



UK Extension's
**Universe of
Possibilities™**

SKILLS FOR CREATING HAPPINESS AND BLESSING OTHERS

Embracing This Present Moment

E*mbracing what is and living with complete attention in the present moment opens up all kinds of possibilities. It's no wonder that great achievers, philosophers, and spiritual teachers from all traditions have sung the praises of living in the joy of the timeless now.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, put it this way: "With the past, I have nothing to do; nor with the future. I live now." Emily Dickinson noted, "Forever is composed of nows." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encouraged his followers to give up needless worry about the future and, with faith, to live in all their natural glory as do "the birds in the air and the lilies of the field." He said to "take no thought for tomorrow" and to "put your hands to the plow without looking back," giving full attention, one day at a time, to the challenges and opportunities that arise.

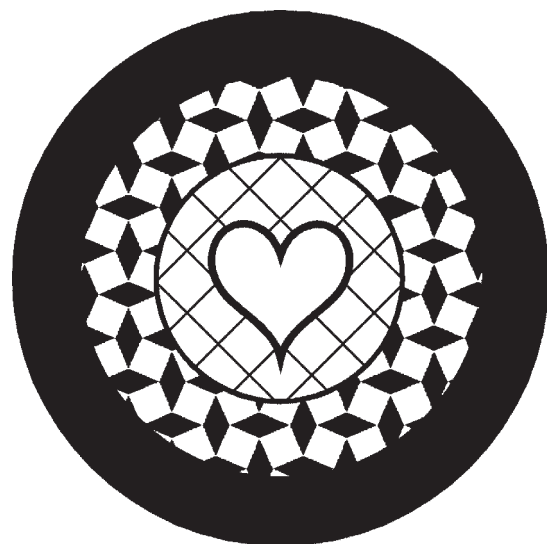
Similarly, Buddha asserted, "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, not to anticipate troubles, but to live the present moment wisely and earnestly."

Of course, the art of living in present time does not preclude skillfully visiting the past and future. Remembering important lessons from the past is vital; fond memories warm our hearts; and having an eye to the future is part of living wisely and giving birth to our dreams.

7 Core Principles

- 1 There are two aspects to embracing the present moment: 1) being fully aware and attentive to the here and now; and 2) completely accepting the moment-to-moment reality of what is.
- 2 When you are fully alive to the wonder and opportunity of each moment, anxiety dissipates, fresh possibilities arise, and a peaceful, fundamental happiness emerges.
- 3 As a general rule, the degree of fear we experience is an exact measurement of how far we have strayed from the present moment into regrets about the past or worries about the future.
- 4 When you do not accept what is in the moment, you are fighting reality—the equivalent of banging your head against a brick wall.
- 5 Learning to accept what is, instant by instant, will save you untold frustration, anger, and disappointment.
- 6 Accepting the moment-to-moment flow of what is gives you the freedom to focus all your energy on creatively making any positive changes that are needed, whether they are concrete changes in the world around you or personal attitudinal adjustments.
- 7 Remember, the more centered you are on the Target of Life, the greater your well-being, the wiser your choices, and the more effective you are in everything you do.

Put yourself in the center of the heart of the Target of Life. **Notice that the heart of the Target is clear, unobstructed, full of light.** From there, you see clearly and make choices that are good for you and those around you. You are attuned to your inner guidance and best judgment. You feel at peace, strong, compassionate, joyful, energetic, and creative. Your reflexes are sharp, your immune system strong. You stumble and fall less often, and you handle life's inevitable challenges with more confidence and skill. Your ability to endure prolonged hardship increases. You are naturally more sensitive to others—more patient, generous, and understanding. You more easily express the richness of your authentic self. The more deeply centered you are in the heart of the Target of Life, the more love you feel and share. **You are at your best—physically, mentally, and spiritually.**



Target of Life

Although you undoubtedly have experienced being relatively centered, often little and big things happen that go against your desires and expectations, and you are likely to find yourself thrown off center and pulled out of your heart's wisdom into the surrounding web of minor frustrations and energy-drainers. Your vitality, peace, and sensitivity begin to fade, and little tensions, doubts, and fears start to emerge. Stress creeps in and things bother you more easily. You are more critical of yourself and edgier with the people in your life. Your effectiveness, spiritual attunement, and physical health start to slip.

All of this can pull you even further away from the center of the Target of Life into the area of increased darkness and sharp edges. When you are in this portion of the Target, you have strayed still further away from your center—your heart of hearts, your home of love, wisdom, and joy. Stress levels are high, and it's much more difficult to sense your inner guidance. You're far more likely to become irritable with co-workers and friends, to yell at family members, and to make poor decisions in every area of life. Tension, disharmony, and fatigue take their toll on your creativity and physical well-being. You and everyone around you are affected negatively.

Beyond this portion of the Target of Life is the outer darkness. Here you can't see well at all; it's a terrible place to be. Insecurity, doubt, confusion, and selfishness are rampant. Stress soars to dangerous levels, and good judgment plummets to an all-time low. You feel heavy and burdened and make decisions that hurt yourself and others. You are driven by fear, blindness, and anger. In this outer darkness your health suffers tremendously, and all kinds of abuse, destruction, and violence flourish. Despite your inherent goodness, you may find yourself saying and doing horrendous things. Truly, it's a living hell.

Every individual has a Target of Life as does every relationship, organization, city, and nation. Even the world as a whole has a Target of Life, and when the world moves too far from its center of love, an array of major problems erupt, including disease, poverty, environmental disasters, international strife, and war.

It is our individual and collective choices that move us away from our intuitive wisdom at the center of the Target of Life into varying degrees of stress, confusion, frustration, and conflict. **Fortunately, by making wise choices at any time, we can move back toward the center of the Target into greater levels of peace, vitality, kindness, and opportunity.**

In the gift of choice lies our greatest power—a power that can be used to uplift or destroy. The Target of Life is a helpful way to understand our individual and collective well-being. **With awareness and practice, we can become highly skilled at detecting and creatively responding to the early signs of harmful stress.** We can gradually learn to stay more deeply centered with increasing frequency, saving ourselves all kinds of trouble and our society billions of dollars in unnecessary health care costs.

If you have a strong spiritual orientation, you may find it helpful to think of being centered as being in the heart of the Divine Presence—the source of all goodness, harmony, abundance, and creativity. As temptations confront you and you allow yourself to be lured into making less than optimal decisions, you stray from the center of Divine Love into varying degrees of fear, pain, and self-defeating behaviors. To move toward the center of Divine Presence or toward a self-created hell of outer darkness, to go more deeply into love and joy or to separate yourself from the Divine and become lost in fear and confusion—these are decisions that you face each day. By staying centered and honoring your intuitive guidance, by remaining alert and choosing wisely, you can be at your best more frequently and help to create a world of marvelous possibilities.



Life takes place only in the present moment. Unfortunately, most of us have a strong tendency to stray into the past or wander into the future. Often, our attention is only partially on the person we are communicating with or on the task at hand. In failing to be fully present, we miss much of life's richness and limit our effectiveness, our happiness, and our ability to give to others.

*Stop living in a past that is gone
and a tomorrow that is yet to come.
Life is only this place, this time,
this breath—right now.*

Lisa Engelhardt

CALL YOUR SPIRIT BACK TO PRESENT TIME

Teacher and author Caroline Myss stresses the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of living in present time. Dr. Myss explains that many of us have trouble doing this, however, because so much of our energy is locked up in the past or future. To help us understand how personal energy works, she uses the image of “energy bank accounts.”

Let's assume that at the beginning of each day you are given an allotment of personal energy to use in any way you decide. To simplify the math, as Dr. Myss does, let's pretend that on a particular day you start off with \$100 in your energy bank account. You can spend that \$100 of energy in any way you want.

But things aren't as rosy as you might imagine. As soon as you wake up, you notice you're angry over what your boss said yesterday behind your back. And then there's the devastating breakup with your boyfriend that has left you feeling sad and lonely. So, right off the bat, you're spending \$35 dollars (35 percent) of your energy account brooding over these past events.

Also weighing heavily on your mind is the big speech you're scheduled to give next week. “How will I get through this?” you say to yourself as your heart pounds and your palms perspire. Your off-and-on anxiety about this future event siphons away another \$25 (25 percent) from your bank account.

This means that, even without additional regrets and worries, you have only 40 percent of your bank account left for dealing with the day's events. As Dr. Myss points out, the opportunity of a lifetime may come along today; however, to see it and successfully embrace it will take \$60 from your personal energy account, but, alas, you have only \$40 left in the bank!

Admittedly, this is an oversimplified example, but you get the point. To function at your best, you need as much of your energy as possible in present time. Get in the habit of noticing where your attention is. ***If your spirit needlessly wanders into the future or gets stuck in a past event, call it back to present time!*** If you're like most of us, you may need to do this again and again each day.

LOVING WHAT IS

One of the basic causes of unhappiness is our refusal to accept the moment-to-moment reality of what is—what's happening right now. ***At the root of our frustration is this: The way things are is different from what we want or expect, and we don't accept that fact.*** It's sort of like getting mad every evening because the sun goes down. Not many of us would intentionally bang our heads against a brick wall. Yet, when we refuse to accept what is, we do just that—bang our heads against the brick wall of reality.

*Whatever the present moment
contains, accept it as if you had
chosen it. Always work with it,
not against it. Make it your friend
and ally, not your enemy.
This will miraculously
transform your whole life.*

Eckhart Tolle

Accepting what is does not mean that things must stay the same. In fact, as you learn to accept the here and now, you keep within yourself all the energy that you used to waste in disappointment and frustration. This means you're in a *much* better position to change what you can.

It's All Perfect

Let's assume there's a good reason for all that happens to you, that each event is designed to feed your growth and happiness, that everything is orchestrated for your highest good, that it's all perfect, and that it's the same for everyone else.

*You might attribute this to the wondrous order of the universe or to the divine plan of a loving God. Either way, **what if you decide to live your life from this point forward with the complete conviction that everything that happens to you—without exception—is absolutely perfect just as it is?** Here are some of the benefits you might experience from seeing the world this way:*

- ♥ You would no longer waste precious time and energy fighting the reality of what is.
- ♥ You would have far more energy available to make positive changes both within yourself and in the world at large. ♥ Undeterred by needless frustration, anger, and fear, you would see people and circumstances with more clarity and understanding. ♥ Accepting what is, you would live more fully and richly in the present moment. ♥ Freed from the weight of needless stress, your body and immune system would function with greater efficiency and strength. ♥ Your energies would be less scattered, leaving you peaceful and alert. ♥ You could engage people and events with deeper compassion, sensitivity, good humor, and creativity.
- ♥ You would find it much easier to concentrate pleasantly and wholeheartedly on the task at hand.
 - ♥ If you are spiritually inclined, you could more easily attune to the Divine Presence.
- ♥ Knowing that everything is perfect just as it is, you would be far less apt to dwell on worries about the past or fears about the future. ♥ You also would be less prone to fear, anger, or depression over events in your life. ♥ You could better see that, as terrible as they are, conditions such as hatred, war, poverty, and young children dying of starvation or cancer may indeed be invitations for us to learn and share and take responsibility for creating a kinder, more loving world. ♥ With your increased energy and understanding, you would become a much wiser and stronger force for good in this world. ♥ Your composure, wisdom, and vitality would be a beautiful living example for your loved ones and for all who cross your path. ♥ You would more easily embrace the wonder and opportunity of each present moment. ♥ No matter what happens—whether pleasant or painful—you would greet each event with greater composure and understanding, saying from the depths of your heart, "Thank you. I will make the best of this opportunity."



*You might not totally accept the belief that "It's All Perfect," but perhaps some aspects of this way of thinking will help you **live with greater peace, creativity, and joy in the present moment.***

MORE POISE, MORE FREEDOM

Remember, accepting what is doesn't necessarily mean you like what's happening. It doesn't turn you into a wimp, and it doesn't mean you won't do everything in your power to bring about positive changes. It just means you've decided to stop being yanked around every time things don't happen according to your preferences. *It means you've decided to stop arguing with reality, and because of that, you are calmer, more alert, more powerful.* You have greater energy and presence to spend enjoying life or taking a stand for what you believe in. The more you accept what is, the more centered you will be in the heart of the Target of Life—and that's the best place of all to be.

By taking good care of the present moment, we take good care of the future.

Thich Nhat Hanh

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

Throughout the ages, in all the world's great religions, some practitioners have chosen staying in the present moment as a spiritual discipline. For example, Buddhists call this practice "mindfulness." Employing a parallel but more devotional approach, Christians and other religious groups call their discipline "the sacrament of the present moment" or "practicing the presence of God [or Allah]." Although discussing religious disciplines is not the purpose of this publication, the principles we have presented for embracing the present moment are highly compatible with the world's time-honored spiritual and philosophical practices.

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS**

One good question can be worth a shelf full of books. *Think about the broad topic of embracing this present moment, then write down several related questions.* Ponder your questions

and discuss your responses with a friend or with a small group. Here are a few queries that may inspire further questions:

- ✧ In your opinion, who does a better job of embracing the present moment—a typical 2-year-old child or the average adult? And why?
- ✧ What role, if any, do you think faith plays in living fully in the present moment?
- ✧ What does being keenly present in the moment have to do with an electrifying performance by a star basketball player, traffic accidents, and eating a meal?

**SKILL BUILDERS**

Skill builders help you exercise your creative muscles to give you the strength you need for success. *In addition to the skill builders below, create some of your own on the topic of embracing this present moment.* As with physical fitness workouts, benefits come from actually *doing* the exercises.

- ◆ Take a juicy orange, a perfectly ripe honeydew, a succulent date, or any other fruit that appeals to you and eat it slowly, giving your complete attention to what you are doing. Let the full range of your senses come into play. Enjoy the fragrance, color, taste, texture, and sounds as you bite into and chew this precious gift from Mother Nature.
- ◆ When you awaken from a good night's sleep, linger for a few moments before getting out of bed. Do you hear the chirping of birds or see the first light of the morning streaming in to greet you? Notice the sensuous, wonderful feeling of breath rhythmically moving in and out of your body. Now rest quietly, eyes closed, and tune into your body. Can you feel a subtle vibration or tingling—the sacred energy of life coursing within and around your being?
- ◆ Try using a reminder—a note, a string around your wrist, or the countdown alarm on your watch—as a cue to make sure your attention is fully in the present moment.

- ◆ During the whirlwind of the day's activities, take a few moments and silently retreat into yourself. For now, put your desires and concerns aside and be still. Enter fully into the present moment. Feel the life energy in your body, the warmth in your heart area, the peace that reflects your true nature. Briefly enjoy this healing silence; then carry the resulting calmness and awareness into the activities awaiting you.
- ◆ The next time you shower, bathe, or wash some dishes, put yourself completely into what you're doing. Feel your body moving and the sensation of warm water against your skin. Notice the smells and tune into the luxuriant and often colorful bubbles. Listen to the sound of the water swishing, pouring, splashing. Give yourself over to the glory of the present moment.



A NEW POSSIBILITY

Bringing a dream to life is a journey. It begins and continues one step at a time. Think about all that you have learned from this publication and how you might put it into practice. Then choose one small goal that you want to accomplish in the next few days. Move toward a new possibility that is really important to you—one that you are enthusiastic about and are confident you can achieve.

Take a card or a piece of paper and, at the top, write "A New Possibility." Under this heading, briefly state what you will do and by when. Sign this action plan and put it where you will see it often. Tell a supportive friend or family member about your goal, and frequently visualize yourself following through. Be prepared just in case doubts or roadblocks crop up. Know that you can always draw upon faith, firm resolve, and creativity to overcome any obstacles that may arise.

When you put the deepest desires of your heart into action, it naturally benefits others, either directly or indirectly. Have fun with your action plan; make a difference; inspire others. Dare to

envision new possibilities, and then create your dreams one step at a time.



POSITIVE THOUGHTS

You may find the following brief thoughts (or similar ones that you create) to be simple yet powerful inspirational tools. You might, for example, memorize and, with deep feeling and concentration, mentally repeat one of these seed thoughts or write it on a card and place it where you'll see it often.

- ♥ I call my spirit back from its truant wanderings in the past and future. With all my heart and soul, I enthusiastically embrace the wonder and opportunity of the present moment.
- ♥ I refuse to waste my energy fighting reality; I completely accept what is. Thus, I can use all my attention and energy to rejoice in this moment or to create needed improvements.
- ♥ I treat all people with the highest respect and kindness. When with others, even if only momentarily or in passing, I am fully present, calmly and cheerfully giving them 100 percent of my attention.



LOVE MADE VISIBLE

Together, let us envision and build a world where all people enjoy optimal well-being. Let us strive to awaken fresh thinking, new enthusiasm, and abundant love. Let us create a world of unimagined possibilities. It can be done!

10 Educational Modules

UK Extension's Universe of Possibilities™: Skills for Creating Happiness and Blessing Others is an educational series containing 10 modules. Each module is accompanied by a Macromedia Flash® movie, a PowerPoint® presentation, and other teaching tools. All these resources, along with a Facilitator's Guide, are available free-of-charge in camera-ready format at the following website: www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/possibilities.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your Vision Map 2. Making the Growth Choice 3. The Way of Peace 4. Heart Intelligence 5. The Freedom of Self-Discipline |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Embracing This Present Moment 7. Accepting and Loving Your Body 8. Healthy Relationships 9. Unleashing Your Creativity 10. Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing |
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Prepared by **Sam Quick**, Ph.D., Extension Specialist in Human Development and Family Relations, and **Alex Lesueur, Jr.**, M.S.L.S., Staff Support Associate. A hearty thank you to the many professionals who reviewed and helped to edit these publications. They are acknowledged on the Possibilities website noted above.

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