

Chapter 11

Your point of power is in the *present* moment.

I 've got one foot in yesterday and one foot in tomorrow and I'm pissing all over today! That's what a friend of mine once told me he heard in an AA meeting. He also told me how true that was for him. In fact, it's true for most of us because almost all of us at least in our heads, tend to live either too much in the past or too much in the future...but not enough in the present. I know I've spent way too much time living in the past—reliving old experiences trying in vain to somehow make them come out differently or revisiting old decisions thinking, I suppose, that my reconsidering them will somehow change things. It never has, though, and it never will.

The fact is neither you nor I have any power over the past nor have we power *in* the past. About all we can do (and it is a mighty thing to do indeed) is learn from the past and use this learning to transform our present experience in accordance with Law #10: *All things can work to the good*. Notice, though, the point in time in which our learning from the past or transforming our current experience happens. They both happen, if we make them happen, in the present.

In addition to being powerless over your past, you also have no power over the future or power *in* the future. The future, by definition, hasn't happened yet. It is the one time phase of the three (past, present, future) in which you have never lived. You can plan for it and it is smart to do so. You can also do your best to create the future you want to unfold and that is a wise endeavor. Notice, again, at what point in time you do this planning or creating. You do it, if you do it, in the present.

So, whether you are trying to learn from your past so you can transform your life today or are planning for and attempting to create a better future for yourself tomorrow you are doing all these activities in the present. The present moment is the only point in time in which you can act. It is the only point in time in which you can take control of your behavior and it is the moment in which your taking responsibility for your life makes the most difference. Why? Because you have no power over or in the past or the future. You cannot undo things already done and you cannot do things yet to be done. You can only do in the NOW. Right now. Your power lies in this moment--*this* minute of *this* hour, not in the last or the next. Within this current minute, your power is in *this second*, not the ones preceding it or following it.

Here is a mental picture that might help. Imagine that your power is like the finely honed tip of a chisel. Imagine holding a wedge-shaped chisel with the tip pointed upward and the two wide slanting faces of the chisel to the left and right. The left face of the chisel represents your past. No part of that face actually cuts the wood when the chisel is used. That "past" face of the chisel supports the tip where all the action can take place but it, itself, isn't where the real work happens. Similarly, the right face of the chisel represents your



“future”. Like the “past” face, the “future” face of the chisel is not where the action is and no work happens there—it only helps support the chisel tip.

It is the tiny, sharp chisel tip where all the real action takes place and where any work can be done with the chisel. That point, that tip of the chisel is its point of power—all concentrated in that very narrow, honed edge. This fine edge is like your present moment. It is very narrow in terms of length of time yet it is the only time in your life when you can actually do any work and in which you can make any difference.

The “past” and “future” faces of the chisel support the “present” tip just like your past and future relate to your present moment. This moment, this second is where all your potential lies. Remember Law # 3: *What you focus on grows*. Focus your desire, your energy, and your plans within that chisel-tip moment that is now and take some action. Do something to advance yourself forward toward what you want to see more of in your life. Your power is in the present moment—your potential to change what you want to change lies only in this moment. This moment is the cutting edge you can use to shape the life you want, piece by tiny piece. But you must act in this moment or nothing will happen and nothing will change. And in this very moment what are you doing? You are reading a chapter about changing your life in a book about the basic laws of life. Hopefully, you are learning new things and being encouraged. This is a fantastic use of your present moment! It is helping you develop a greater *potential* for using the moments when you are not reading this book to make your life what you want it to be.

I have used the word “potential” several times and it is a good idea to stop for a bit and learn more about that word. Philosophers have made a distinction between the concepts of “potency” and “act”. “Potency” or “potential” comes from the Latin word “potens” which means “power”. To say that something has “potential” is to say that it possesses some power to do something but that it is *not* actually doing anything right now...or, at least, not at the level of its maximum power or “potential”. “Potential” is the opposite of the concept of “act”. “Act” is from another Latin word, “actus” which means, not surprisingly, “action”—current movement, live accomplishment, things going on right now. Think about the chisel example again. If the chisel is lying in the toolbox it is just a tool that is doing nothing—it has *potential* but since no one is using it, it is not *acting*. If you pick it up and start using the honed edge to cut or shape something, however, then the chisel is “acting” or, much truer, you are really acting by using it to “act” upon the surface you are cutting. As the chisel “acts” in your hands, it is fulfilling its “potential”—its power to act. Or, even more accurately, *you* are fulfilling *your* potential to some degree by your picking up the chisel and using it to perform some act of cutting or carving.

Neither your past nor your future have, within themselves, any “potential” or ability to “act”. They cannot possess these because past and future are just phases of time. Additionally, as we have seen, you have no potential or ability to act in the past and while you may think you have potential and some capacity to act in the future, that is just an illusion. Disagree? OK, go ahead and try doing something in the future to realize your future potential. Are you having trouble acting in the future? I would imagine so because you cannot act in the future or fulfill any of your potential in the future. You can only act

in the *present* and fulfill your *present* potential. Your present moment is (or can be) pure “act”—the one time in your life when you can actually (pun intended) focus the honed edge of your action on something and make a difference. For the chisel and for you, your point of power is in the finely honed edge of the present moment.

You may be agreeing with most of what you’ve read so far and may think “well, that’s pretty obvious stuff, just live in the present.” But do you? Do most of us? Actually, not nearly as much as we could. Why is it so hard to live in this moment instead of dwelling on the past or the future? One important reason is that we have loads of distractions. Hardly a second of our lives is not filled with some noise or moving media image. We get so used to all the static that we don’t even notice it anymore but the constant din of TVs that never seem to be turned off, radios, dreadful music in public places and so on drowns out our awareness of the now. It is tough to be in the present when we are so distracted. Another reason it is hard for so many of us to live in the present moment is that we simply lack the skills needed to quiet and center ourselves enough to even notice that the present moment is, well, present. We are also busy, we say to ourselves, yet most of us are caught up in what Steven Covey called “the thick of thin things”—busy about things that don’t really matter in the long run.

One of the last reasons, I think, that it is so dreadfully hard for us to live and act in the present moment is that it is so hard to “see”. Imagine a very long tape measure that could measure time. All the years you have lived in the past are on the left of the present moment and stretch back a long way. All the years you may live are on the right of the present and stretch forward a long distance. The present, though, is this tiny slice in the middle. In terms of a tape measure it may only be 1/32 of an inch compared to all the many feet (or miles) the past measures and all the distance the future measures. The overwhelming distances measured by the past and the future can make focusing on this tiny present moment pretty difficult.

You would have the same experience if you took the sharpened chisel, from an earlier example, and looked down on the razor sharp blade from directly above it. If it is very sharp you might not even be able to see the blade edge. You could see the left face of the chisel (what I said stood for the past) and the right face (what I said stood for the future) but seeing the very tiny chisel cutting edge would be very difficult. You would also have the same kind of experience looking at photos from space of Mt. Everest. The flanks of the mountain are clearly visible, even from space, but looking down on the immense mountain and seeing the relatively tiny summit tip would be extremely difficult. That is because the tip of the mountain, the tip of the chisel, and the tip of time that is the present moment are all so very small compared to what lies on both sides of each. So, naturally, we see the mountainsides, the chisel faces, and the future and past much easier and we then tend to focus on them at the expense of focusing on the tiny point in between—the present. Since what we know that what we focus on grows, is it any surprise that in our minds the past and future expand and help crowd out our attention to the present? Not really.

Given this very human tendency to focus more on the past and future and since the present (even though that is where our power lies) is so tough to "see" what are we to do? Let me ask you to do an experiment before I suggest a solution. After you read this sentence and reach the period at the end of it, I would like to ask you to stop reading and hold your breath for as long as you can. If you didn't hold your breath because you think you don't need to do this I strongly suggest that you do it because what I am about to say will be lost on you if you don't experience the effects of breath-holding—so please do it now. In the first few seconds of holding your breath there was no problem. You might have even thought, "oh, this is silly" or "I can do this for a long time, no big deal, why is he asking me to do this anyway?" You might have even had thoughts about what you had for breakfast or noticed some dusting that needs to be done on a table across the room. You might have had a thought or two about some recent past event/s or some event you are planning in an hour or so. Very, very soon, however, you stopped thinking about the past or future and started feeling a deep desire to breathe. You might have felt a little lightheaded or a burning sensation in your lungs as your need for a breath increased faster and faster. No longer were you anywhere but in the present moment and that moment was one that was a bit uncomfortable. Notice how feeling the acute need for something as basic as oxygen brought you quickly to the very second you were in, the very tiny moment that was the present for you.

This link between breath and rooting ourselves in the present moment (the only moment where our power lies) is a very old one. Eastern and then, later, Western spiritual traditions dating back thousands of years have attempted to help humans center themselves in the present moment so that they could experience life, insight, or God more fully. You will not get far reading anything about Eastern spiritualities without learning about the importance of being aware of the present moment and techniques used to help one become more "present" in the moment that is now. Western spiritualities, especially the Christian monastic traditions that started in the Middle Eastern deserts shortly after the beginnings of Christianity, picked up on the truths taught by the earlier Eastern spiritual traditions and adopted them.

One of the simple truths both traditions share is an understanding that our breathing can help root us in the present moment. Most of us don't think much about breathing. In our bodies, breathing is automatic and, in fact, breathing along with heart rate, are controlled by the autonomic nervous system. "Autonomic" means "self-law" or "ruled by itself". That is, our breathing and heart rate are ruled by a self-controlled portion of our nervous system to ensure that these functions keep going...and keep us going. Breathing, then, is automatic and we don't think much about it at all until we do something like hold our breath or are deprived of breathing. Then we REALLY think about it alot! Breathing is no longer taken for granted, ignored, unappreciated, etc. Taking a breath becomes the one and only thing we crave to do and we want to do it now (in this very second—the present moment). We do not have to deprive ourselves of air to experience the present moment, however, and that is certainly not what past traditions are suggesting. I had suggested it only as an experiment to help you see the power of breath. What the past spiritual traditions are suggesting is that we use our regular, automatic breathing to become aware of the present moment and experience it.

Breath is life. You felt that pretty strongly a few minutes ago when you stopped breathing, didn't you? In the Old Testament shared by both Jewish and Christian faiths, God gives what the book of Genesis called the first man, "Adam", life by...breathing into him. If you continue reading the Bible, you will see many references to "breath" as representative of life or inspiration (a word that literally means, "to breath in"). Breath and life, then, are basically the same thing—you can't have one without the other. In order to root yourself in the present moment, then, you will need to focus on your breath. This does not mean you need to take over from the autonomic nervous system and then start breathing in a controlled or special way. Focusing on breath simply means noticing it (something we usually don't do) and experiencing it as it happens. As we start to notice our natural breathing and become very aware of it we are pulled into the present moment in which that breathing is happening. The more we become aware of the present and the more we focus on it, the more it expands and grows in our minds. As the present moment grows, it crowds out our excessive thoughts about the powerless past and future and our minds become quiet and settled in the present. Continuing to allow our normal breathing to help us focus on the now moment creates space for much greater awareness to grow. More awareness of our "now" allows quiet insights to come up that previously were drowned out by internal and external noise and by our previous preoccupation with the past and future. These insights often provide us with direction, ideas, and much greater clarity about what we can do to make powerful changes in our lives. This quieting also deeply roots us in the wisdom that has always lain within us like a deep, subterranean oil reserve waiting to be tapped. We tap that reserve of wisdom as we become still and deeply aware of our present moment—the only time in which our power lies.

Grounding ourselves in the present moment by becoming aware of our normal breathing helps us to stop all the reactivity, irritation, and frustration that characterizes our behavior and previous approach to life. Awareness of the present moment allows us to *respond* rather than *react*. "Response" means that I choose my behavior. "React" means that I act without thinking. Which way of behaving do you think will help you create the life you want? When you react it means that you are allowing external events, situations, and other people's behavior to determine yours. Like a knee-jerk reflex you are just re-acting to what has been presented to you by these events, situations, and people. Do you really want your behavior to be determined by these external forces? You have another, healthier option: response. Response means that no matter what happens to you or what other people do, you get to *choose* how you will act in return. Responding means that you take up your power and use it by choosing what you will say and do. How can you strengthen your tendency to respond rather than react? Spend regular time (even if only 60 seconds several times a day) becoming quiet, aware of your breathing, and so rooted in the present moment where your power to act and to choose lies.

Let's sum up what we have learned so far. First your power to make any change in your life lies only in the present moment. Second, you cannot lay hold of that power until you become aware of and completely conscious of the present moment in which that power lies. Third, achieving this deep consciousness/awareness of the present occurs most

easily through paying attention to the natural rising and falling of your normal breathing and allowing it to root you in the present.

Since awareness of your breathing is the doorway to consciousness of the present and, as a result, enables you to grasp your power to choose responses that move you forward, it's a good idea to learn some specific techniques of breath-awareness. You can do your own research about this and, if you do, search on the topic "mindfulness meditation". There is a great deal of information available about this in books and on the internet. Learning more about mindfulness meditation and, especially, practicing it will help you immensely. Here are some basic breath awareness steps I suggest:

1. Turn off all external and extraneous "noise" generated by TVs, radios, sound systems of any type, phones, etc. You cannot "tune in" to the present if you are barraged by external noise.
2. Sit in a comfortable chair with both feet on the floor, your hands in your lap, and your back resting straight against the back of your chair.
3. Close your eyes and take several deep breaths. Hold each for a moment and then slowly release each. These deep breaths will be under your control (later ones will just occur naturally) and will help you oxygenate your blood, relax, and signal your mind that it is time to settle down and let go.
4. After you have taken your several deep breaths and released them, allow your breathing to return to normal without any attempt to control it.
5. Begin to notice your natural breathing without changing it in any way. Just notice how it rises and falls. If it helps, as you are beginning the practice of breath awareness, you can imagine yourself floating on a small raft on a very warm and safe sea. As your breath rises, imagine that you and your raft are gently lifted by a warm wave passing underneath. As your breath falls, imagine that you and your raft move downward into the trough of the wave. Up and down, up and down, the warm sea waves gently carry you. Do not try to control the rising and falling of your breath—just become aware of it and let it do what it does, naturally.
6. You will quickly notice that as soon as you start to quiet your mind and notice your breathing little intrusive thoughts start to pop up. They may be small memories or things you want to do later or bits of conversations you had or something you heard recently. They could be anything. The best thing to do is not to fight them or attempt to swat them away like the flies they are but just to refocus on the rising and falling of you on your raft as each breath rises and falls. Return your mind to the gentle sensation of rising and falling. Focus on it and that sensation will grow in your mind and the little distractions will buzz away. More will always come, mind you, but do not allow them to take you away from your breath focus until you have completed the time you allowed for breath awareness.
7. I suggest that you start with only one or two minutes at a time, perhaps several times a day and then increase by one minute until you can get to at least five minutes at a sitting at least twice a day. Stay with this schedule for a week or so and then add another minute or two until you can get to 10 minutes twice a day. At that point you will begin to just start noticing the difference your breath awareness practice is making and how it is helping you root yourself in the present

moment. From then on I would suggest that you experiment with how long you can perform mindfulness meditation at each sitting and how often you feel it would be helpful to you each day. Create a schedule for yourself that works for your life. It is better to sit and become aware of the present for very short periods every day than to attempt sit for an hour and only do that once a month. Regular daily time spent in mindfulness meditation, no matter how short the period, is better than doing in only once a weekly or month.

Please notice, above, that I said I “suggest” these as steps to help you get started with becoming more aware of your breath and, as a result, more rooted in the present moment where your power lies. If any or all of these steps are not helpful to you, then don’t do them. Do whatever uniquely helps you become more rooted in the present. If, in your research about mindfulness meditation, you encounter any rigid rules or practices you are told you “have to” follow to achieve awareness of the present, keep looking. Rules, “oughts”, “musts”, “shoulds”, etc. are not helpful and will only wind up punishing your efforts or, at best, give you the feeling that somehow what you are trying to do is not good enough. Don’t let that kind of thing discourage you. Remember, you are not trying to satisfy someone else’s requirements. You are not completing some religious tradition’s steps for indoctrination nor acceptance into a monastery nor to achieve some degree of enlightenment required by them. You are a real person living a real life in a real and very noisy world who is trying, I think, to lay hold of your power to make positive changes in your life. By now you may have come to accept that this power of yours lies in the present moment and that, by becoming more aware of your present moment, you can take up this power more effectively. I have suggested breath awareness as a powerful doorway into your present moment but even that is merely a suggestion.

Whatever way you can use to root yourself in the “now” moment, do it. If breath awareness/mindfulness meditation helps, use it. If adapting the above steps or ones you may read about in your research helps, do it. If doing something totally different than suggested here or anywhere you read helps, do it. But, please, do not allow anyone else’s statements dictate what you need to do such that you feel you that you are not “doing it right” and give up. Do what works for you to help you access the present moment and let all the advice of others fall to the side if it is not encouraging or helpful to you. The goal, after all, is not to follow the advice of others perfectly, it is to become more rooted in the present and, by so doing, to experience the insight and the power that the present has for you. With new insight and by grasping your power you are then in a position to act to create more of what we want in your life and less of what you don’t want. You do this and can do this because you know that *your point of power is in the present moment*.