Living in the Present

Tell Me Something About the Present. -- U.G.

But it is often truly important to turn one’s attention to the present. “Be here now!” is great in the right context. It can be a reminder to someone on automatic, running joylessly after something he thinks he is missing, and ignoring the sunlit reality around him. It can be a fine lesson to teach the grudge keeper, blindly determined to continue an ancient and harmful feud. “Be here now” can urge those who stubbornly cling to an outdated theory to open their eyes to the counterexamples right in front of them. It is also a perfect wake-up call to those who spend too much energy in worrying fruitlessly about tomorrow. Smell the coffee! Listen to the first hesitant birdsong! Love the one you are with!

-- Vito Victor

Preface

It is well known that time has presented a serious problem for both philosophers and followers of religion and spirituality as well as to the common man. For the common man vicissitudes of time include famine, disease, old age and death as well as fame, power and fortunes. There have always been advocates of the unreality of time both among philosophers (e.g., St. Augustine, McTaggart) and teachers of spirituality. Kant saw that time is a condition for all our experience of the phenomenal world – both internal and external experience is in time. In spiritual traditions like Advaita, time (with space) has always been considered as an attribute of the phenomenal world, while the ultimate reality or Brahman is timeless.

Spiritual traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism time (since it represents change and eventually death) considered an ‘enemy’ of man and they sought various methods to overcome time. Some spiritual teachers, on the other hand, have been advocating, in the same vein, as a strategy to overcome time, spiritual practices which help the aspirant live in the ‘timeless present’, in the present moment, as if there is no past or future. Unfortunately, the idea of the timeless present has been misconstrued as the present moment in time. And there have been onslaughts on the idea of any experience of or living in the present. In this essay, I would like to try to make sense of the idea of the experience of the present moment as well as living in the present, while yet not rejecting the role of the past or future in one’s living. This essay is based on the assumption that time is a concept of the mind, and past, present and future are mental constructs to help us organize our experience in time. The essay is, in a way, an elaboration and extension of the ideas from Vito Victor¹ presented above.² It is based on a distinction between two sense of the ‘present’: the timeless present, where there is no consciousness of time or of the past, present or future, and time present as distinguished from time past and time future.

¹ Vito Victor is a poet and a philosopher. He has retired as a computer science professor and currently lives with his wife in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
² Needless to say, Vito is not responsible for the views I have presented in this paper.
Experiencing the Present Moment

The following are some of the objections raised against experiencing the present moment and my replies to them:

Objections One (from neuroscience): Sensory stimuli take a few milliseconds to be registered in the brain and another set of milliseconds to be processed before we recognize what it is we experience and/or be conscious of it. So by the time we recognize it, the object or situation is already past, not the present one.

Reply: How long does it take for the stimulus to be passed on to the brain and the time it takes for the brain to process it seem to be irrelevant, because the fact that it takes a few hundred milliseconds of time to respond, or the fact that the object is already some milliseconds old, does not invalidate the fact that the object I experience is in the present (or that my experience is of the present,) for all practical purposes. For example, to say that I noted the time on my watch at 6:30 am, it’s enough to notice a minute later that the train which is supposed to leave at 6:30 has already left (and my watch is correct to the second).

To say that what is present is already past in a few milliseconds is purely academic (or rather, scientific) hair-splitting. The present moment is not defined in terms of how many milliseconds have passed before it becomes the past moment. Does the moment have duration or some other magnitude? Can be it longer than a thousandth of a second? Is it possible then that while I am experiencing the moment I am still within the moment, while some of it may have been past, and I could still say that I am experiencing the present moment?

You could easily apply this discussion to the investigation of a neuroscience researcher: Is the researcher’s study based on his experience of something? What did he experience? Only his past? If he can only observe a past moment or event, and nothing counts as his observing the present moment or event, how could the results of his study be applied to the present situation?

Objection Two: There is no such thing as the present moment. There is only the past and no such thing as the present, because in order to say anything about the present, you need concepts, which are necessarily a product of the past. UG, for example, simply denies the notion of recognition to experience of an object or situation in the present as the present one; and thus he rejects the very notion of experience of the present moment.

To call it 'living from moment to moment' is very misleading. That moment to moment living can never be captured by you -- that can never become part of your conscious existence, much less your conscious thinking.

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3 By ‘experience’ in this essay I mean both sensation and perception, which in turn mean awareness of something through the senses. Perception is generally distinguished from mere sensation. While awareness of the object through the senses is sufficient for sensation, identification or recognition of the object is necessary for perception.
Look here, there is no present to the structure of the ‘you’; all that is there is the past, which is trying to project itself into the future. You can think about past, present, and future, but there is no future, there is no present; there is only the past. Your future is only a projection of the past. If there is a present, that present can never be experienced by you, because you experience only your knowledge about the present, and that knowledge is the past. So what is the point in trying to experience that moment which you call ‘now’? The now can never be experienced by you; whatever you experience is not the now. So the now is a thing which can never become part of your conscious existence, and which you cannot give expression to. The now does not exist, as far as you are concerned, except as a concept. I don’t talk about the now.

-- Mystique of Enlightenment:

The above two objections may seem to be similar. But they are not. The first says that by the time you have experienced the present moment as such, it is already past. Therefore, what you are experiencing is not the present moment, but only what was there a moment ago. The second objection, on the other hand, is not concerned as much with the time lapse involved in the stimuli traveling from the sense organs to the brain or in the brain processing them as with the idea that in order to recognize the present moment as such you need a concept, which is a product of your past.

In the above passage, UG says that there is no present but only the past, and he denies that the present can be part of our experiencing structure. He says that you cannot experience the present, but only the knowledge about the present, which is of the past. So, what you experience is not the ‘now’. He further says not only that there is no present, but there is no future either; there is only the past of which it is a projection.

I believe there is confusion here between the two senses of the term ‘present’ I introduced in the preface. On the one hand, UG seems to say that there may be a present but it cannot be experienced or ‘captured’ by you, because your experience is based on your knowledge which is of the past. On the other hand, he is saying that experience or knowledge is only of the past. This latter idea seems to deny anything called the present in time or the experience of it.

I would like to show that UG’s statements about his own experiences belie the fact that he was indeed, in some sense or other, aware of the present, which he may or may not call experience, as for example when he says he doesn’t see three dimension, (“The tree I see is two-dimensional – there is no depth to it.”) But the fact that he could report this presupposes that he recalls some experience of something, especially when he denied that you actually perceive in three dimensions, since, according to him, there are in fact only two dimensions. How did he come to that conclusion, if he didn’t have a concept of the two dimensions and experience them? He would have to say that the experience pertained only to a past moment. Yet he seemed to be only reporting what he was then currently experiencing.

The neuroscientist might say here that a person talking about his being aware of something means that there is a ‘sensory input’ which he later remembers and calls it as a state of awareness.

Here we are entering the domain of semantics. The term ‘sensory input’ hides the fact that there has indeed been awareness, as attested by our assertions such as that I was simply looking at something.

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4 Many of his friends, including me, heard him say this.
Take another example of UG simply looking at a clock, which he calls a state of ‘not knowing’. He says that he didn’t know what it was he was looking at. His mind was ‘a question mark’. But when someone asked him what time it was, he says that the answer shot forth, “It’s quarter past three.” Even though he doesn’t quite admit that there is such a thing as the present, we can say he was in the present fully aware, but didn’t know what he was looking at. In common parlance we say that he was simply staring at something, without knowing what it was.

It’s merely a matter of semantics now whether you call this awareness an experience or not. The term ‘experience’ in the above example could mean either the mere awareness of the clock or the knowledge of the time of the clock. The state of ‘not knowing’ must have been in the timeless present, while the knowledge that the time of the clock was quarter past three was about the present clock time, i.e. his experience of the present as a moment in time. Thus the present that UG is denying as capable of being experienced (i.e., the state of not knowing) is not of the present time of our experience, but the timeless present. Not that he was aware of his being in the timeless present.

UG might reply to this by saying that the knowledge of the clock as quarter past three, because it utilizes concepts, makes the experience of the time of the clock already of the past.

I beg to differ. I may indeed be using concepts from my past to read the time, but my experience of the time itself is not of the past but of the present.

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The concept of the past does not make much sense except in relation to the present, and the same goes with the idea of the future. What UG is really saying that the ‘now’ does not exist except as a concept. But the question is what, then, does the concept apply to? Or does it simply have no significance or denotation?

Putting it another way, past, present and future are concepts of time. You cannot employ one without utilizing one of the other two. The future is future only in relation to the past or present. The past is only past in relation to the present. Much of what we say about the present can only come from concepts arising from the past. If the concepts are ultimately dependent on experience, what does the concept of the present represent?

To deny the application of the concept (or the word) ‘present’ to a present object or situation or moment is simply to deny it to anything else. That is to deny the application of any time concept to anything we experience. Then we are excluded from the realm of concepts altogether since they are all derived, in UG’s view, from the past. UG must be talking about a reality outside of time. And this is completely beyond our experience. He may be right, but he cannot be understood by anyone who is operating within the realm of normal experience and day-to-day life.

1.2. Remember our expressions to describe our present experience: “Let me be there at the moment when he says that, he sings or whatever.” Also remember how when we drive a car we have to pay total attention to the road in order to avoid an inadvertent accident -- we have to notice the obstacles on the way, the traffic lights, or cars passing by and overtaking us and so on. Listening to music is

5 UG Krishnamurti – The Natural State: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxZUUyPilik.
6 See section IV below for a discussion of the distinction between awareness and knowledge.
another example of being in the present and appreciating the performance. Or I am counting time and at a certain point we say, “Now it’s three O’clock.”

Again, I am feeling my pain right now, and you want to say that it’s not a present pain I am feeling, but only pain of a moment ago? How many times do I see myself making mistakes because I am not present to what I am engaged in? Can I learn a new task without being completely attentive to every move I am making? Or is none of these is experiencing the present?

Is there such a thing as an abstract present moment apart from these? What would that be? I would say that it is experiences of the present moments such as these that are the basis of our concept of the present moment.

What is implied in UG’s objection is that our past knowledge and experience have a significant role to play in our experience of the present, as do the concepts derived from our past experience.

This is indeed true, but that in no way contradicts the fact that the experience itself is of the present.

1.3. The Concept of the Present: A concept is a spoken word or symbol or an image with a meaning attached to it, namely an object or a situation. By repeated association, when we think of a concept meaningfully, we think of the object or situation referred by it, in the background. That is how concepts become meaningful, or intentional (i.e. referring to objects or situations), if you will.

Meaning essentially comes through memory. Memory is facilitated by different vehicles or media: it may be an image (visual, or auditory or other), a word, or a thought (based on them).

How did we come to have the concept of the present? In order to form a concept of something, you must first experience it. This by repeated association with a word (or concept), it becomes the content of further thoughts or ideas utilizing the concept.

When we apply a concept referring to a present object or situation, we have what we might call recognition. The recognition may carry with it a judgment (or a thought), such as when we not only recognize something as a cup of coffee, but say that it is fragrant, it is tasty, keeps me awake, and so on. Or it may be without any judgment or thought. The more we move to the level of judgment or thought, the more our past is utilized. Still the referent is the present object or event.

1.4. Experience: Experience is multi-tiered: experiencing something in the present may just be an innocent process of merely being aware of something, without differentiating or recognizing what it is, and recognizing of something in the present without further importing anything else from our past. And there is no self-awareness or judgment that I am perceiving this, or even that this is such and such. But the recognition by itself, although it may involve a concept acquired in the past, doesn’t necessarily make the present experience an experience of the past, or past experience. We can still experience and act in the present without getting lost in the mental world, in the world of the past. This experience, unfortunately, may not last very long, since, in most cases, we almost instantaneously absorb the experience into our thinking process which necessarily involves past experience and knowledge. That’s when we shift from the world of present experience to the world of thought.

1.5. Living in the Present: When someone talks about living in the present, it’s truly a matter of degree to what extent we are moving in the real world, responding to objects and situations appropriately. We may totally be there, or on the other extreme, we may be barely there, only to check, verify and make sure that things are happening the way we want them to.
Our being totally in the present may just happen effortlessly, without our willing, when our mind does not go anywhere, when its activities are in abeyance. These are occasions in our experience when the awareness, or sense, of time is completely absent. Then also we can say we are totally in the present moment, not in the sense of the present as opposed to the past or the future. We just are. You can’t describe it. You are experiencing it, although you are fully conscious, but your mental processes are not in operation. Therefore, in this context, the question of the present, past or future experience does not arise.

Once again, UG’s experience of his mind being a ‘question mark’ before the questioner asked what time it is, is a timeless experience. He was in the ‘present moment’, aware of the clock, but was not conscious of the moment as present. He was just aware. But this present moment is a timeless moment. But when he responds to the question saying, “It’s quarter past three,” he is applying his previous knowledge to the situation and then we can say he is still experiencing the present moment, but the ‘present’ now in the sense of ‘present time’.

1.6. As Protagoras said, man is the measure of all things. That is especially true about time. Here we are dealing with time as man experiences it, not some objective chronological time (although even that has also to be ultimately measured by man). To say that all experience is in time is a better way of expressing than saying that the experience of the present is from the past and so on. It is experience that we distinguish as the past experience, the present experience or the future experience which has not occurred yet, but we can anticipate. Without these contrasts, time doesn’t make much sense. And past, present, and future are from someone’s point of view, and in someone’s experience.

II

The third objection does not flatly deny that you can experience the present moment. Its objections are to what is believed by mystics or meditation teachers as living from moment to moment, as though the past and future have no significant role to play in our lives. To illustrate this objection, I will continue the quote of Vito Victor’s article published on the internet (“The Cult of Present Moment,”[https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnx2aXRvdmljdlG9yeHxneDozZWM5NmlyMmQyNjkyYzFh]

In particular contexts like these, we can gently turn a friend toward a current, more nourishing reality and away from some unhelpful preoccupation. In such cases, we know what we mean perfectly well, and so does the friend in question. “Be here now!” gets its meaning from a specific situation in which some useful present reality is being ignored.

But it is not at all clear how such an exhortation would function as a general guide for living a happy or successful life. Considering how we actually spend our time – driving, reading, eating, watching television, listening to music, making love, engaged in sports or work, conversing, even meditating – it is often very hard to say whether we are “in the present” or not. And the attempt to apply “Be Here Now!” to all the phenomena of living invites a tangle of philosophical perplexities.

As a first attempt to make some order in this area, I want to demonstrate some ways in which these perplexities can arise. My headings will be 1) multitasking, 2) fiction, 3) purposive action, and 4) duration.
Vito argues that none of these will be possible except by recall and anticipation which generally accompany any “dominant activity.”

Recall and anticipation too seem to “multitask so regularly with whatever we are trying to focus upon that it is hard to imagine human life without them.”

He gives the example of driving:

…the driver, besides monitoring the road both ahead and behind, maybe listening to music and studying the landscape as well as carrying on an extended conversation with a passenger.

Thus Vito says:

If multitasking is indeed the default state of our mental functioning, it may be unrealistic to expect us ever to be entirely in the present. Human life is complex; there are always many balls in play, many things to keep track of at the same time. A more modest injunction might be to keep one foot in the present whenever possible.

Vito’s article emphasizes the function of past and future, i.e., past experience and envisaging future, and shows how essential these are for the human living. He shows the pitfalls of obsession with things of the past, or losing oneself in one’s past altogether, might render a person totally unfit for living. He also shows how many things we do, our actions, take place in the present. They may arise from the needs of the present.

Vito talks about how past and future can be very real, as, for example, in post-traumatic stress or in terminal cancer. He says that although being here and now and sometimes quite important on some occasions, it cannot be generalized it to living as a whole. The rest of the article is to show the various aspects of life (such as appreciation of music) where past experience and future anticipation play a vital role in human life.

Vito is not opposed to the experience of the present moment as such, but, once again, only to generalizing the idea to the whole of one’s life. In fact, he cites moments from his own meditation where he stayed and experienced things in the present.

I don’t have problems with this eloquent presentation except to add another meaning to the idea of living from moment to moment, which can indeed be quite significant in our daily life. Please read on.

III

3.1. Most of the time we live in the past or in the future. Living the past means we either constantly reminisce past events which we are involved in, or just plain images from the past, and going through either pleasant or unpleasant situations, and review them over and over again, with a view, of course, to resolve them. If the situations we recall are pleasant, we build on them by congratulating ourselves, feeling good about them, and planning to repeat similar events in the future. Or the build-up of the future may be just building castles in the air, fantasizing, or planning to do various things to enhance the pleasurable experience, or repeat it at any rate, and so forth.

That’s where the future comes into the picture. And if the situations in the past have been unpleasant, say that someone insulted or hurt us or our feelings, or we are angry at someone, we keep imagining
how to compensate our anger or insult. On the other hand, the recall may bring in its train only feelings of depression, guilt, and anger. We keep mulling over them, reviewing them and keep thinking of a future in which these feelings are neutralized, or at any rate what think would be a better future.

3.2. Meditation: If we meditate, that may be just a means of freeing ourselves from our involvement in the past or future. It is at the least temporarily letting the past or future go, as for example, letting a feeling of insult, for instance, be without interfering with it, and not be so excited about a future project. It’s a process of freeing ourselves, as it were, from our “passions”. Of course, it involves experiencing the past in the first place and acting in relation to it in the second place, albeit in a passive way. And it is this action that is in the present, hence constitutes living in the present. Take, for instance, fear: We are keenly aware of the fear, as well as our struggle to be free from the fear. Acting in the present in relation to it consists primarily in learning to be aware of the struggle rather passively and to let it be, as much as we can. If we are still constantly thinking about the fear and worrying, we could take the consequences of the frightening situation to their limits and face the m. Let the consequences be, including, for instance, possibly losing a job or money or life. In other words we let the uncertainty be, and ultimately surrender to the fear. The process is one of disengagement from the past, as much as we can, and from the future that it generates. The effect of the meditation must be something of this sort.

3.3. This can also apply to day-to-day living: Of course, such a living must involve the past in order to experience anything. But letting the intruding past experience come into the present and letting it be is entirely different from living in the past or fantasizing about the future. When I listen to music, or someone talking about their problems, I am primarily just listening, although in order to understand what I am listening to my past experience has to come into play. But my focus is on the listening, on the present music or talk, not just remembering past such experiences or my own similar situations.

Notice how we not only just filter our present experience through our past biases and prejudices, but cut off most of what we perceive in the present. We barely listen to what we hear what is being said or see what is actually there, as we are busy most of the time reacting (positively or negatively) to what little we hear or see. Our mind is constantly busy chattering away and commenting. I remember an occasion when a visitor kept on asking me questions, battling off and criticizing what I say. It seemed to go on endlessly. So, at one point, I stopped him and asked to repeat a single idea I had been presenting. He couldn’t. It was obvious he wasn’t listening. He missed out most of what was being said, as he was eager to win in an argument.

Living in the present involves being free simultaneously from our past and our future. This can be liberating on its own right. One doesn’t have to be “enlightened” to live like this. And one could limit

7 I am not here advocating meditation as a means to become totally free from the past (as, for example, in liberation). I am well aware of the pitfalls of using any method or practice (which I presented in my book, Being Yourself [See the chapter on Meditation]. Here I am talking about the meditation process to free ourselves from day-to-day problems.

8 Susan Nettleton, a psychiatric counselor and friend of mine, commented on this as follows: “But the activity of ‘taking the possible consequences to their limits’ involves a different state of consciousness--“the calculating mind”--from the process of ‘letting it be’--the passive witness consciousness or “meditative mind”. The calculating mind is very involved with knowledge, i.e., calculation about the future arises from the experience of the past, where as the meditative mind has suspended judgments and as observer is more actively in the present. In my experience these two states are not simultaneous nor the same thing, rather, but fluctuate in meditation. I agree though that the technique of calculating the consequences can prepare the ground for ‘disengagement from the past’.”
one’s goals to what is necessary or essential for living, and not be carried away by romantic ideals and fantasies.

3.4. Living from Moment to Moment: Take, for instance, a moment of grief. We can grieve someone’s death in an ongoing fashion or intermittently. It can last a few minutes or many years. It all depends on the extent to which a person is willing to let go of his or her past. When we move on to something else, we have moved away from that moment to another.

Or, you have been really enjoying a tasty meal and you even regret finishing it. You want it to last longer. Or you are fascinated by someone and admire that person, going through different scenarios in your mind in which you imagine you would be acting or speaking similarly. It can become an obsession. When a teacher or someone suggests living from moment to moment, he or she is saying that when things come to a reasonable conclusion you put a stop to it and move on to the next moment or thing to do, and not dwell on the past.

When someone insults you, it’s natural to feel hurt and even want to hurt back or revenge. If you realize this might be a never-ending process, you let the hurt be and pass on to the next thing in life.

3.5 UG, who is well-known for living from moment to moment (in spite of long spates of reminiscences of his past), did on occasion spend even three or four days isolating himself, after he had a row with one of his associates, yelling and vituperating. This ‘moment’ of his lasted at times for days together. Once I remarked while I was with him in Hemet, California, that his anger (or whatever) only lasts for a moment. The next moment it’s gone. His immediate reply was, “It can be more than a moment, Sir.”

The moral of this lesson is that the idea of the ‘moment’ can stretch in time, yet there is such a thing as moving away from one situation to another. This is a way of understanding living from moment to moment.

IV

4.1. Awareness and Knowledge: Let us look at the example I mentioned in section I above of UG’s looking at the clock. I said that when he was first in the state of ‘not knowing’ he was in the timeless present (from his point of view, although for an observer he was aware of the clock at the present moment in time), while the knowledge that the time of the clock was quarter past three was about the present clock time, i.e. his experience of the present. Not that he was aware of his being in the timeless present. Later the knowledge of his watching the clock or answering what time of the clock came into the picture when the question was asked of him.

The term ‘awareness’ has multiple meanings. In this context I mean by ‘awareness’ consciousness with or without its having an object. Thus, UG’s report of his state of mind of watching a clock as a question mark or a state of ‘unknowing’ can be understood either as being aware of the clock without a specific knowledge that it was a clock or that the time was quarter past three or simply a state of merely being aware. It is not always easy to determine whether a person is merely aware or is aware of an object. Thus the experience I was describing in 1.5 above can be understood either way. That doesn’t affect my argument in this essay. In my opinion, remembering, recall or recognition can occur on the basis of either kind of awareness.

I can see a serious objection to the idea that awareness can exist without knowledge: How is one able to report his experience as mere awareness without any past knowledge operating on the present
experience saying “it is pure awareness”? It seems as if one needs at the least a concept of awareness in order to able to say that he or she was aware.

And I can see two possibilities that can answer this objection: 1) A reply given by Sankara, the great Advaita philosopher: that awareness is aware of itself. (UG’s version of the same idea is that ‘Life’ is aware of itself.) There is no further knowledge necessary (in order to remember it later). And that is sufficient for me to be able to say that I was aware. 2) There are many moments of our experience when we were just aware. We were just spell-bound by something, or act on an impulse without thinking a moment about what we are doing or act automatically our sheer habit. We didn’t even know that we were aware, because we didn’t have a concept of awareness yet, let alone apply other concepts to the experience. In retrospect, we might say that we were aware of something, but didn’t have the faintest idea of what it was because we had no idea of what we were aware of. Of course, someone must have taught us by then (or we acquired it by some other means,) what ‘awareness’ meant for us to be able to utilize the term as a concept, just as we were taught other concepts. For example, someone might point to some such experience (as impulsive action) and say that “you must be aware of what it was, although he didn’t quite know it.

Recognition of what we have perceived or experienced before can occur in various stages, starting from a bare feeling of familiarity to a full recognition and then on to remembering the past events surrounding the experience.

4.2. U.G.’s Calamity: UG couldn’t have described anything about the “death” experience, as it simply was not an experience and there was no awareness of it. What he described as ‘Calamity’ was events that occurred before or after what he called the ‘calamity’.

> It was a sudden ‘explosion’ inside, blasting, as it were, every cell, every nerve and every gland in my body...I didn’t feel that I was a newborn baby – no question of enlightenment at all – but the things that had astonished me that week, the changes in taste, seeing and so on, had become permanent fixtures. I call all these events the ‘calamity’.

On the other hand, Sankara (the Advaita philosopher) said that consciousness (or awareness) must have been there in deep sleep because when we wake up we say “how soundly I have slept!” But I think this is a misleading argument. True, in deep sleep there may often be some minimal consciousness. But I do remember an occasion when I had resolved the previous night to wake up at 4 am next morning to go and receive my former professor at the train station, but due to lack of sleep for the three nights before, I didn’t wake up till 7 am. The alarm must have gone off, but I didn’t hear it. (I had to apologize to him later.) And I couldn’t remember a thing about those hours I fell asleep—not a thing. My experience was similar when I had anesthesia before I had gone in for surgery. I only remember passing out (the first time lights went up in a circle in my head and then I was simply out), rather being conscious at a certain moment and being conscious at a later moment after I came out of anesthesia. What occurred in between the two moments I couldn’t say anything. Could the same thing be not true with ‘clinical death’?

UG never said anything Calamity about except that he was not aware of anything about it. But when he was brought back to life by someone’s phone call, he became gradually conscious, just as I did when I went through the process anesthesia. In fact, one could say that about any state of deep sleep. I was aware of myself when I was awake before falling asleep, and then again when I woke up. Between the two moments I had no awareness or let alone knowledge of what happened to me, even that I was alive
or dead. You can’t just say that the calamity was stored in UG’s memory as an experience, when he didn’t and couldn’t have any memory of it, except that he was only aware of what occurred before and what occurred after the ‘death’, just as you assert that you were in a state of deep sleep only because you only remember the moment before falling asleep and the moment you woke up from sleep.

V

5.1. It would be fruitful to look at the role of the past in human experience as a continuum at the one end of which is living totally in the past or in the future which is modified past, as living perpetually in a fantasy world and at the other end is living in the present where there is no concern with the past or present and the mind doesn’t go to either place.

I remember UG’s admonitions such as “Don’t think, just act,” or “You are always thinking something that is totally unrelated to what’s going on.” This doesn’t mean that UG’s own daily activities preclude normal living where past experience and thinking are very much in use, as well as future possibilities. There is another way looking at this, viz. that we are in the present, are aware of whatever is going on, and to that extent there is self-consciousness, but there is no dwelling either in the past or in the future. This awareness requires the use of past knowledge in order to recognize the elements of the present and doesn’t go any further. And it may not even have to involve any division between us and what we experience, or, at any rate, if there is a division it’s minimal – only to the extent of recognition.

And now we can add a bit more content to this situation: we employ whatever knowledge from our past we utilize in the current situation to solve or resolve problem in the situation. Of course, we may not even be aware that we are doing so, as in the following example: when we truly want to help someone, a friend or a loved one, or even a stranger, one doesn’t always have to act through the division, and the self-centeredness and selfishness that it normally involves. One might not be acting through one’s vested interests at all, or one might be aware of them and act in spite of them and not because of them. This is especially true in emergency situations.

In this context, I am also thinking UG’s description of stimulus and response being one unit without a break between the two. You could apply this to the above example and say that simply because we utilize (rather automatically) our previous knowledge to the current situation, it doesn’t follow that we are aware of the division between ourselves and the ‘other’. There is just a situation and an immediate response. How much of self-consciousness can intrude in this experience can vary from situation to situation.

5.2. So, it should be clear by now that being in the present can have varying degrees of consciousness or awareness, starting from plain unconscious states such as deep sleep, anesthesia, swoon, somnambulism or other unconscious activity to experiences where there is only a mere awareness, but no conscious awareness or recognition of the objects of experience, and to varying degrees of reflection or self-consciousness. When we begin to recognize experiences or their objects, our past experience responds to them in terms of thinking.

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9 One could say that he lived in two different modes – one in which there is no duality (where stimulus and response are one unit without the mediation of an idea or thought) and another in which there is. (UG often said that ‘duality’ and ‘non-duality’ exist in the same ‘frame’.) I mean by this living in which there is no consciousness of time or being in the present, or division between himself and others (non-duality), and yet, at the same time, acting as if he was aware of the division (duality).
Also in self-consciousness, which is built on a previous recognition process, we are not only aware of what we perceive, but are commenting on it from various points of view, and viewing those comments again from other points of view, and so on, ad infinitum.

5.3. Living in the Mind: Our entire conscious life seems to be occupied by the living in the mind, and we use current perceptions, i.e., we land only in the real world, from time to time, and use what we perceive in it only as fodder for our mental life. Our appreciation of things, our enjoyment, our happiness, pleasures and pains, pride and humility, inferiority and superiority, kindness and cruelty, our violence, our helpfulness or non-cooperation or withdrawal, etc. all seem to be possible only in the mental world. 10

Thinking automatically puts us in the vicarious world of thought where objects are represented along with the consciousness of ourselves as their knowers or thinkers. Most of the time this thought world is more real to us than the actual world.

To illustrate this vicarious living in the mind, take, for example, what I call the ‘two sexes’: You really can’t ‘get it on’ many times except by imagining your favorite sex act while you are actually engaged in sex. This is what I would call a case of ‘two sexes’: we are actually thinking of sex while we are in fact engaged in it. The actual food we eat loses or gains in its taste only through comparison with something we ate in the past. No action of a person is satisfying unless it matches our expectations. Also, our senses become jaded as nothing present matches our past experience. And ultimately we get bored with life. 11

Or a person may be fantasizing about his dream partner so much that even when someone that might fit his specifications passes right in front of him, he hardly notices her.

Various dramas (arising from diverse positive and negative identification with ideas, beliefs, things, people, groups, nations, religion and places) are enacted in it, replaying scenes from our past, acting out various unresolved situations, or using our imagination to resolve the emotional issues that arose in those situations. Each reenactment builds up our experience structure and is cumulative in pleasure or pain. I need not describe in detail how such a life based on identification and self-protectiveness is the source of untold conflict, violence and misery. It’s a life that runs parallel to our actual life and makes us lose touch with reality to varying degrees.

I should add here that self-consciousness can go to extreme levels when we become totally ‘paralyzed’ in action, 12 suffocate ourselves, or be nervous or frightened. 13

5.4. Mental ‘Dwelling’: Living in the mind is facilitated by mental ‘dwelling’. Stray thoughts pop in and out, distracting you from the present. It may be speculation about the other person’s motives, worry

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10 We need not list all the activities involved in thinking such as commenting, judging, evaluating, problem-solving, analyzing, goal-seeking, and figuring out a path to the goals and so on. In fact, the list is endless.

11 Boredom in general as a life problem, on the other hand, may be a consequence of a deep frustration that leaves one with a general lack of interest in things and affairs of the world.

12 As eminently illustrated in Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground.

13 Reflection also brings approval or disapproval of oneself and what one is thinking about, based on how we think others think about what we do or say. And this is the process through which we build our self-image as well as ourselves.
about what else I might be missing or forgetting to do, and so forth. They don’t have to be complete thoughts which lead us into the past or future. It may just be broken images, fragments of thoughts and features of situations. Interestingly, one or another of these images or thoughts or memories is enough to create a train or trend of thought and pull us into either recalling or reenacting a past situation or make us live a fantasy.

Various memories intrude into our present consciousness. We tend to pick or latch on to whatever gave us pleasure or pain in our past and elaborate on it endlessly, enhancing them or battling them until we find satisfaction or resolution of some kind. These mental tracks are unfinished and keep calling us for completion. But unfortunately these are endless tracks. They go on and on, even when we think we have taken them to a reasonable conclusion, until we actually satisfy them or resolve them in practice. Even then the mental activity can continue and become habitual. The self is nothing but a set of such habits.

In the mental world, the self and the world, the subject and the object, are correlates of each other: one doesn’t exist without the other. We shape ourselves constantly by imagining and viewing ourselves from others’ point of view, real or imagined and form our self-image. And our values and judgments are formed by such considerations as well as what gave us pleasure or pain in the past.

Of course, it is also in the thought world that appreciation of music or art in general or gratitude for the favors of others, take place. This is a world in its own right, feeding on the past, present and the future. Also, there is a time travel, moving back and forth in time, dreading the future, imagining dying and coming to terms with it, searching for the meaning of life, and constant reviewing and revising of the past. We are choked by the world of thought. Indeed, as UG said, we are under the ‘stranglehold of thought’. Living in the mind is ubiquitous.

5.5. The central question here is: where does living in the present or being in the present fit in this framework?

Life in the mind or mental life is living in time. Nothing much happens in the mental world without being ‘bracketed’ by time. Past, present, and future are all part of the mental life. Even when we think of living in the present, it’s only as a being living in the world of the mind that we envisage that as a project. It’s true that while we are carrying on our daily activities we constantly monitor what is actually happening in the real present world. But such monitoring is all part of projects which can only occur in time. Even when we practice meditation and follow the admonition to live in the present without caring about the past or the future, we still have to mentally resolve to do so to order to achieve it as a goal, and that’s an act of volition. It’s not something that happens automatically.

5.6. Freedom from the self: The question is always how one could be free from the noise of the self, how to come down to the real world without any effort. The answer is simply to look for the different goals, desires or fears and let them go, by taking them in one’s mind to their logical conclusion and examine them without trying to change anything. Unfortunately, one is not actually prompted to do this, except in times of crisis. And this hardly ever happens. Most of our lives we take these for granted and real. I am only stating the necessary conditions, not that we are likely to question them.

I don’t need to dwell on this except to say that if nothing changes after one does this sort of work, then we need to learn to accept the outcomes and surrender to them. That could free us from our past or future and land us in the present without any effort. And this can happen only when you are free from goals and their contemplation. Of course, you cannot force yourself to be in the present for any length of time, for that too is a movement of the self and is bound to end up in duality and failure.
We may not need to exert any effort deliberately. In fact, effort is counterproductive. The focus on the problem naturally occurs when the problem is intense or painful. One doesn’t need to remind oneself of that constantly, which is in general what effort amounts to. Or it may amount to constantly telling oneself to follow a certain recipe, formula or policy. But unfortunately, we will realize sooner or later that none of these ‘methods’ work. And in that moment of total frustration and surrender arises effortlessness. This realization could perhaps be called meditation. It’s not something we can deliberately undertake as a project.

5.7. Thus the past in the service of the present is different from living in the past. Also living in the present is entirely different from living only in the mental world. There are no prescriptions, practices or methods to adapt to life in the present. When you realize you are distracted by this or that, you are automatically in the present. And there are no special rewards for being in the present either, except being from the self and the turmoil it creates in our lives.

If we are aware of the source of the conflict and deal with it either by letting things go or accepting (surrendering yourself to) what you are (your fear, your anger, your depression, your loneliness, your guilt, shame and remorse, your frustration, and so on), perhaps you can be free from the conflict. At any rate, the point is to become free from the duality, which conflict represents, one way or another, including the duality between living in the present and living in the mind. That may amount to doing nothing unless and until one is forced by a problem or crisis, but accepting things as they come.

Then it really doesn’t matter whether we do or do not live in the present, or only live in the mind. You are free. And you are at peace, but not everlastingly, because there is no such thing.

VI

6.1. It’s not just that higher levels of self-consciousness remove us from reality, but that duality, which is built in them, between ourselves and the world (or other people) is also exacerbated. The duality that is based on the processes of the pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain and is bound to generate suffering.

The rationale for advocating living in the present is primarily in the realm of suffering. It is being bound to the past or future that generally causes much of typically human suffering. For example, one had some satisfaction or pleasure before, and therefore, one is keenly aware of lacking it now or missing in the future. The agony that is created in waiting for things to happen, for one to succeed in one’s endeavors, the keen awareness that is created in being frightened, humiliated, or the guilt one feels in relation to one’s doing something to someone in the past, and so on, are further examples of duality. It is freedom from such past or future that delivers us from our suffering.

This is really the reason for anyone, such as a spiritual teacher, to admonish his pupils to live in the present (being here and now).

Of course, one might say that mental life is necessary for human living in as much as goals are formulated in it and much human pleasure or happiness is derived from accomplishing various tasks and achieving the goals, pleasures such as in having pride in oneself, enjoying companionship with people, avoiding pitfalls in living, etc., and not just problem solving, innovating and so forth.

No one is saying that one shouldn’t work for a living, providing food, clothing, and shelter for oneself or family, nor enjoy relationships when they happen; or appreciate various aspects of living such as music, literature or solving problems of mathematics or science. And some amount of pain or suffering,
beyond the merely physical pain from injury or illness, is built in the process of living. But it is the idea of self-fulfillment through the process of goal-seeking and pleasure-seeking that is bound to bring unnecessary pain to human life, because most of these goals are beyond any real need in life, and the pleasures we seek never end with their satisfaction, but become ends in themselves as in pursuit of money, acquisitions, wealth and power. We thus a life purely based on seeking permanent pleasure, or seeking endless self-fulfillment, avoiding pain and unhappiness.

To what degree, or what kind of goals one ought to have for one's living is, of course, a person's choice, as long as he or she realizes where the needs end and where greed begins. You set your own limits to how much you need.

VII

7.1. About UG: I must add a major caveat to the idea of being or living in the present. The above discussion presupposes that we can somehow bring ourselves into the present by conscious effort, say by talking to ourselves, and somehow live in it, thereby descending from our mental lives, albeit temporarily. But this may all just be a ploy of mental living. The mind doesn't see any possibility of totally denying itself and let reality in. (Even when it thinks it is doing it, there is always a constant monitoring going on, which in turn is a mental activity.) Actually, there is no way it can. The mind willfully cannot commit 'suicide'. Old (mental) habits die hard. It may be mere happenstance that we are free from the trammels of the mind and land in the world of reality for brief periods of time. These moments are short-lived. Soon the mind, or self-consciousness, is bound to assert itself, by starting to recognize the moment, recognize what's going on, and resume its activity of commenting, judging and so on, formulating further goals, and thus putting us back in the mental world. And the whole rigmarole starts once again.

What UG had called his Calamity may be a total cataclysm, shakeup or overhaul of our psyche or organism, or it may be something more commonplace than that. This may very well be a genuine possibility, but obviously not part of our daily living or experience. And there is no mention here of how this happens to anyone, or what one could do for it to happen. What is important about it is that the freedom from conflict and duality that it entails. UG says that after the Calamity, he was freed from the stranglehold of thought. That is, thought had no place in his consciousness except when a need or occasion called for it.

Except that UG still has to explain how he functions in daily life seeming to be governed by the self. That part is not quite clear to me. UG might say that life or "something else" takes over, and you have no say in what you do or say. "It's not in your hands." "You have to clinically die." I guess that (i.e., life 'taking over') applies even to the wrangling he engages in sometimes, the planning and decisions he makes from time to time, the offenses and defenses. You have no way of explaining all that. The only thing you could do is just somehow assume that it may not be what it seems, because you notice certain freedom of movement from one situation to another lacking in others, the ability to walk away from anyone or anything -- the non-involvement, the instant disengagement and, not the least of all, the compassion. You notice him instantly dropping of all activity when the situation changes -- he might then simply drop into sleep or some routine activity unrelated to what has been going on before. Such things prompt you to be amazed at what you see and somehow come to the conclusion that there is no way you can understand him. He is a total mystery, particularly because we have no way of knowing what actually goes on in his mind, if anything does. Or, perhaps, as I used to say, "What you see in UG is what you get!"
You can also say that UG too uses mental functions, dwells in the past sometimes and plans for the future. I certainly have known him to make mistakes in judgments, in understanding and responding to situations (in spite of his assertion, “‘This’ can never be (or go) wrong”). But what is crucial to understand in all this is while all this may be true about him, one thing you notice is that there is no self, self-interest, self-protectiveness and even self-concern in him. Even when he turns up the heater in his room to the discomfort of everyone else, he is not as worried about other people’s unwanted presence as making an automatic response to his feeling cold. In some ways, he acts like an automaton.

Whether he lived in the past, present or future is merely an academic question. I have seen him dwell hours together in chatting away about his past to the utter boredom of those present. But he always said he was not involved. The same is true when he bawled out at people for trivial mistakes. He also showed tremendous, sometimes rather exaggerated, concern for other people, even if they were total strangers. He participated in the writing of his biography, he discussed with me details about what could be done with the volume that was going to be prepared about him, and how it could be improved, and so on.

7.3. How does all this relate to my discussion about being or living in the present? Only to the extent to point out that the problem is not as much living in the present or being in the present, as to what degree extent we are free from ourselves. And we can conclude that regardless of the effort we make to be in the present, our ability to live in the present with or without effort is more or less dependent on the degree to which we are free from ourselves. And in that, we can also say that freedom includes freedom from self-centered projects, past worries and anxieties, and other mental issues. And wisdom, as someone put it, consists in “changing what we can and accepting what we can’t”.

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May 2, 2019