

LIGHTING UP THE NOW

You and the Nature of Time

A. H. ALMAAS

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Thank you.

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**If we experience ourselves in our true self-existing condition,
we will see that what we actually are is a being of light.**

Imagine this with me if you will. The point isn't to believe it or not, or even to understand why this is so. The point is to allow yourself to entertain the image, the notion, the possibility, and see how it affects you.

We are beings of light in the fluid state—completely frictionless, completely luminous, totally radiant and free. Now, everybody knows that because light has no mass and no weight, gravity does not affect it. So, in our True Nature, we have no heaviness, no thickness, no weight. We are substantial only in the sense that fluid light has a fullness, a bodyness to it. But that fullness, that substantiality, is completely light and smooth. That is the nature of awareness. And because it is light, it doesn't help us see—it is what sees, it is what perceives. Thus light, awareness, consciousness, perception, sensitivity are all the same thing.

However, even if we recognize the truth that we are beings of light, we tend to reify that perception and identify with it, concretizing ourselves and experiencing ourselves as heavy and opaque. Even as beings of light, we see ourselves as a physical body, with its parts and activities, having mass and operating under the influence of gravity. We think that we are entities in space and time, and that our existence began in the past and will end in the future.

In our continuing exploration of True Nature and of the obstacles to being ourselves that we encounter, we want to focus now on another particular area that makes it difficult to be who we are: our incomplete understanding of the nature of time. In order to do this, we need to observe our experience from the perspective of being a being of light. What are the properties of light and time that can help us understand more about our essential nature?

Light and the Passage of Time

Science tells us that light moves at the maximum speed possible in the universe, which endows light with certain properties that differentiate it from everything else. One of the principles within Einstein’s theory of relativity is that the faster one travels, the slower time passes. Time slows down for somebody who is going at a very high speed—and the closer we get to the speed of light, the slower time becomes. That means that the closer we come to being light, the slower that time will pass for us.

What are the implications of this for understanding what it means to be ourselves?

If we apply it to our internal life, we can see that the more we are present and the more fully we are experiencing and being our essential presence, the more we will experience things slowing down. This seems to be a law of time—not that linear time is being altered, but more time becomes experientially “available” to us. Thus, the slowing down of our experience of time will place us more and more in the present. The more we are the presence, the more we are in the present. So, the slowness of time has a lot to do with being in the present.

There is most likely an etymological connection between the words “present” and “presence,” because the two are very much connected in sense and meaning. In our practice of inquiry, when we talk about being where we are, we mean being in the moment. Our experience is always in the present, even though our mind might be flitting about in the past and future. The actual manifestation—what is arising in our experience—is always arising right now. This is also true of light. For light there is only now; there is nothing else. This fact is another consequence of the reality described by Einstein’s relativity equations.

The more fully we are experiencing our essential presence, the more we will experience things slowing down.

What is behind the principle that the faster you go, the more slowly you experience time? It begins with understanding that the speed of any object in the universe can be seen as a function of traveling in both space and time. We never travel in space without time passing. Physics has determined that the faster you go in space, the slower you go in time. As we travel at normal speeds, that is not apparent to us. But as objects accelerate and approach the speed of light, it becomes apparent that speed in time slows down the more speed in space increases—the maximum point being the speed of light.

In our universe, nothing can exceed the speed of light in space. And the slower you travel relative to the speed of light, the faster time passes. So for human beings, time passes very quickly relative to light because we move very slowly in space in comparison to light. Thus the combination of speed in space and in time always equals the speed of light.

Light and the Eternal Now

The human experience is of moving about in space and steadily, constantly aging—of having time pass. What is the experience of light? Time does not pass for light—light does not go through time. It travels at the maximum speed in space—the speed of light. So what is its speed in time? Zero. That is, since its speed in space is the speed of light, and the speed of light is the maximum speed, its speed in time is zero.

Einstein was talking about physical light, but when we are experiencing the inner light, the actual luminosity of our True Nature, we begin to appreciate Einstein's idea and have an actual experience that is analogous to it, instead of just a theoretical understanding of the idea. We begin to know what it means when we say that for light, time does not pass; that for light it is always the eternal now, and there is nothing but now.

What does that mean? If you see light from a star, and some of it is coming from as far back in time as the Big Bang, you will think that the part of light that you are seeing is very old—say, three billion light years old. Logically, you think, “This light came from that star and it took it that long to get here, so it must be at least that old.” The light itself, however, will not experience that any time has passed for it. If you were to experience the light, or if you were “riding” the light, you would know that it is the same age as it was at the time of the Big Bang. It is one hundred percent new light, ever fresh; it never gets old.

So for humans, who are operating outside of light, time passes, and things get old. For the light, there is no such thing. Light travels through space at a certain speed, but it has no experience of getting old. It is always new, always fresh, and so it is always itself; it doesn't change. It is always, always, its very nature.

You might not have thought about that, but scientifically, it is known that light is ageless. We don't experience that because we are not traveling with light; we are looking at it from outside. This is just like looking at our True Nature from the outside, from the perspective of the physical body: We keep experiencing the passage of time, and therefore we assume that time must pass for our True Nature, too. But if we are in the stance of our True Nature, things can change around us, and our body still changes, but the experience is that there is no passage of time. And that is because the experience of that body of light is agelessness, endlessness—always now, now, now, never changing, that ever-fresh now, this very moment always.

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So what we call present time is actually the intersection between what we call time and that timeless presence. The only place we touch True Nature is in the present moment, not in the past or the future. In the present moment is where True Nature intersects time, because it is the now.

Now without Future

True Nature is the now-ness of time, but the now-ness of time is not just the present time, the particular moment you are in. When you experience the actual now-ness, it is not an instant in time; it does not have a beginning or an end. If you notice an event happening, you can say that it has a beginning and it has an end, but all of it is actually experienced in the now. So the now itself doesn't start with the beginning of the event and it doesn't end with the end of the event. It is always now.

You can see, then, why it is difficult to think logically from the perspective of light. The universe appears differently for light. As we have seen, light doesn't age, and time doesn't pass for it. So there is no such thing as boredom, because there is no history, and there is no such thing as future.

What does that mean for us as human beings having experiences? If there is no history, no future, then nothing affects me. How can I be affected if it is only the now that is real, that is present? And if I recognize that there is only the now, what is the point of trying to change my experience?

Any attempt to alter your experience, to improve it means that you believe that there is a future and you are living for that future. You are saying no to the now out of hope for some better future. But for light, that better future never comes. Whenever we want to advance to a better future, we disconnect, we cut off from the path of light. Light experiences only the now, the very moment. It recognizes that what is now is what is, that what reality is is the now-ness of this moment.

Even if you just look at this logically, what else is there but now? The rest of it is really just stories in our mind. If you believe the stories of your mind, you believe in past and future as possibilities.

Living in the Now

So this is where we can see how our orientation, our attitude, about time can become an obstacle, an obscuration, to being our True Nature. If we have the attitude of future orientation, we miss the moment. We are dissociated from the presence of the moment, and we can't be in the moment.

The truth is that our True Nature is similar to the nature of light, which is timeless and which we can experience in the moment as the now-ness of the moment. But if we are oriented toward the future, we are not allowing ourselves to be where we are, which is now, and we are also leaving, dissociating from, the moment. Our nature is light, pure now-ness, so to operate from the perspective of a future that can get better or worse means that we are dissociating ourselves from our True Nature. How am I going to be myself if I do that? How am I going to be where I am?

In other words, the orientation of hope—hoping for something in the future—disconnects you from who you really are. The orientation of expectation or of having a goal to accomplish does the same thing. For example, you may be thinking that one of these days, you are going to be enlightened, so you are working at it now.

Light would never think that way; it doesn't posit an end state in which everything is going to be wonderful, and it doesn't say that we have to practice now in order to get to that goal. For light, that is completely nonsensical; there is just now. Now is just wonderful the way it is, and now is all that we have.

The orientation of hope disconnects you from who you are.

If there is future in our life, it is true that we need to consider it for the sake of practical matters. When you are doing your budgeting or choosing insurance policies or making travel arrangements, you will have to include the future in your planning. But what does that have to do with your experience of yourself in the moment? Your experience in the moment is your own consciousness, which is a fluid body of light. Why can't you experience that even as you are planning?

The way we relate to facing the experience of death is an important example of what I am talking about. If you are totally in the moment when death comes, it won't be a terrible thing. It is true that it will be a shock to the system, but the fear that most people in our culture have about death is about more than that. It is our fear of being totally in the moment, any moment—without past or future—that makes us afraid to face the particular moment that we call death. Death is a moment with no future. Likewise, it is the fear of physical death that makes us afraid to be completely present in each moment.

Why is that? Because totally letting go of the past and the future is a death of the familiar self. In other words, being completely in the moment makes us fear death because we think that no time means death—we associate the passage of time with life and being alive.

Experiencing Now-ness

But remember that you are the presence, the now-ness that is here, and that now-ness is your now-ness. You don't need to depart from now-ness to be able to go wherever you are going—in the next minute, or tomorrow afternoon, or wherever you will be after your physical death.

So we are pointing here toward the recognition of the timelessness, or the now-ness, of our True Nature. Presence means that something is in the present, but not just in the sense of being there in present time. Look around you. Whatever you see is in the present—your chair is in the present, your body is in the present, the walls are in the present. But the presence in the present is not just the fact of those things being there, it is the very now-ness of the presence in the present; it is the very experience of now-ness.

How do you experience now? How do you get a taste, a flavor, of now? This flavor, this texture of the now, is the immediacy of the experience of awareness, consciousness, presence. It is like trying to find out what fluid light is made of. It is made out of now, out of now-ness. It is an unchanging, condensed now, a full, indestructible now. It is a now that is at all times, for it is the now that is the present of all times—past, present, and future. And it doesn't change from an instant in the past to an instant in the future. It is the same now—always fresh. Time doesn't have an impact on the now.

What is useful to recognize, then, is that our time orientation will disconnect us from our True Nature because it contradicts the now-ness, the timelessness, of our True Nature. It is paradoxical, of course, to think about things that way because we are always thinking in terms of time. The time axis is very important for the mind. The mind is always thinking of things in the past and of what it is going to do in the future. It rarely settles in the moment. If it did, it would become quiet.

When you settle into the moment, you realize that there is not much happening—a few things here and there. The primary awareness is of the immediacy of the moment. This is because presence—being in the now—is characterized by beingness, simply being here now. In contrast, our familiar self is based on doing, going, making things happen. We do not trust that action can arise and proceed from inner stillness; we do not recognize that Being is the ground of everything. To be in the now connects you with that quiet beingness that underlies all changes, all activity—the simple here-ness where what is most basic is not activity but presence.

So when we are not settled, all the images, all the reifications, all the projections from the past arise and influence the present. We don't see the present as the present; and we don't experience the presence of the present.

Missing the Now-ness in the Present

That same influence of the past also keeps orienting us toward the future. Something will come up from the past that we are not happy about, and in our desire for things to be better in the future, we disconnect ourselves from the moment. We miss the now. And when we miss the now, we don't just waste time, we miss the now-ness of what we are, the realness, the here-ness—the very fact that we are.

When people talk about being in the here and now, it is a more profound experience than simply being aware of the content of the experience of the moment. It begins with that awareness because the content of the moment is what is arising now. So, we are aware of the content of the moment—the physical attributes, the feelings, and the thoughts that

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are arising in the moment. But the more we are attuned to what is arising in the moment, the more time slows down as we become more present to the moment. And when we become more present to the moment, we begin to recognize the now-ness itself, which turns out to be the presence that is present to the moment.

So, my presence is the now-ness of the moment; they are not separate. It is not that my presence is present in the now of the moment; the presence is the now of the moment. That is how we actually know what presence is. In the practice of being where we are, it becomes clear that to be ourselves, to be real, we need to be in the present moment. We need to attend to the moment, we need to embrace and be completely aware, immediately in touch, with the moment. This immediate in-touchness with the moment is the in-touchness with the now-ness of the moment, which is the same thing as the Being of our presence.

Caught in the Flow of Time

In some sense, all the obstacles to being ourselves that we have observed and explored so far are basically in time; they are a function of the passage of time perceived in the linear sense. They come from the past and move into the future. If our center of consciousness is operating within a linear time framework—in the passage from the past to the future—it will be engaged in these obstacles. Our judgments and rejections and hopes and desires and expectations all happen in time. Even our inner practice becomes a practice in time. We are going from one point of time to another for a process that has a beginning and an end. There is a cause and a result: something we do now will result in a change in the future. That kind of time orientation will dislocate us, will take us outside the presence of what we are and into the ephemeral mental world of time, which is where most people live.

People are living in the bardo—in the passage, in the transitional. That is what the bardo really is: continuous transitioning from one thing to another, which is the product of the experience of a time-bound mind. So, when we say to be present and to be aware of where we are, we simply mean to attend to the moment, to be in the moment, to be here, to be now, to be aware of what is happening right this moment.

Even if I am remembering and reliving something that happened to me in my childhood, I can do that in the moment. In fact, the more I am in the moment, the more real, the more alive, that reliving is. If I relive an incident in my mind, it is more like a thought, a memory; but if I am really in my body, in my sensations, in my presence, in the immediacy, I am in a sense experiencing the now-ness of that past because I am in the now-ness now. But it is the same now-ness.

Remember that light from a distant star is not moving in time; that is, no passage of time is involved in its journey. As we are seeing it, it is the same light that was there billions of years ago. It hasn't aged a minute, even a second. It is always now, and in this now-ness we can experience the past as much as we like—fully, completely—and really process it. Because that is true reliving; it is not just remembering. But we have to be in the moment, we have to be in touch with our presence.

This is one reason the practice of presence is often referred to as self-remembering, or simply as remembering. We do not mean remembering in the ordinary, cerebral way that memory usually functions. We mean the remembering of our presence, remembering it in the sense of reliving the presence—which is reliving the now, which is the now of the present moment. In other words, self-remembering works as a practice of presence if and when we can do it in this fullness of being in the now, in the full experience of true reliving.

Past, Future, and Presence

Thus far in our considerations, we have seen how our past knowledge—what I call learned ignorance—impinges on our experience by mentally overlaying the past on the present. This affects both the central component of our present experience—what we have called the primary manifestation—and the reactions, associations, and judgments about that central component—what we have called the secondary manifestations. If we look at learned ignorance in terms of these two manifestations, we see that the primary component is mainly bound by the past. The secondary components, although controlled by the past, are usually oriented toward accomplishing something or going someplace in the future: “No, I don't like this; I want it that way” or “I like this, and I am going to get it” or “I am afraid that I won't be happy with how this turns out” or “Let's work on this so it will change.” All the rejection and the comparison we engage in imply a future orientation, a hope for something different or fear of a bad result. So although primary

and secondary manifestations are both involved with past and future, the primary tends to be mostly dominated by the past and the secondary are dominated by the future. Most commonly, what we identify with is our future orientation. And that is why we keep our attention on the secondary manifestations of our experience. The primary component of our experience often doesn't even have a chance to impact us, much less the actual reality of presence at the heart of it.

Think about it. You still believe that you know there is going to be a tomorrow and that expectation becomes a controlling aspect of your experience. Perhaps you have an appointment tomorrow, so you do need to consider the future in that sense. But that is not the same thing as your consciousness levitating out of the now and jumping to the future.

We don't need to do that in order to be efficient. We can still reside in the present, enjoying the moment—because really, that is all that we have. The future might never come—who knows? So just like anything else that may arise in our experience, we don't have to go along with our future orientation. When we notice it coming up, we don't have to believe it, we don't have to take it seriously, we don't have to identify with it.

But not identifying doesn't mean pushing away. Instead, we can recognize, “Who I truly am is a being of light.” When we know this, we don't get caught up in all the obstacles we encounter. Not because we are avoiding them or denying them or pushing them away, but because those obstacles actually don't exist for beings of light. For a being of light, what you are right this very moment is all you have. It is in the presence of this moment, and only in the presence of this moment, that we can be where we are, that we can be ourselves, that we can be real. It is as simple as that.

It is only in the presence of this moment that we can be real.

Further Exploration

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At the end of each chapter of the book you will find an exercise you can use to explore the material of that chapter. The “Note to the Reader” at the beginning of the book provides guidance on how to use the exercises alone or with others.

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About the Author



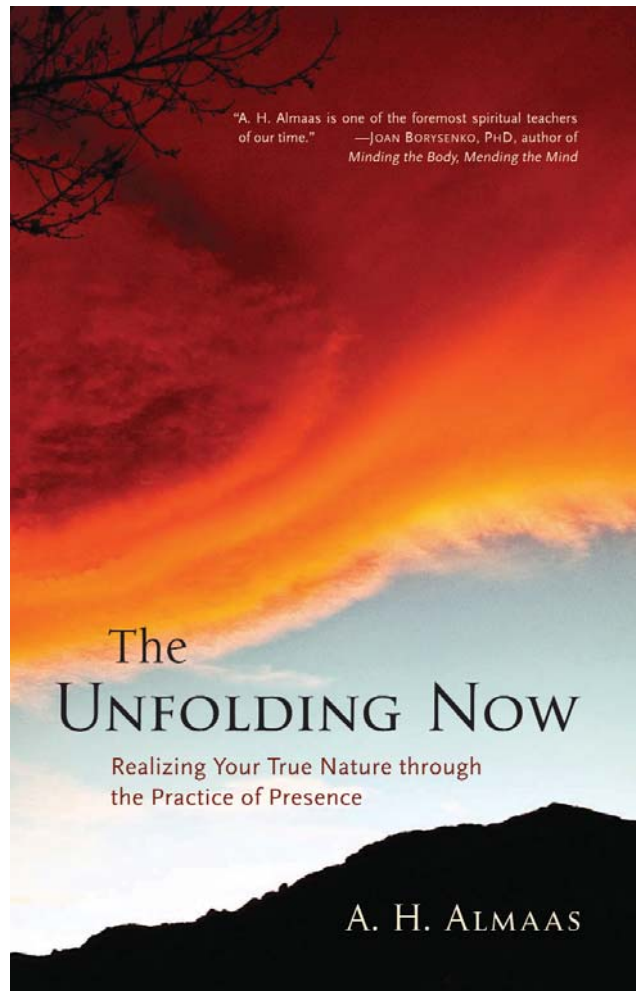
“Hameed Ali, writing under the pen name of A. H. Almaas, is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential spiritual teachers of our time. His presentation of the spiritual path, which he calls the Diamond Approach, as it has now emerged and developed over 25 years, is distinguished by a thoroughgoing effort to bring modern Western concepts and understandings to the traditional work of spiritual development and realization. And, judging from the schools, groups, and many students now practicing this work in the US and Europe, the effort appears to be yielding impressive fruits.”

– Lawrence M. Spiro, former Director of the East-West Psychology program at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco

Almaas is the originator of the Diamond Approach, a method of unfoldment of the human soul. He is also the founder of the Ridhwan School, the vehicle by which this method is taught and practiced by people in North America, Europe, and Australia.

[A. H. Almaas on Wikipedia](#)

The Unfolding Now, a new work by A. H. Almaas.



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