

Being Present

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



We have been strongly encouraged by spiritual visionaries and social scientists to focus our attention on the here-and-now. Similar to most ancient definitions, the word *presentis* treated mostly as a verb denoting action, and not a noun. An old definition of the word *present* is “being at hand, not absent”. We can translate “being at hand” to “being present”. Before exploring why being present receives such a significant endorsement by so many theorists, let’s look at why it is so popular to avoid being present. Such a consideration may help to minimizing seeing ourselves as spiritual failures because of some predisposition to not being present.

Hazards of Being Present

Being present means that in some way we are uniting with what greets us in the here and now. It would be excessively naïve to imagine that being present is simply an emotionally satisfying and fulfilling experience. We learn early that the present may have hidden threats and dangers yet to be realized. We have been shamed, ridiculed and excluded in the present. In fact, being present holds more potential of harm than being in the past or the future. Certainly, we can experience some post-traumatic fallout from past injuries, even though the actual event is not taking place now. Although we worry and lament over a possible future incident, that event has not yet occurred. It is being present that offers a myriad of possibilities, from being warmly acknowledged and

loved, to being impacted by disdain and injury. We have also noticed that being present is often greeted by an undoing of our best efforts to remain in control. Rather than face the loss of power awaiting us in the present, we often prefer illusions of power to be found in the past and the future.

Preoccupied With the Past

Focusing on being in the past offers an attractive escape from the unpredictability of being present. With our memories in full control, we are liberated from feeling the burden of an unpredictable loss of power while being present. We can step away from being responsible for how we feel about ourselves now. Attached to reminiscing about past achievements and victories can massage a self-worth currently experienced as more tentative. Attaining insufficient closure with meaningful relationships and past experiences allows us to avoid the challenge of creating new meaning now.

What is the most fulfilling way we can be in the past? Certainly, a connection to what has ended that frees us to be present is preferable. Such a connection would be woven with gratitude, curiosity and possibly sorrow for what was lost. Visiting the past is like visiting a friend. The encounter is meant to be time sensitive, rather than acquiring a new address. Gratitude helps to make peace with the life we were given. It is such a peace that provides an opening to what’s next. An old definition of the word curious is “full of care”.

When we are curious about our past experience, we bring care and an interest to it. We hold what happened in the past with regard, suggesting it is a carrier of information helping us to bring stewardship to being present. When a loss is heavily accompanied by grief, we can schedule 10 minutes per day to honor what was lost, remaining aware of not allowing the loss to usurp our ability to be present.

Fascinated With the Future

Anchoring our attention toward the future offers several desirable escape routes from being present. It is only too easy to take up residency in visioning, allowing for preferred imaginary realities. The future holds a special seduction when we ascribe some alleged potency to our plans and strategies aimed at generating success and happiness.

Infusing a supposed power to our plans easily eclipses what it means to simply prepare. There's also the wonder and magic of worrying. We often complain about how much agonizing we do when facing the uncertainty of future events. However, worrying is also imbued with illusions of control. "I'm not sitting being present, and doing nothing, I'm worrying!" Letting go of the magic of our plans and our worrying means learning to surrender to the mystery of the future, knowing only that whatever happens, there will be opportunity for us to be present with it.

Letting Go of the Past and the Future

Being present mostly means letting go of our attachment to the past and to the future as warranting much of our focus. We can employ several ways of looking at the present that support our understanding of it as a verb, or being present.

- **Being bodily.** Being present is mostly a bodily experience. It means we are aware of having a body that occupies some particular space at some specific time. One old definition of the word *present* is "in this place". We can think of our bodies being in a particular place in two ways, *instinctively* or *mindfully*. *The first happens when we are either instinctive active or instinctively emotional.* One expression of instinctively being in this place is the expression of deep emotion,

grief, fear, sadness or anger. I think athletes, actors or performers are often instinctively being present. Their actions are driven by instinct and not mindfulness. Although, it is important to note that their instinctive presence does reflect some intention that they simply are not aware of in the moment. Instinctive presence can be malevolent causing harm and destruction. When that happens, increased mindfulness is advised. *The second way we can become bodily is by being mindful of our bodies.* We can notice internal sensations like a tight jaw, a pounding forehead, jittery limbs, a bloated abdominal area or shallow breathing. We can also be mindful of the different places in our bodies that are containing emotional energies. Possibilities include fear in the stomach, anger in the jaw and sadness in the chest.

- **Pace.** Maintaining stillness or moving slowly helps keep us in a certain place. Speed tends to usher us into the next moment. Moving fast, even talking fast, is a way to be in the future. Of course, swift movement typically gets praised as productive, easily obstructing our efforts at being present. Slowness allows for our energetic field to remain closer to our centers of gravity, approximately two inches below the navel. When centered in that way, we can bring more mindfulness to our emotions and our intentions. We are able to use language rather than acting impetuously. We lower the likelihood of acting in some hurtful way, resulting in regret. We then need to employ a series of justifications and rationalizations in order to redeem our behavior. Moving slowly takes courage, since there is some loss, some confusion, some defeat, some fear waiting there in the moment. How seductive the illusion is that we can out-run what we don't want to face or feel.
- **Attention.** An old definition of the word *attention* is "to listen closely". As mentioned above, our attention can be focused toward the inner world or toward the outer world. When we offer attention to the external world, we are experiencing something happening in the immediate environment with a minimum amount of distraction. When such attention has quality, we can say that some measure of

attunement is taking place. We are adjusting our listening skills in order to take in the feelings, beliefs or values we are witnessing. When attunement is sharpened, our listening is minimally burdened by our own biases.

Benefits of Being Present

Being present means our bodies are in a particular place, slow moving and attending to either our internal or external experience. We've looked at the hazards of being present. Now, let's explore the benefits.

- **We are more available to being informed.** Receiving more information or knowledge is a great benefit of being present. This means that we come to actually hold the faith that the here and now can be an effective conduit for deepening our understanding of life and ourselves. However, when the future is glamorized, it can be very challenging to believe that the present would have some valuable offering.
- **We have a greater capacity to bring discernment to our decisions.** Because we are still, being touched and moved by our experience and having the time to explore our reactions, we limit acting prematurely. Pausing enhances discernment by allowing our perceptions greater acuity and our decisions more consideration.
- **We can exercise some measure of control over our lives.** Having some degree of control over our choices and decision only happens when we are being present in some particular place.
- **We are more available to love and be loved.** Love can only reach us when we are being present,

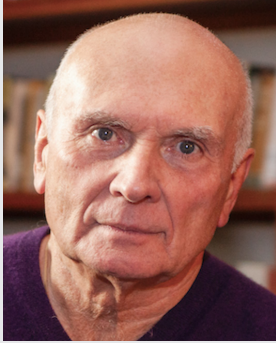
and we can only offer love when being present. A topic for further examination is how it is that being loved becomes such a motivation for not being present.

- **We are more prepared to support our safety when necessary.** The ego's natural tendency is to either go to the past or future in order to acquire safety. Unfortunately, neither of those can operate as an authentic resource for safety when it's needed. One of the first lessons in any fundamental martial arts class is how to remain grounded and stay balanced, since falling is what is to be avoided at all costs when sparring. Acquiring balance and being grounded as well as being able to flee or fight can only happen when we're being present.

How to be present is not something we ultimately figure out. We become familiar with it because of a commitment to remain its apprentice. In our apprenticeship, we will experience not being present again, again and again. This is not an unfortunate failure.

It is the way of real development, which takes place in the context of polarity. We learn about being present by being able to recognize when we're not present. The process is no different than the development that takes place in all polarities. We come to know freedom because of our experience of bondage, fulfillment because of knowing emptiness, being welcomed because we know what it means to be forgotten or compassion because of issuing or receiving disdain. The only thing that matters is our compassionate commitment to the apprenticeship, not a striving toward some idyllic state of always being present.

SELECTED READINGS



PAUL DUNION earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.



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