to step out of being completely entangled in the stream of thinking”. This, he believes, “is the the real meaning of spirituality. People still think spirituality is having certain belief systems — in God or angels — but ‘spiritual’ means to be able to step beyond the conceptual reality in your head. In other words, accessing the dimension of stillness within yourself.”

Does he consider himself enlightened? “Well, one could say that,” he says, and pauses. “But that leads to delusion. When one says I’m enlightened or you are enlightened, that enlightenment is a personal achievement or possession or some kind of attainment.”

He feels his way cautiously. “There is simply a state of peace, clarity and aliveness.”

It wasn’t always so. Brought up near Cologne in Germany as Ulrich Tolle, he had a miserable childhood, largely because his parents constantly argued. “Even aged 10 or 11 I was trying to figure out ways I could commit suicide.”

Refusing to go to school, he was taught at home and learnt several languages, as well as studying philosophy and astronomy. At 19, he moved to London where he worked in a language school teaching businessmen.

But “suffering from depression, anxiety and fear”, he started “searching for answers to life”. Believing these lay in philosophy and literature, he took evening classes, and then went on to King’s College, London. He was 27. “For a moment I thought, ‘I’ve finally made it’. And then after a few weeks I got depressed again.”

One night shortly after his 29th birthday, Tolle says he was in a state of suicidal despair. “I couldn’t live with myself any longer. And this question arose without an answer: who is the ‘I’ that cannot live with the self? What is the self? I felt drawn into a void. I didn’t know at the time that what really happened was the mind-made self, with its heaviness, its problems, that lives between the unsatisfying past and fearful future, collapsed. It dissolved.”

He pauses and reflects. “The next morning I woke up and everything was so peaceful. The peace was there because there was no self. Just a sense of presence or “beingness”, just observing and watching.” He laughs lightly. “I had no explanation for this.”

In his mid-30s he lost interest in research and abandoned academia, drifting for two years, staying with friends or occasionally in a Buddhist monastery, sitting on park benches and sleeping rough on Hampstead Heath. His family thought him “irresponsible, even insane”.

It was, though, after this “lost” period that people — former Cambridge students, those he met by chance, friends — started to ask Tolle questions about his beliefs.

More students gravitated towards Tolle over the next five years, and he moved to Glastonbury —

the nexus of “alternative living”. In 1993, he arrived in Vancouver. It was there that he wrote the first question in *The Power* : What is enlightenment?

“I wrote an answer,” he says. “And then a stream of writing happened, which was very empowered, very different from the casual writing I had done before.” It was published in 1997 and has since been described as a “seminal work with a vibrational energy”.

When talking with Tolle, I neither experienced a great sense of awe nor had any momentous revelations. But, as I was leaving, he caught me off guard, and hugged me. It was as though I had been squeezed by a huge force that, nonetheless, trembled like a feather in the wind.

I walked out, and my mind fell quiet. For some reason, I could feel tears in my eyes. Suddenly, everything on that ordinary Kensington Street and in the cafe where I stopped to collect myself, seemed intensely beautiful. I also have no explanation for this. Tolle is now in the limelight. His appearance hasn't changed much — since “the shift”, he says, he has aged slowly — but his life has.

When I spoke to him last month, he played down the pressures: “I'm not like some gurus who never meet anyone who is not a devotee.” But, he adds, “I do sometimes wear sunglasses when I go out”.

Tolle is keen to emphasise his ordinariness: he says he enjoys simple pleasures — a walk on the beach, shopping in the supermarket, sitting quietly.

He says he doesn't pay much attention to money, although he jokes that he “should pay more”. He has used his new-found wealth to buy a flat, which overlooks wild parkland, and a car. He says that while he has no intention of setting up an ashram or centre, “it could develop organically”. Still, he has no plans to create an empire or “a heavy commercial structure”.

Munro Magruder, assistant publisher at New World Library, the American publisher that picked up the American rights for Tolle in 1999, says: “The last big best-seller we had was *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* by Deepak Chopra ... One of those laws is to practise detachment, but Chopra doesn't. He is very involved in the business.

(But) Eckhart truly practises detachment. “He's never asked how many copies of his book we've sold, nor enquired about the marketing campaign. He couldn't care less. He's only interested in being a teacher, and people resonate with that. He's the genuine article.”

*Stillness Speaks* , Hodder Headline, \$24.95.

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