

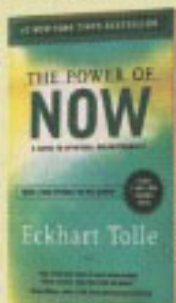
The Secret to Serenity

Worried about tomorrow? Eckhart Tolle has helped millions to embrace today

Clouds the size of zeppelins roll past the 16th-floor window of his apartment, but Eckhart Tolle barely gazes at the majestic scenery before pulling on a baseball cap and heading for a place with an equally riveting view: his local Starbucks. "I just love watching the variety of human beings," he says as he grabs a latte and a corner table. "I love the movement, watching what they do and how they speak."

That this diminutive author, whose 1997 *The Power of Now* has sold more than 2 million copies, will sit there unnoticed for hours might sound surprising. But Tolle, 57, whose book of spiritual philosophy has spawned a worldwide following and been translated into 30 languages, has built a reputation based almost entirely on word-of-mouth recommendations. Meg Ryan told Oprah about it, and she featured it on her show. "I've read it at least seven, eight times. It really got me through September 11," the Queen of Daytime said back in 2002. And yet Tolle, who lives in Vancouver, shuns nearly all reporters and TV appearances and happily describes himself as a hermit. "I love not to be noticed," he tells PEOPLE in a rare interview. "I can almost say it's against my nature to be out in the world."

“I've seen guys in solitary confinement truly softened by his words”



"If the dysfunction of the human mind remains," says Tolle (with his King Charles spaniel Maya), "we will destroy ourselves and the planet."



"He's so at one with life," says longtime girlfriend Kim Eng (with Tolle in Vancouver). "He lives and breathes it."

That's a bit ironic, given that Tolle's teachings, which have brought comfort and calm to millions, are about how to more fully *be* in this world. The way he sees it, much of the fear, anxiety and guilt that all humans experience can be traced to our inability to live in the present. Instead, he says, we spend our days dwelling on past mistakes—why did I have to eat that double cheeseburger?—or fretting about the future—the high school reunion is coming up, and I just ate that double cheeseburger. Lost in all that worrying, he says, is the present, the only period we can actually experience and enjoy at any given moment. "The now is the only thing there ever is, you can't get away from it," says Tolle. "But the voice in our head keeps us either in the past or in the future, treating the present moment as if it were the enemy."

Tolle, whose strongest indulgences are the occasional glass of wine and a

night of watching *Seinfeld* reruns, has a fix for all of this: Live your life right here, right now. "Instead of making the present moment into an enemy, turn it into a friend," he suggests (see box for tips on putting the words into action). As simple and gentle as Tolle's principles may sound, they've struck a deep chord in his followers. "He's brilliantly expressed awareness of the present moment as a window to the spirit," says New Age guru Deepak Chopra. Adds Mitchell Cantor, 69, a Zen teacher from Boca Raton, Fla., who has played tapes of Tolle's teachings during visits to maximum security prisons: "I've seen guys in solitary confinement truly softened by his words."

Growing up, Tolle's life was anything but soft. Born in Lünen, Germany, he was 11 when his parents' unhappy marriage ended in divorce, a source of shame and embarrassment to the young Tolle. He sank into

LIVING IN THE NOW

According to Tolle, we spend entirely too much time listening to the incessant chatter of the mind. Here are two of his tips on how to turn that chatter off—for a minute or two, at least:

- **Feel yourself breathing**

Feel the air moving in and out of your body. Note its temperature (really). "It won't last long," says Tolle, "but it's a space when you're not thinking."

- **Look at trees, flowers and the sky**

Try to perceive them without always having to repeat their names or without categorizing them. "Anything natural can much more easily take you out of thinking than man-made things," he says.

a deep depression that dogged him for years. After dropping out of school at 14, he moved to Spain to join his father, Leonard, a struggling writer. Tolle managed to get his academic career back on track and was working on a doctorate in literature at Cambridge University when he experienced a profound transformation. In the middle of a summer's night in 1977, he awoke in such despair that he considered taking his life. But by morning, he says, he was filled with inexplicable bliss—and he spent the next decade asking spiritual teachers to explain the cause. "It was a deep peace that was with me wherever I went, even in the middle of London, the middle of traffic," he says. Eventually, Tolle identified the principles that he would later write about in his book.

So what's it like being a guru? "I'm not," insists Tolle, who travels the world to give lectures but drives an SUV and lives in an apartment decorated mostly with books, not far from his girlfriend and business associate Kim Eng, 44. "I always say the truth is not to be found within anybody else. It's in you."

By Johnny Dodd in Vancouver