

Notes from meetings of a Book Group
Eckhart Tolle's "The New Earth"

Reading 1. (10/8/2014)

In the first two chapters the author talks about awakening. What is awakening, and what are we awakening from? There is a story that one day a Brahmin saw the Buddha meditating and asked him who are you? Are you a God? The Buddha told him, "I am the one who awakened." Although there were great teachers like Jesus and Buddha who awakened and taught people how to wake up from this ego-centered story of our lives the world has never been quite ready for it. But the author thinks it is probably now or never because of all the dangers facing humanity, most of them caused by our rampant greed resulting from our ego which causes us to attach ourselves to material possessions and objects, including our body, and want to acquire and possess more and more things and accomplishments. He tells of a woman that he was counseling who was on her deathbed. One day she lost her grandmother's ring and started to fall into a depressed state of mind. He asked her to think about when she might be ready to let go of it, and whether letting go of it would change who she was. Then she realized that she was identifying with a false notion of her self and started giving away her things. This made her feel very light and free and see life in a new light. From the time we are born we slowly develop attachment to things and forms and build up a story of who we are based on what we have, what we have done, what people think of us and so on. This is our ego. It is by itself neither good nor bad. In fact if we start fighting the ego and try to overcome it that itself creates more ego! The key is to simply become aware of it, and to start seeing things for what they are. Then we see the true nature of things, and the beauty of the world and our own deeper self opens up. For some people this happens when a great tragedy in their lives leaves them with nothing and they are forced to let everything go and get in touch with their deepest self.

Comments and discussion: Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us to see things as they are, to look deeply, and realize the "suchness" of things. Thus mindfulness is a way to awaken from the superficial self.

People talk about "getting outside the box." Too often we get stuck in a box, in a fixed way of approaching life and a fixed notion of what kind of person we are and want to be. This is all part of our ego. We also get very attached to the objects of our life.

There is also a certain beauty to life itself. Happiness and sadness, new beginnings and painful losses, they are all part of life. There is a certain nostalgic pleasure in holding on to memories of our life events and people. How do we reconcile this beauty and joy with the fact that they are also related to our ego? Perhaps the answer is that there is a difference between ego driven pleasure and sorrow and seeing the beauty in life, people and nature. When you get too attached to anything it causes suffering and delusion. There is a joy in seeing the beauty in everything, but when you get attached to even that joy you could fall into delusion and suffering and forget the true nature of your self and the universe.

Reading 2. (10/22)

In chapters 3 and 4 Tolle talks about the source of ego and the various manifestations of it. The ego arises out of identification with oneself and separation from others. Identification and separation is the process by which the ego arises and survives. People try to identify with one group and separate from other groups, resulting in conflict, hatred and violence. The “I” cannot exist without the “other.” Ego is strengthened by complaining about others, holding grievances and feeling that “I am right” and “they are wrong.” To overcome this thought pattern that has existed for all of human history will take time. But once we become aware of this process we start to free ourselves from ego. We see that what we think and feel is not really who we are. We start to get in touch with our most essential, innermost being that is also part of all life and all beings. This is the truth that is at the basis of the teachings of the great spiritual leaders.

In different people the ego takes up different forms, but they are all playing the same role and undergoing the same process of identification and separation. Behind a confident ego is the hidden fear of inferiority and behind a shy ego is the hidden desire for superiority. In either case it is because the ego is playing a role in order to survive, to distinguish itself, through recognition and attention. Sometimes we realize that we have been playing a role and say “I don’t know who I am anymore.” That is not confusion but actually the beginning of peace and clarity. Sometimes when we go through deep suffering our ego is eroded. Also when people focus on their work almost to the point of being unconscious of the world they are losing touch with their ego. When we truly love someone and see that they are also part of the same consciousness we can start losing our identification with our little self. When we realize that there is no such thing as “my life” we understand that it is impossible to lose one’s life and that the true consciousness is eternal and immortal.

Comments and discussion

This is a remarkably ambitious book. It can be complicated and difficult to understand. Tolle is aiming to explain to us what very few, such as Jesus, Buddha, Ramana Maharishi and so on have understood. But I think he gives a very thorough and comprehensive explanation, using many vivid examples from daily life. Each sentence of this book is full of deep insight.

His description of the immortality of true consciousness brings to mind Thay’s teaching of “No coming, No going.” Also in his book “Transformation at the base” Thay talks about the store consciousness and the mind (manas). The store consciousness is part of the collective consciousness. But the mind develops the notion of separate self. Once we realize the impermanence of our body and mind as well as the non-existence of a separate self we lose our identification with the individual, transitory self.

So far in the book Tolle has not talked much about the role played by emotions and feelings by themselves. But I guess he considers them by themselves neutral and in service of our ego.

Many mindfulness teachers talk about focusing on the awareness of the body as a way to detach oneself from the continuous ego-generated thought activity. Being in nature, walking mindfully, or simply sitting and being aware of the breathing are all ways to create peace and tranquility within.

Tolle says forgiving should happen naturally over time without our trying to make it happen, but that can be difficult. Memories can be strong and tricky to let go of. At first we need various ways to think about it and deal with it.

Reading 3. (11/6/2014)

In chapters 5 and 6 Tolle talks about the “Pain-body” and how to break free from it. The pain-body is the accumulation of all the emotional pain that we carry within us. Our body has an intelligence of its own that helps to carry out all of its involuntary functions. This intelligence also responds to dangerous situations with primordial fear and anger. It cannot differentiate between something that is a danger to the body and something that is perceived as negative by our ego. The ego generated negative emotions as well as positive emotions are mostly responses to external factors. This is in contrast to the joy of simply being which is not affected by external factors and does not have ups and downs. We continue to generate negative emotions throughout our lives and carry them within us through our memories and they are triggered any time something reminds us of a painful situation from the past. This is our “unhappy me.” Some people carry a heavier pain-body than others. They even go about their lives constantly living in negative emotions. People living in this unconscious state commit various acts of violence and cause suffering. In the bigger picture though, even the pain-body has its place because ultimately it leads to a state where they get tired of the suffering caused by it and want to break free of it as well as from the ego.

To break free from this pain-body one needs to learn to simply be, to be simply present. The moment we stand back and observe our “unhappy me” thoughts they lose the power to continue and to grow. The past cannot continue to live in us if we can be present in the here and now. Tolle talks about two women with heavy pain-bodies who came to him for help. He asked them to try to simply be with their emotions, to simply observe them instead of trying to get rid of their unhappiness. They found that this developed a space within them where they felt they could hold that unhappiness and it did not seem to matter as much.

Comments and discussion

Reading this book has been really transformative. Tolle is able to very clearly and systematically show how the ego works and how our emotions and thoughts can create a false world of suffering. Reading it is like going through a forest with a floodlight instead of a flashlight. It gives much needed clarity. Nevertheless, mere understanding and knowledge are not enough. Without practice one does not have a deeper understanding and it is possible to get confused and conflicted. As he says in the book the key is to let go of thinking about it and to be present. This cannot be done by thinking and can only come with practice.

Even when we are aware of our ego and know what is causing us pain it is difficult to let go of it. The triggers of our negative emotions are there in every moment and it takes practice to recognize when something is causing us to react. The important thing is to be able to take a few breaths before we react to a situation with a spontaneous emotional response. Once we are able to take a few seconds and stand back and notice ourselves reacting and not being present we can start breaking free of the cycle of negative emotions.

Reading 4. (11/19/14)

In chapters 7 and 8 Tolle tries to answer the question, "Once we have identified the ego as the part of us that is attached to form and understood that it is not who we really are, how do we find out who we really are?" He says it is up to us to find out who we really are because that which is beyond forms cannot be described. He quotes a great verse from the Upanishads that describes our true essence thus: "It is that which the eye cannot see but that whereby the eye can see."

He gives us various ways in which we can reach that dimension beyond the world of forms. The first step is to recognize who we are not, by observing our ego and realizing that it is not our true essence. The next step is to be present in every moment, to notice our breath, to be open to the wonders of the world, to see the beauty in every little thing. By practicing detachment, non-judgment and non-resistance we could free ourselves from our reactive, small self and experience an inner spaciousness and generosity. By giving without expecting anything in return we can bring out the feeling of abundance and joy within ourselves. As Jesus says, "To the one who has, more will be given. To the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

When we free ourselves from our ego and open ourselves to the universe and become aware of something beyond us, what are we really becoming aware of? We cannot be aware of space because space has no form. We are really being aware of our awareness. Through us the universe is becoming aware of itself. Some say we are becoming aware of God. This awareness does not come from losing consciousness of our own mind or losing thought through drugs or otherwise. In that case we are really falling below thought, not rising above it to a higher consciousness. Such awareness only comes when we are calm and completely attentive to the present moment. It can come in moments where we are in awe of the universe or in moments of stillness when we are aware of only the stillness and nothing else.

Comments and discussion:

It is a wonderful thing to give and not expect anything. To be content with what you have is really the essence of feeling abundance. Sometimes we worry that if we just give others might take advantage of us. But that is only the small ego within us that is making those calculations. When we give we feel generous and a space opens up within ourselves, and it always makes us feel better even if we have misgivings beforehand. But it is important to not expect anything. Sometimes we trick ourselves into thinking that we are just giving while we are really doing it with the hope that if we give without expectation then we will receive.

Thay (Thich Nhat Hanh) has recently retranslated the Heart Sutra. He explains why he translated again, on the Plum Village website, and it is highly recommended reading. He calls the Heart Sutra as the teaching that contains the highest vision of the Buddha. It says

“this Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.

“Listen Sariputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being...”

This seems to be exactly what Tolle is trying to explain, when he talks about the awareness of space.

Reading 5. (12/3/2014)

In Chapter 9 Tolle talks about finding our purpose. Now that we have awakened and learned how to live without getting lost in the illusory ego-centered existence, what do we do with our life? He says that by awakening, we have already reached our primary purpose in life. He calls that our inner purpose. What remains is to align our everyday life with that inner purpose. This is our outer purpose. The way to do it is to live in the moment, to focus on whatever we are doing at the moment. Our outer purpose is whatever we are doing at the moment. If we stay awake and stay conscious of our inner purpose, then this outer purpose will naturally align itself with it, and lead us into actions that benefit the world. He describes how he was led to abandon his promising academic career once he awakened to his inner purpose and how he followed his impulse to go to the US and write “The Power of Now.” It was not something he planned and worked on for a long time but something that just arose naturally out of his efforts to live in the moment.

In the final chapter he concludes with a profound meditation about the nature of life itself, and how we can live in alignment with the flow of life, the universal consciousness. He believes that all of life and the universe itself follow the pattern of manifestation, growth and contraction followed by transformation to another form. All three aspects of life carry within them opportunities to awaken and live in harmony with our inner purpose, one with the cosmic consciousness that he believes is nothing other than God. The way to do that is to first accept the moment as it is, then start enjoying it and finally live with enthusiasm. By accepting life as it is and not fighting it we make it possible for us to enjoy it. Once our enjoyment is connected to a goal it creates enthusiasm.

Comments and discussion:

The difficult part in living an awakened life is in dealing with everyday situations. How do you keep from judging others and not reacting when they are acting “unconsciously,” i.e., out of ego? The important thing is to be able to step back and simply observe what is going on before acting. When we can do that, and realize that we are more than our ego as are others, it creates a spaciousness inside, a generosity of spirit and big heartedness that in turn softens the reaction of others and causes them to pause and become more aware.

In life we often have goals based on what we think we should achieve to gain a certain status in society. This is purpose born out of ego and it causes stress and pain when those goals are not achieved. Living in the moment and accepting life as it is makes it possible to find one’s purpose without being deceived by illusions of grandeur. Somehow things start falling into place. As long as we are aligned with our inner purpose and conscious of the inner being our life is a success.