

buddha standard time

awakening to the infinite possibilities of now



National Bestselling Author of
AWAKENING THE BUDDHA WITHIN

lama surya das



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Awakening to the Infinite Possibilities of Now

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Introduction: Making Peace with Time

To be able to be unhurried when hurried;
To be able not to slack off when relaxed;
To be able not to be frightened
And at a loss for what to do,
When frightened and at a loss;
This is the learning that returns us
To our natural state and transforms our lives.

—Liu Wenmin, early sixteenth-century poet

FOR EONS PEOPLE HAVE been grappling with the concept of time. From Sophocles to Ben Franklin to Einstein to Mick Jagger, the wisdom has been passed down to us: Time is the stuff life is made of. Time is money. Time is of the essence. Time flies. Time is relative. Time is on my side. Time is a cruel thief.

We measure time. We lose time. We kill time. We are strapped for time. These days, that last sentiment is what I hear most often from people. With varying degrees of vexation, agitation, or despair, they are constantly telling me, “I don’t have enough time!”

It’s not surprising that many of us feel this way. The pace of life today is far more frenetic than it was a generation ago, and unimaginably faster than what it was in the ancient world of Moses or Confucius. Trying to keep up with today’s tempo can take a huge toll. That stress shows up in our suppressed immune systems, high blood pressure, heart attacks and stroke, insomnia, and digestive ailments. Stress contributes to the inability to think clearly or make competent decisions, to short tempers, and to sloppy work. As a result, we have more everyday problems: arguments at work and home, car accidents as we speed and yak on our cell phones, and unresolved grief because we don’t have time to mourn properly. Stress also contributes to fertility problems, turns hair gray, and wears out bodies before their time. Long-term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving us more vulnerable to anxiety and depression, weight gain, and substance abuse.

I learned for myself some stark lessons about the daunting acceleration of life when I came back to the United States in the late 1980s after spending almost two decades in the East. I had lived in India and the Himalayas for most of my twenties, in a slow-paced, natural-rhythm, electricity-free zone. I then spent my early thirties in a traditional Tibetan *Dzogchen* meditation retreat at the Nyingma Retreat Center in the thickly forested Dordogne River valley of southern France. When I finally returned home I felt like Rip Van Winkle: The complexity of the world had increased so exponentially that modern American life was almost unrecognizable to me. I wasn’t used to the rampant commercialism, the constant clamor of products being hawked. Even meditation centers and ashrams had become veritable spiritual supermarkets, with boutiques and cafés selling imported goods and wares to help support their nonprofit status.

As I began to adjust to a Western lifestyle after so long in monastic simplicity, what struck me more than anything else was the new aversion to the mundane tasks of daily life. Thus the ubiquitous time-saving tools—instant coffee, fast food, ATMs, microwave ovens, personal computers—as if somehow life would be better if we could speed our way through it. That message has only escalated since then. These days, young people tell me that they don’t even have time for cell-phone conversations or e-mails. They prefer to text. The instant response that new technology allows has altered

our perception of time. And ironically, most of us seem to feel we have far less time as a result.

Many of us feel that the modern efforts to save time have backfired, bringing onerous new problems of their own. Our technological advances and constant availability have blurred the line between leisure time and work. No sooner do we wrap our minds around a new computer program than it becomes obsolete. We can end up wasting precious minutes stuck on the phone with someone on the other side of the world, trying to figure out how to reset the computer brain in our dryer, or stove, or espresso machine. It takes time to learn how to do online banking, connect with friends on Facebook, master the complexities of smartphones and GPS units, and download a best seller to our e-readers. When Excel crashes and the work is lost after we've spent an hour entering data for a deadline, our blood pressure skyrockets. There's even technology to fix the stress created by technology. I recently learned of an experimental Google feature called Email Addict that shuts you out of your inbox, forcing compulsive e-mail checkers to give it a break.

Don't get me wrong. I think we're living in an amazing age, as miraculous and futuristic as anything out of the *Star Trek* and *Jetsons* episodes of my youth. I love being able to talk on my laptop face-to-face with someone on the other side of the world or to download a book or piece of music in a minute. The problem for a lot of us is figuring out how to disconnect from all this intensity for some peace and quiet. And how much of the time-related stress in our lives comes from trying to accommodate every single person who wants a piece of our day? Do you suffer from the "disease to please," striving to satisfy all those who make a claim on your time? Many of us are torn between the desire to be generous with our time and the need to conserve our own energy. It takes only a few seconds to read a 140-character Twitter message, but the cost of the total distraction lasts far longer. The thinner we spread ourselves, the more we skitter over the surface of our lives, never going deep. And since we can be tracked down just about anywhere, anytime, it seems there is literally no escape.

In the pages that follow, I'll teach you how to wean yourself from the addictions that sap time and energy, to clear out all the debris and distraction—in much the same way that a snow globe becomes calm and clear when you stop shaking it and allow the flakes to settle. You'll see, for example, that we can stay at our desks or in a traffic jam and, however momentarily, genuinely give our attention to the present moment as a way of finding inner peace.

I want to show you how to coexist peacefully with the inevitable, inexorable march of time. As a Buddhist, I've long studied the question of how to live authentically and joyfully in the present moment, and how to remain mindful, centered, and harmonious no matter what challenges come my way.

In a way, Buddhism is a profound study in time and time management, because the better you manage your mind and spirit, the less hold time has on you. Every moment can be lived fully, free and unconditioned, and every moment holds infinite possibilities and opportunities for a fresh start. Every moment of heightened consciousness is precious beyond price, for awareness is the primary currency of the human condition. Buddhism for me is a study in how to live fully and authentically, not only in our earthly time zone, but in what I call *Buddha Standard Time*—the dimension of timeless time, wholly *now*.

In recent years, I've had so many people ask me for help with finding their spiritual center in their out-of-control lives that I decided to make it the topic of this book—to show how we can discover a more calm, vibrant, and gratifying way of life. We can become masters rather than victims of a packed schedule and constant change, and feel composed in any situation—neither rushed nor overwhelmed, but peacefully in the moment. We can learn to set our own pace, a pace that makes sense in relation to who we are and what we need for our life journey.

One of the main obstacles to making peace with time is that we tend to experience it linearly: we keep moving forward, doing and accomplishing things, rather than just being. We are human *beings*, after all, not human *doings*. It costs us dearly to live only on the linear axis of time. We lose connection with our deeper and most authentic

selves, too often mistaking mere movement for purpose and meaning. We adapt to a faster and faster tempo that keeps us feeling busy, but rarely with a sense of accomplishment. Staggering forward on a treadmill of events, we gather momentum until we lose any sense of how to stop. We are expert adapters, but the complexity and speed of our world require something other than merely adapting to its pace.

If we cultivate clarity, detachment, and equanimity, we can learn to remain still and calm amid the torrent of commitments, no longer allowing our overscheduled lives to rob us of the time we need to recalibrate and connect to the natural world, ourselves, and each other. For time moves on whether we are hurtling through life or savoring it. The big transformations can take place outside our daily awareness, until a stark reminder catches us up: hearing the new crack in the voice of a teenage son, perhaps, or seeing the unwelcome surprise of a gray hair, or wondering how it “suddenly” became winter.

We’ve also lost so much of our connection with the natural world that it doesn’t seem to matter to many of us whether it’s day or night, hot or cold, summer or winter. We control the climate at home, in the car, at the office, in the mall. We watch ball games at night under powerful lights. We eat food with little regard for season or source. These artificial means keep the rhythms and cycles of nature from us, further removing us from indicators of time passing. As we use up our limited natural resources, watch the ozone layer thin and glaciers melt, and hear about the extinction of species after species, it seems that the earth itself is gravely impermanent, a victim of time and change as surely as we all are.

We all experience time differently, depending on our frame of mind. When I returned home to Long Island for a visit after my first few years in India, I encountered not only a culture clash but a time clash with my parents. My mother didn’t want me to meditate. Good Jewish mother that she was, she was fine if I napped every afternoon, but she felt that meditating was a waste of time—time that she felt I could have been spending with her and my father.

She was absolutely right in one sense: she hadn’t seen her eldest son in years, and shutting myself in my room or wandering off into the backyard to meditate deprived us of precious hours together. But I had experienced another reality, a different way of being. I had learned that a meditation practice and a dedicated spiritual life lend time an infinitely expansive quality that would enhance every moment I spent with my parents. I knew that time need not be an either/or commodity, and that we always have the possibility of breaking out of linear time into a deeper dimension. When I rejoined my parents after an hour or two spent tapping into the timeless, I was a happier, more present, more patient, more aware, more engaged human being.

Right now you may still be struggling within the limited perspective of experiencing time linearly. “I can’t do two things at once,” you may find yourself saying. “There are only twenty-four hours in a day!” Even spiritual seekers wonder how they can possibly find enough time to meditate, study, chant, and pray. Our lives are crammed. Our calendars are full. It seems that something’s got to give to allow time for the spiritual development that would allow us to break out of the linear lock. But that’s not how it works. We don’t need to find that impossible extra pocket of time in the day; rather, we can incorporate the spacious outlook of our spirituality into every minute of our life by reimagining and reframing the expanse of time we have.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha said that if we directly perceived the actual difficulties and sorrows of life, we’d practice to achieve enlightenment “as if our hair was on fire.” A simple definition of enlightenment is the deep flash of awakening to the knowledge that we are much more than our time- and space-bound, material selves living in a material world. Some people awaken to enlightenment by grace, seemingly without effort, but most of us stay obsessively stuck in the past or the future, running our mental trains backward and forward on that track every minute of the day. We have a limited view of ourselves and our capacities. And nothing will change unless we stop the train and get off.

Emaho! (That’s Tibetan for “Hallelujah!”) We *can* stop the train. Buddhist wisdom teaches that the minutes and hours of our days do not merely march from future to

present to past—looming, engulfing us, passing us by forever. Rather, each moment is intersected by a realm of infinite spaciousness and timelessness, known in Tibetan as *shicha*, the Eternal Now. This is the precious awakened dimension that I call Buddha Standard Time, and it is available to us every instant.

“Let go the past,” the Buddha said, “let go the future, and let go what is in between, transcending the things of time. With your mind free in every direction, you will not return to birth and aging.” When we are in touch with being only in the present moment, only with *what is*, instead of what we regret, fear, or anticipate, our sense of limits in time will no longer have negative power over our lives. This is ancient, timeless wisdom. People have been writing about living in the present moment as far back as the Pharaoh Akhenaton, who in the fourteenth century BCE wrote, “He who neglects the present moment throws away all he has.”

This is something we all need to remember every day. We can’t afford to wait to learn that lesson. “It’s now or never, as always,” I like to say. Be present in this moment, as if it’s the only moment. This breath, as if it’s the only breath. That is how we meditate, lead mindful and centered lives, and stay in the now. And that is how we begin to make peace with time and with ourselves.

In Buddha Standard Time, there are no small-minded contortions over a mentally constructed world. It is a place of being, not doing, a much vaster dimension than the one most of us habitually inhabit. I will show you how to get out of your frenzied time zone and into that timeless dimension, no matter where you are or what you are doing. There you will feel balanced, clear, joyful, and able to function at your best.

When you learn to live in Buddha Standard Time, bringing what I call *nowness-awareness* into your daily life, you’ll be more present and engaged in your interactions. You’ll be better able to negotiate the rough patches, sensing when to assert yourself and when to withdraw. Above all, you won’t fear that life will pass you and your loved ones by, but will recognize that we each have our own pace and way of blooming. You’ll feel clear about your ability to discover happiness and fulfillment. Nowness-awareness is the secret of enlightenment and self-realization: the Buddha within.

You’ll see that living in Buddha Standard Time is in no way antithetical to modern life but gives you the tools to live it sanely and joyfully. Neither planning ahead nor reminiscing about the past need obscure the clarity of our present awareness. The Buddha would say: If you’re planning ahead, just plan ahead. If you’re remembering, just remember. We can look forward or back without fretting or obsessing, or allowing concerns about the future to constrict freedom in the present. Think about it: even contemplating the future or the past is a function of present awareness.

We can always choose how to respond, what to do, how to live. We always have time to take a breath and begin again, revitalized, awake, aware. When we understand and connect with our true, timeless natures, we will automatically slow down. And when we slow down, time slows down as well, so we perceive that we have more of it. The more aware we are and the more quickly our minds process things, the slower they seem to occur—just as time seems to slow down on that first glorious autumn morning, when the colors and the breeze come alive under our intensely focused attention.

We can learn to experience a similar heightened awareness every day. We then have more room to choose, reflect, attend, respond intentionally, and thus make the most of our time and the opportunities given us by this magical life. We can learn to do things sensibly and sequentially when we’re under pressure, turning off the harried mental chatter that makes us feel we must do several things at once.

The more conscious we become of our key stressors and the unproductive habits we’ve developed around time, the closer we’ll be to freeing ourselves from their net. A skillful relationship with the pace of life on this earth means that every choice, every action, and every breath can be whole and complete. We can be fully, vibrantly present. This is the secret, hidden in plain sight if only we open our eyes to see it.

Whether you’re a Buddhist or not, this book will give you the inspiration and tools to reduce the amount of stress in your life and help you find more focus, fulfillment, creativity, and wisdom. I’ll show you how to integrate mini-stress busters into your day, the simple meditative pause that can fit in anywhere, and how to enrich your daily

life with true wakefulness. There's no rule that meditation must be done sitting cross-legged on a cushion. As you'll see, we can practice meditation on a nature walk or even while washing the dishes. In the beginning, you will learn how to pick up and carry awareness practice with you wherever you go; later, stable mindfulness gently empowers and carries you. This is the blessing of a genuine spiritual path.

Each chapter has one "Mindful Moments" exercise and one "Time Out" meditation. The former offers advice and practices to incorporate into your day to begin to transform your old relationship with time. And the latter provides a calming, meditative pause. I'll show how to incorporate practices from other spiritual traditions as well—the Jewish Sabbath being a classic example, or a pilgrimage like the one Muslims make to Mecca—to help you slow down, be present, and embrace time's infinite possibilities.

With practice you'll find that taking time to meditate will actually save you time and enable you to do more. It will increase your energy, alertness, and stamina in the same way that athletes who do their calisthenics every day keep in optimal shape to improve their performance and face challenges. I offer an eclectic mix of techniques for meditating and living in the now, drawn from Tibetan Buddhist tradition as well as from other great wisdom traditions, neuroscientific research, and holistic mind-body approaches.

Buddha's ancient prescription for enlightened living is scientific in that it can, like a science experiment, be replicated. Anyone who follows the principles of mindfulness will come into harmony and balance with the natural world and progressively realize his or her innate spiritual nature, a nature that is not fixed in time. This is the enlightened Buddha's primordial promise, and millions have achieved it.

The following chapters cover the essential aspects of making peace with time, living in the moment, and realizing our potential. As you read through them, you will learn to synchronize with the rhythms and cycles of nature, including your own mind and body, cells and tissues, and neural pathways. You will learn how to slow down or accelerate time, to have richer relationships, a more productive work life, and much less stress. Ultimately, you will arrive at the shore of the boundless, universal, and everlasting, and know that it has been with you every moment along the way.

Each time you repeat a "Time Out" meditation, it will take you more deeply into the moment, and each time you repeat a "Mindful Moments" exercise, you will learn something new. As Goldilocks might explain, your first reading of a suggested meditation or exercise will invariably be too broad, your second reading will be too narrow, and your third reading will be just right! In Buddhism, this is known as the Middle Way—a moderate, balanced, and flexible path of life.

The focus of the chapters is as follows:

1. **AWAKENING TO NATURAL TIME.** In the first chapter, you will learn how to awaken from the tyranny of artificial modern time. You will rediscover the multiple cycles of growth, change, and decay in the natural world around you and learn a mini-meditation or "breath break" to refresh yourself, increase your attentiveness, and strengthen your resolve throughout the day.
2. **TAKING TIME FOR YOUR HIGHER SELF.** In the second chapter, you will learn how to take time for your higher Self—your noblest, deepest nature—in contrast to the small, separate self whose fleeting moods change from second to second, day to day, and year to year. You will begin to feel less time pressured and distracted and see time as your ally and friend rather than as an enemy or tormenter.
3. **GETTING IN SYNC.** In the third chapter, you will learn to go deeper into the flow of life and learn to synchronize linear Father Time and cyclical Mother Nature (manifested, for example, in left-brain and right-brain thinking, respectively); attune to the natural circadian rhythms of your body as well as your meridians and chakras, or natural energy centers; and give voice to your innermost heartbeat, the most reliable timepiece you have.

4. UNDERSTANDING OUR POWERS OF PERCEPTION. This chapter examines the phenomenon of time being in the mind, and the gifts of perception—our own and that of others. From bodhisattvas or angels around us who provide exactly what we need just when we need it, to what appears as psychic ability, to compassion and loving-kindness, to aging as a state of mind, you will learn how mindful awareness brings to fruition our phenomenal ability to perceive and connect.
5. MINDING TIME WISELY. In the fifth chapter, you will learn to practice the contemplative arts of mindfulness and presencing, which is meditation in action. You will learn to go more deeply into the moment to experience its richness, subtlety, and promise.
6. CREATING SPACE IN THE PACE. In the sixth chapter, you will begin to master living in the moment by expanding and contracting time according to your personal needs and desires, as well as varying the tempo.
7. LIVING IN SACRED TIME AND SPACE. In the seventh chapter, you will learn how to create or fashion temporal and spatial refuges—the foundation for putting forth your best efforts and realizing your life’s full potential. You will learn how to engage and synchronize better with others and find meaningful personal and social outlets for your skills, talents, and creative energy.
8. THE SPINNING WHEEL OF TIME. In this chapter, you will learn to experience sickness, loss, death, and other ravages of time as natural aspects of life, to be gracefully embraced in their seasons, rather than as untimely interruptions, threats, and enemies, and you will consider the global aspects of time. Finally, you will learn to balance and synchronize all the temporal dimensions to enter Buddha Standard Time and become one with the radiant, timeless ground of your being.

As you progress through the book, you will find your notions of time and self undergoing a change. You will evolve from darkness to light, from confusion to wisdom, from selfishness to unselfishness, from a separate self to your divine Buddha nature. This is the promise and premise of the spiritual path, the miracle of genuine awakefulness.

In Buddha Standard Time you will come to realize that, in spite of your hectic days, you have much more time than you think. In fact, you have all the time in the world.

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