



Right Away is the Opposite of Now, by Jacob Needleman

Some years ago, I was walking downtown San Francisco with a great friend and a learned Tibetan scholar. I asked him about one of the most striking ways that the Tibetans express the uniqueness of the human condition. Imagine, they say, that deep in the vast ocean there swims a great and ancient turtle who surfaces for air once every hundred years. Imagine further that floating somewhere in the ocean is a single ox-yoke carried here and there by random waves and currents. What are the chances that when the turtle surfaces, his head will happen to emerge precisely through the center of the ox-yoke? That is how rare it is to be born as a human being!

In the middle of our conversation, I pointed to the crowds of men and women rushing by on the street and I gestured in a way to indicate not only them, but all the thousands and millions of people rushing around in the world. "Tell me, Lobsang," I said, "if it is so rare to be born a human being, how come there are so many people in the world?"

My friend slowed his pace and then stopped. He waited for a moment, taking in my question. I remember suddenly being able to hear, as though for the first time, the loud and frenetic traffic all around us. He looked at me and very quietly replied, "How many human beings do you see?"

In a flash, I understood the meaning of the story and the idea. Most of the people I was seeing, in the inner state they were in at that moment, were not really people at all. Most were what the Tibetans call "hungry ghosts." They did not really exist. They were not really **there**. They were **busy**, they were **in a hurry**. They -- like all of us -- were obsessed with doing things **right away**. But **right away** is the opposite of **now** -- the opposite of the lived present moment in which the passing of time no longer tyrannizes us. The hungry ghosts are starved for "more" time; but the more time we hungry ghosts get, the more time we "save", the hungrier we become, the less we actually **live**. And I understood that it is not exactly more time, more days and years, that we are starved for, it is the present moment.

Through our increasing absorption in the busyness, we have the present moment. "Right away" is not now. What a toxic illusion!