Living in a Four-dimensional World

One of the best pieces of advice I’ve ever heared was the ever-popular “be here now.” It’s not a new piece of advice. Baba Ram Dass wrote a book by that name back in the sixties. Thousands of spiritual masters have pronounced this advice over the millennia. Generally speaking, like many kinds of advice, it’s a good idea if not applied too broadly.

Lately, though, the idea has been recycled as a spiritual path and has gained a lot of traction, like many pop-psychology fads that come and go.

The reason this advice is so popular is because it advocates a form of voluntary ignorance. The past, because it was a trial-and-error learning experience, is often full of mistakes and bad things that we’d rather forget. The future, because, as far as we can ever know, is unknowable, and is often a scary place. It’s better to pull your hood over your head and ignore the past and future.

Most of the spiritual advice about living in the now is about detachment. Detach yourself from your past and future. You can’t do anything about the past, and it’s only an illusion anyway, so try to forget it. As for the future, que sera sera, as the song goes – what will be will be, so forget about it. Dwell only in the present moment, and you will experience a joy and peace that can be called enlightenment.

It’s always good, if you’re a messianic figure, to give advice that is only one step ahead of your audience. Set the behavioural bar too high, and people will turn off. Give them something easy enough, and they will beat a path to your door. Promise them easy rewards, and the money will pour in.

I recommend living in the now. I certainly do not recommend ignoring the past and future. Coming to grips with reality is never an easy thing, but it’s a necessary part of life. In order to achieve Fun, you must accept and deal with the facts of your history – past, present and future. Sticking your head in the sand gives you nothing but a temporary relief, which, if you are miserable enough, you will mistake for peace and joy. In order to live entirely in the present, you have to ignore a large part of you. As the prophet says, you are not your mind.

Nonsense.

Of course you are your mind. You are not only your mind, but in the present, you are more your mind than anything else. To pretend that your mind – the part of you that experiences thought, emotions, sensory input and controls your body – is not you is irresponsible. Only by pretending that your spiritual self is divorced from the meat in which you live are you able to go “outside your mind.”

There is not, never has been, and never will be the slightest shred of evidence that you can go outside your mind. You can calm your mind, still your mind, ignore parts of your mind, shut down some of your conscious awareness, but it is your mind doing these things to itself. It’s possible to control the mind, or at least guide it, and the great spiritual traditions of the world are largely about maintaining the discipline of your mind, but there is no going outside of it. The joy and peace that you seek take place in your brain, not in some other dimension that you can only access through wilful stupidity.

I’ve written elsewhere about how I think of the fuzzy concept of a human soul. To me, your soul is the name we give to the fact that we seem to be more than the sum of our parts. There is an almost-indefinable spark within us that seems to set us apart from all other beings, animate or inanimate. What I do not believe is that such a thing is magic. God, spiritual dimensions, and divorce from your mentality are magic, and there is, in the world of truth, no such thing. Magic is a poetic truth, and should healthily be viewed as such.

Many people will tell me that their personal experiences don’t bear this out, that they have directly sensed magic in the world on many occasions. They are right, but not wholly right. We all have a brain hemisphere which acts with intuition rather than pure logic, and can create and experience reality through the medium of our selves – body and mind – without recourse to apparent calculation. I’ve had a strong right hemisphere all my life, and have always felt an affinity toward the spiritual, but I also have a very insistent left hemisphere, which insists that things make sense and be verifiable. I have had to learn to reconcile these two things in my life, in order to have peace. As far as growing up goes, it was not the hardest part of my life. Not even close.

My views on poetic and literal truth solve the problem for me. Poetic truth need not make sense from a logical point of view, but it doesn’t have to be confused with logical truth. One is one and the other is another.

I need to talk more here about your brain; a lot of the living in the now stuff can be understood from the point of view of brain physiognomy. I know that isn’t romantic, but that’s because most people just don’t have respect for the amazing complexity, virtual impossibility, of the human machine. I am in awe of the wizardry of myself. I don’t need magic to explain it. It is possible for the right-brain world to be in awe of science without completely understanding it.

In most people, language primarily takes place in the left, more logical hemisphere of the brain. About 16% of humans have their primary language centers in the right side of the brain, which is more holistic and intuitive, but most people are left-brain dominant, meaning that the controlling behaviours of the brain take place in the logical side, and are deeply intertwined with the “wordiness” of our brains. Language is not just a useful thing we learn how to do to get mama to do stuff for us. It’s built in to the fabulous complexity of our brains, and is one of the absolute prerequisites of life. Most of your thoughts are primarily word thoughts. That’s just part of what it means to be human. It is the great joy of my life that I can say “I love you” to the people who matter most.

To live in the now by detaching ourselves from our “minds” is really a process of learning to still the language centre of the brain, and allow the right-brain to take temporary control of ourselves. The flow of time from past through present to future is a logical construct, deeply bound up with words, and if we can go beyond logic and words, we can live for a while in the right-brain. Supposedly this leads to great joy and peace, but I’m sceptical for many reasons. If it were true, then every person who was extremely dominant on the right would be happy and all the time. I know this to be untrue.

Still, I can definitely see the value in using both sides of your brain. Your intuitive, holistic side, which functions in a less-wordy world, can be a source of great strength. Just don’t try to live there all the time. It’s a nice world to visit, but not a great place to live all the time. You do have a life in a difficult world to deal with, and often people who are right-brain dominant have a hard time coping with it.

Unless they’re messianic figures, of course. People who for some reason have learned to live in the right side of their minds sometimes find relative peace there, because their wordy lives have become untenable. They then assume they have achieved some mystical plane, when in reality they have decided to use only half their brains. If they have delusions of importance and grandiosity, they believe they have experienced enlightenment, and write books about it, and go on lecture tours. I say this as a bona-fide bipolar man, who has experienced all of the above sensations more than once. Luckily my mood swings have always tended to be short-lived, so that I’ve never been able to attempt to capitalize on my “enlightenment.” I’m not making this up – I’m speaking from real experience.

Of course, when you’re trying to teach people to live in the unused parts of their brains, it isn’t important to make much sense, or to root what you say in reality. If your audience does learn to live, however temporarily, in their right-brains, they’re not feeling particularly wordy anyway, and you don’t need logic on your side. And since most people are fairly desperate to believe that there is a god, or that they have a soul, or that there is a spiritual dimension that cannot be directly sensed, by placing this new behaviour of their brains outside themselves (in other words, “you are not your mind”), you give them what they came for: psychological comfort.

To reiterate, in case I’ve lost you, living in the now and not being your mind are simply descriptions of the ability of the disciplined mind to work outside of the left sphere. It still takes place in the trillion connections of your brain. There is no magic involved. The magic is that it’s all real, in spite of how unlikely and impossible it seems.

For me, the great weakness of the “live in the now” advice is that it’s wrong. Sorry, I couldn’t resist that. What I should have said is “I humbly submit that it’s tragically mistake on many levels, several of which I am going to attempt to elucidate for your mental mastication.”

By definition you live in the here and now, and that’s the only way it can be. Your thoughts may metaphorically take you to the past and future, and depending on how your present reflects your history and your prospects, this can either be a good thing or not. If your future is not great, for instance, ignoring it is not only practically impossible but dangerous. Look at it this way. You live in a world where the air is full of pollution, allergens, rude noises and people expelling bacteria and viruses into your space. It would seem, therefore, to be a good idea to live without these things. We would be healthier without pollution and noise. So go ahead and stop breathing.

Your mind is the same. See how long you can mentally hold your breath before reality makes it impossible. In order to stay alive, we have to breathe, and take the bad with the good. In order to deal with pollution, allergens, microbes and noise, we have to discipline our physical and mental immune systems. You don’t do that by hiding – you do that with exercise. You don’t need to ignore the past, you need to deal with it from a position of strength. Your mental immune system can be exercised in many different ways: meditation and sex for example. If these things prove impossible due to organic problems, drugs (legal ones) may be in order. If your mind is fully functional, there are two methods that I know of which will aid your mental immune system. They are the Living in the Fun method and the I Don’t Care method.

If you Live in the Fun, you will experience the peace and joy of right-living without sacrificing your left-brain. If everything you do reflects your belief in and ambition towards Fun, you will have fun (which may manifest itself as peace or joy, or many other Aspects, which makes it much more varied and interesting than relative blankness).

If you use the I Don’t Care method, you will, by repeated use of the mantra at appropriate times, discover that you don’t care about things which aren’t worth caring about. You will never never NEVER stop caring completely about the past, but you can stop caring so much about it. You can stop caring what people will think about you deciding to wear socks with sandals.

I have almost nothing in my past but bad memories. I’ve done terrible things, and been a terrible person, and often I have to deal with memories using the I Don’t Care method. It’s a lie, of course – I always care a bit. But using it means I can pick up those memories, turn them over, examine them and learn from my mistakes. At the same time that I admit to myself that I have done karmically incorrect things, I can usually convince myself that that version of Adam is long-gone. Sometimes I am tortured by bad memories, it’s true. But even people who claim to live in the now have the same problem; they just try to hold their mental breath, until they turn mentally blue, and can’t hold out any longer. Then they still have to deal with those memories, and now they have to deal with their failure too. A very lucky few will succeed at living in the now exclusively, and become boring.

The same goes for the future. If you direct your life at Fun, you will do the right things, and produce good memories, which when the future becomes the past you will ENJOY dealing with. You won’t have to hide from them. If your future is a bad place for you, and there is nothing you can do about it, then by all means, live in the now. Most of us don’t live in such a terrible place, and we can look at the future with Hope, one of the Great Aspects of Fun. If you can’t have everything you want, then want smarter things, and tell yourself that you don’t care for those things. You don’t need the Ferrari, or the 98-room house in the Hamptons, wherever that is.

Living in the now is only part of your life. Doing it exclusively is kind of like deciding that it’s better to live on a sheet of paper, flat and white and uniform, two-dimensional and boring. The purity and cleanliness of a fresh sheet of paper is beautiful, but paper is meant to be drawn on, or written on, or made into paper airplanes and thrown off tall buildings. You need a three-dimensional world, with a fourth dimension of time, to make your life interesting. Time is really a name we give to the process of change. A life without change, in which every moment was just the now, and never the then, would be a stale life indeed. The idea that you can exist outside your mind is silly, but the idea that you should exist in a one or two-dimensional world is downright immoral.

Let’s go with the paper metaphor, but this time we’ll allow the paper to have been used. The past and future are the horizons of our life. Would you rather live on a map than the world it portrays? Would you rather live in a place where trees and mountains and oceans are just drawn on? Would you rather live in an unchanging watercolour world? The paper is still flat, and the world it portrays is still an illusion, and therefore boring. Things are not flat. To experience every drop of joy we can from viewing trees and mountains, we must live in the four-dimensional world. We must embrace it completely, warts and farts and all.

I can’t see a horizon without wanting to go there. And when I get there, there is always another horizon. I will never run out of things to do, or places to go, or people to see. For some people, who wish to control the world, the fact that there is always another horizon beyond becomes a source of pain. That pain is not best mitigated by putting your head in the sand, and pretending you won’t think about it. It’s dealt with by changing your thought pattern about that horizon. Horizons are fun, and Fun is always the best Goal In Life. The mystery of the horizon is one of the real mysteries of life. Who needs mystical planes beyond the world? The mystical plane is right over there.

Ah, I hear you say, gotcha. What if you live in a crowded, dirty world, where drugs and crime are rampant, where people don’t say hello on the street and where death lurks around every corner?

You leave, if you don’t like it. Or you say, this place is not fun, but in the name of Fun I will make it fun. In the meantime, I will refuse to care too much about things over which I have no power. The Serenity prayer may be an annoying cliché, but it got to be that for a reason – it makes sense. Change the things you can: clean up the world, say hello to people on the street, and know that death lurks everywhere, but don’t care too much about it.

You have right to live in Flatland if you prefer. I just hope you won’t attempt to impose it on your children. They have the right to grow up embracing their lives, not rejecting their lives, and children live in the future. They look forward to each birthday, to growing bigger and smarter, to being men and women. Time takes a long time for them, who live in a natural state. Wanting the future to be here is normal. Every child compares his or her age and size with the others. Even as adults, our status and place in the world are partially determined by these factors. It’s built into us, and to be the best us, we have to maximize the true cores of our selves.

The past is just that; what has gone past. We can’t go back to the horizon behind us. But we can remember it, and use it. If it’s a good place, we can use the lessons we’ve learned. If it’s a bad place, we can use the lessons we’ve learned. The great philosopher George Santayana most famously said “Those who cannot remember the past, are doomed to repeat it.” The line is misquoted frequently, but the meaning is always clear. It stands on its own. Forgetting the past is a recipe for disaster, and an amputation of an important mental faculty. Would you cut off your hand because it did something wrong? Do you blind yourself because you don’t like the colour grey?

I think I would find living in the now all the time boring. Maybe you like being bored. Maybe you’d rather look at a TV and wish the screen was blank. When I look at a TV, I want to learn something, to go somewhere, to find that new horizon. I almost never watch comedies or dramas – I want to be amazed, educated and improved. No matter how many steps I take toward the horizon, it will always be there for my adoration.

But there’s more to the past and future than that. There’s substance and meaning there. The past means something to us, and not just as a learning experience. My people, the Jews on one hand and the English on the other, both have powerful senses of history, because it’s deeply satisfying to understand that you are part of it. I have ancestors who existed in the earliest dawn of life, and I am the last in an unbroken change. I carry the memory of those animals and people in every cell of my brain and body. The Temple of Solomon was built by me and Stonehenge was raised by me. I will fly to Mars, cure hunger and disease, and leave a legacy of Fun, one way or another. I am not an island, I’m part of an unbroken chain that started with the big bang, and will go on forever. Mystery upon mystery!

That’s a line from Lao Tzu – the author of the Tao Te Ching, a book written millennia ago, and somehow to me more relevant than the living in the now stuff. The way that can be named is not the way. As soon as you define what something is, you have limited it and subjected yourself to those limitations. I have a certain methodology for living, and I think of myself as enlightened, but the day I cannot adapt and change that method is the day I fall off a high cliff. To be adaptable and agile in life you must be aware of the real world. You cannot close your eyes and adapt to what you cannot see. You cannot learn under an emotional and intellectual anaesthetic.

Trying to forget the past and future is like trying to forget that there’s a thorn in your foot. There are two ways of dealing with the pain: try to forget the pain or going to the source and removing the thorn. If the thorn is impossible to remove, by all means seek the anaesthetic. That is not normally the case. Deal with the cause, not the result. If you don’t deal with suffering, the NOW of pain becomes the FUTURE of pain. You might spend the rest of your life trying to escape it. That’s a lot of work for very little reward.

Enlightenment, joy and peace are not an exclusive club. Anyone can join. To claim that all enlightenment starts in the same place or goes in the same direction is most unenlightened. My path to peace and joy, or my enlightenment, in other words, takes the path of full consciousness and mindfulness of the world around me. There is great joy to be had in reality, if you look for it, and it’s a far more natural and healthy experience than trying to learn not to use half of what you are. You ARE your mind. Your life is here and now, but where you were and will be in time and space are as much part of you as here and now are you. To live a four-dimensional life, you have to embrace it all, or you aren’t even embracing yourself.

I have one final argument. Indulge me.

You are not only you. You are your species. You have a responsibility – Fun is a responsible process. Hiding may feel good, but it’s a selfish kind of good. You don’t have to feel my pain, but you have to do something about it. To live in the now is to accept my pain as inevitable, as simply a part of a world we can’t really do anything about. Living in the now means abdicating your responsibility and pretending that the pain will somehow take care of itself.

If there was going to be a messianic age of universal consciousness it would have happened already. If there were any easy answers we’d have them already. We still live in a world of famine, disease and war. If you really want to live in the now, experience that! Take the good with the bad, if you’re so smart. It’ll take you decades of work to achieve living in the now, or you’ll just be fooling yourself with your escapism, and the magical world that you’ve been promised will turn out to be yet another illusion. Millions will live and die in misery while you contemplate your navel.

Good luck with that, and be prepared to die with no credits in your Karmic Bank Account.