

ARTS & BOOKS

Tolle vs. Descartes?

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Tolle is a contemporary Canadian spiritual guide, who aims at transforming individual and collective human consciousness and who claims to have debunked Descartes.

As a human being, it is legitimate to wonder: what do I need to feel happy and satisfied? Western society tends to give answers like material success, intellectual accomplishment and a fulfilling private life. Nevertheless, some people still feel an inner void which cannot be filled by those achievements, whether they are reached or not.

In most North American and European bookstores, the shelves devoted to religion, mysticism, philosophy and esoteric writings have been expanding vastly in the last few years. Eckhart Tolle, one of today's most influential contemporary spiritual teachers. He was born in Germany in 1948 and was educated at the Universities of London and Cambridge. Tolle suffered from long periods of depression until he reached the age of 29, when he experienced a spiritual transformation. This dissolved his former identity and changed the course of his life. He began a new career as a counsellor and spiritual teacher. His non-fiction book *The Power of Now* was first published in 1999 and reached the *New York Times* bestseller list in December 2002. It has been translated into over 20 languages.

In *The Power of Now*, Tolle emphasizes the importance of focussing on the present moment as the past is gone and the future can only be imagined. When you accept the present moment for what it is, you no longer create suffering. In his latest book, *A New Earth* (2005), Tolle explains that the ego creates thoughts all the time in order to give us an identity. When in the 16th century the French philosopher Descartes wrote: "I think, therefore I am***", it was, according to Tolle, a huge mistake. We are not our thoughts: we are the awareness behind the thoughts.

Eckhart Tolle's teachings are seducing a considerable number of people, including celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Meg Ryan. Unlike Osho, an Indian spiritual teacher who was the subject of much debate until his death in 1990, Tolle has been rather uncontroversial. His teachings consist mostly in his personal experience of enlightenment and practical advice. He has attracted thousands of people looking for their true inner nature, but so far, Tolle seems to be a rather benign guru... yet another successful author in the ever-booming self-help publishing industry.

Sources: * Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, New World Library, 1999.

** Eckhart Tolle, *A new Earth: Awakening to your life's purpose*, Dutton Adult, 2005.

*** René Descartes, *Discours sur la méthode*, 1637.

«www.wie.org» Entitled "What is Enlightenment?" this website deals with the different waves of contemporary spiritual teachings.

"Vancouver-based spiritual teacher agrees to book deal," *The Globe and Mail* 13 August 2003.