



Oprah Winfrey loved it. Millions more have bought it. The self-help best-seller *The Power of Now* has turned German-born writer Eckhart Tolle into a spiritual guru, writes **David Leser**.

HERE'S AN ADMISSION. I take Eckhart Tolle to bed with me every night. I share him with others, of course, but he's the constant companion. He's the one that's always there. Sometimes, when I don't sleep, I turn to him for comfort or advice. At other times, deep in the grip of some dream state, I feel him guarding the night like my own personal shepherd.

Time magazine might have dismissed his teachings as New Age mumbo jumbo, but I think the magazine is wrong, as do millions of others. Eckhart Tolle is today the author of two of the biggest selling books in the world. His first, *The Power of Now*, published in 1997, has been described as the bible of our times and been translated into 33 languages. *That's the one I have next to my bed!*

His second book, *A New Earth*, has topped best-seller lists across the US for the past three years and been endorsed by no less a celebrity and celebrity-maker than Oprah Winfrey. She's described the book as "a wake-up call for the entire planet".

Oprah has a copy of it on the bedside tables of all the guestrooms of her various properties – from Chicago to California, Hawaii to Antigua.

Last year, in an unprecedented gesture, she presented *A New Earth* in online seminars with the author – one chapter each week for 10 weeks, creating what was, in effect, the world's largest ever classroom. By the third week, 11 million people had logged on. Today, more than six million people have a copy of the book.

During the 12 years she's run Oprah's Book Club, America's richest woman has given many authors her golden seal of approval. Never like this, though. *A New Earth*, she said, had changed her life.

"I've read hundreds of books that have helped me become more spiritually attuned," she noted. "*A New Earth* resonated so deeply with me and caused such a shift in the way I perceived myself and all things, I couldn't not share it. It's been the most

rewarding experience of my career to teach this book online with Eckhart Tolle and witness millions of people all over the globe awoken to their lives in such profound ways."

Oprah Winfrey isn't the only celebrity to have endorsed the teachings of this one-time homeless spiritual seeker. Meg Ryan first recommended *The Power of Now* to her and, in June 2007, Paris Hilton opted for Eckhart's wise counsel when she entered the Century Regional Detention Facility in California on a driving offence. She arrived at the gates clutching the Bible in one hand and *The Power of Now* in the other. *Well, okay, maybe that's not such a good endorsement after all.*

Singer Annie Lennox has also sung Eckhart's praises, declaring, "I think he's truly exceptional, but in saying that, it's almost like I'm putting some kind of label on him, which could be misleading. Perhaps what I should say is that there are many people claiming to be teachers, coaches, guides and gurus, but he has some kind of special quality that I've never encountered before."

In *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle writes about how the human mind has become dysfunctional because of too much thinking. "Not to be able to stop thinking is a dreadful affliction," he says, "but we don't realise this because almost everybody is suffering from it, so it is considered normal."

"The mind is a superb instrument if used rightly. Used wrongly, however, it becomes very destructive. To put it more accurately, it is not so much that you use

your mind wrongly – you usually don't use it at all. It uses *you*. This is the disease. You believe that you are your mind. This is the delusion. The instrument has taken over."

Eckhart says the beginning of "freedom" comes from the realisation that we are not what we think, that a vast realm of intelligence exists beyond thought. Thinking is only a tiny aspect of that intelligence and all the things that truly matter to us – beauty, creativity, joy, love, inner peace – arise from beyond the mind, from beyond thought.

"Thinking and consciousness are not synonymous," he continues. "Thinking is only a small aspect of consciousness. Thought cannot exist without consciousness, but consciousness does not need thought. All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no mind, from inner stillness. Even the great scientists have reported that their creative breakthrough came during a time of mental quietude."

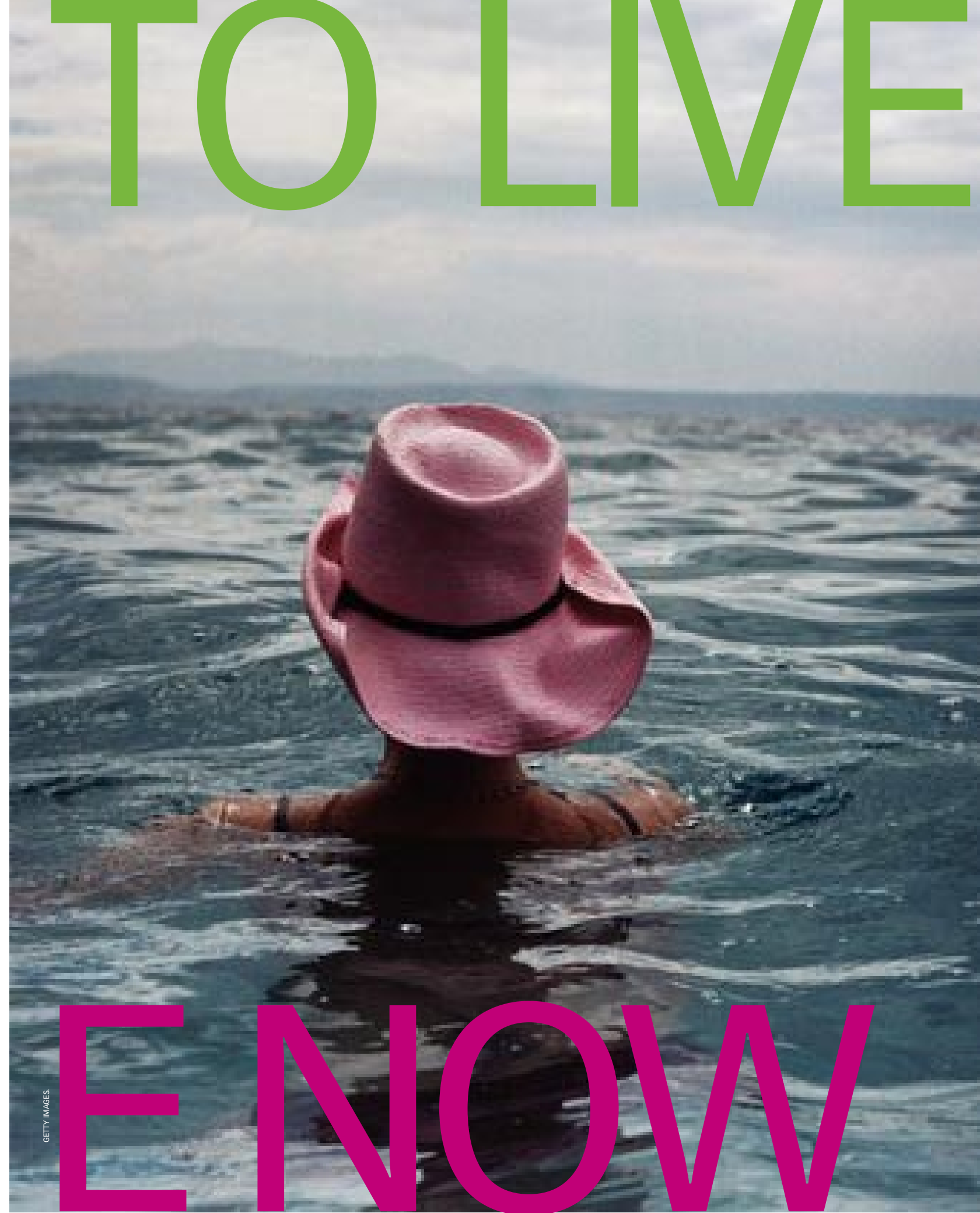
The way to access this stillness (see *The How of the Now*, overleaf), Eckhart says, is to withdraw the mind's attention from the past or the future – at least when it is not needed – and focus instead on the present moment. The more we're focused on time – in other words, the past and future – the more we miss the Now, the most precious thing there is.

"Why is it the most precious thing?" he asks, rhetorically. "Because it is the *only* thing. It's all there is. Life is now. There was never a time when your life was *not* now, nor will there ever be. Nothing ever happened in the past. It happened in >>>

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the Now. Nothing will ever happen in the future. It will happen in the Now. What you think of as the past is a memory trace, stored in the mind, of a former Now. The future is an imagined Now, a projection of the mind. When the future comes, it comes as the Now."

All our negativity, Eckhart goes on to say, is caused by an accumulation of "psychological" time and a denial of the present. In other words, all the unease, anxiety, tension, stress and worry we feel are often caused by too much future, not enough present. Conversely, all the guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness we feel – all the forms of non-forgiveness – are caused by too much past.

As long as we remain unable to access the present moment, every emotional pain we ever experience will continue to live on inside us. It will merge with the pain of our past and become lodged in our minds and bodies. This is what Eckhart refers to as the "pain body" and the only way to break that pain body is to observe it and feel its energy field inside us. Or, as Eckhart says, become the "silent watcher" of our own minds.

"Once you have understood the basic principle of being present as the watcher of what happens inside you – and you understand it by experiencing it – you have at your disposal the most potent transformational tool ... This means that [the conceptual mind] cannot use you anymore by pretending to be you and it can no longer replenish itself through you.

"You have found your innermost strength. You have accessed the Power of Now."

ECKHART TOLLE LIVES on the 16th floor of an apartment building on the outskirts of Vancouver, Canada. From two sides of his living room you can almost touch the treetops in the aptly named Pacific Spirit Park, a 763 hectare deciduous forest separating the city from the University of British Columbia.

From the other side of this eyrie, you can see on a clear day all the way to the coastal mountains of British Columbia and then, just to the left, the distant sea and mountains of Vancouver Island.

This is where Eckhart Tolle lives with his partner, Kim Eng, a yoga and Tai Chi instructor, although often, in summer, they will repair to their house on Salt Spring Island, a two-hour ferry ride from Vancouver, so that they might fully immerse themselves in nature.

Life was not always so settled – or salubrious – for this man born Ulrich Tolle in Dortmund, Germany, in 1948.

"LIFE IS NOW. THERE WAS NEVER A TIME WHEN YOUR LIFE WAS NOT NOW, NOR WILL THERE EVER BE. NOTHING EVER HAPPENED IN THE PAST. IT HAPPENED IN THE NOW ... WHAT YOU THINK OF AS THE PAST IS A MEMORY TRACE."

(He changed his name to Eckhart in honour of the 14th century German spiritual leader, Meister Eckhart.)

At the age of 13, he moved with his father to Spain, but refused all formal education because of what he claimed was the "hostile environment". He still managed as an adult student to graduate from the University of London and then complete research at Cambridge University in the field of literature, language and philosophy.

That was in 1977, the same year he went from a suicidal depression to a profound awakening, one that would transform not just his own life, but the lives of millions of others.

In a rare interview with The Weekly prior to his arrival in Australia, Eckhart explained how anxiety had taken hold of him throughout much of his early life. "If it wasn't one thing, it was another," he says now. "Financial difficulties, difficulties with relations, unhappiness, sometimes loneliness ... there were always different reasons. Great fear about the future, about not making it in this world.

"So all these things seemed to be the cause of the depression, but I later realised that the depression was something to do with not so much what was happening outside in my life, but the structure of my mind.

"My mind was continuously creating thoughts that generated unhappiness. Thoughts about me. I was the centre of my life, as is the case for most people, and I was very much obsessed with myself, this mental image of who I am or who I should become.

"It's the voice that most people have in their heads that they may not even be aware of because they're so identified with it. It's the continuous thought processes and in the centre of these thought processes is this imagined *I* with *my* possessions, *my* achievements, *my* successes, *my* failures, *my* ambitions, *my* fears, *my* problems, *my* past, *my* future.

"It is all mind activity that gives you a

sense of who you are, but it's always an uneasy sense of who one is. That is how the ego works. So one is never quite at ease with oneself, or if one is ... it's only for short periods and then the unease comes back. The unease can also easily become fear ... many kinds of negative emotions can arise [and] you live from this really artificially generated sense of self."

All of Eckhart's egoic consciousness or false sense of self collapsed one night in England, not long after his 29th birthday. In his darkest moment, he had said to himself, "I cannot live with myself any longer" and it was then that he'd become aware of what a peculiar thought this actually was. "Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the 'I' and the 'self' that 'I' cannot live with."

As he explains at the beginning of *The Power of Now*, he was so stunned by these thoughts, his mind stopped and he felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. Gripped by fear, his body started shaking uncontrollably. He heard the words "resist nothing" and then he has no idea what happened next, only that he awoke to the sound of chirping birds.

"I felt deeply at peace," he tells me now in his even, tranquil tones, "although externally nothing had changed in my life. Everything was alive, fresh, beautiful. I actually realised later that I was fully living for the first time. I was fully in the present moment."

For the next few years, Eckhart drifted around Cambridge and then moved back to London, homeless and almost penniless. "I stayed with friends here and there, slept on people's sofas, sometimes on floors. Occasionally, I didn't have anywhere to sleep and so I spent a lot of time just going around parks and sitting on benches, and being totally in the present moment, really having no concern about what was going to happen to me. That's because that *me* wasn't there anymore. I was very much at peace, but an external observer might have said I was no longer functioning very well."

Did you look like a bum in the park? I ask him, half-jokingly. "No, not quite," he replies, giggling like an elf might if you tickled him under the arm. "I always managed to kind of still look acceptable."

(Eckhart is prone to wearing waistcoats, corduroy pants and shirts buttoned to the top. He also has a preference for parting his hair on the left!)

In 1995, at the age of 47, Eckhart was "called" from his hermit-like existence to the West Coast of America. "One day, I woke up and I suddenly realised 'I have to >>>

THE HOW OF THE NOW

Do these exercises each day and feel more joy in your life

1 Start listening to the voice in your head as often as you can. Pay particular attention to any repetitive thought patterns. Don't judge what you hear. Don't take your thoughts too seriously. When you listen, you are aware not only of the thought, but of yourself as the witness of the thought. A new dimension of consciousness has come in. The thought then loses its power over you and quickly subsides. When the thought subsides, you experience a discontinuity in the mental stream – a gap of "no-mind". At first, the gaps will be short, a few seconds perhaps, but gradually, they will become longer. When these gaps occur, you feel a certain stillness and peace inside.

2 In your everyday life, you can practise this by taking any routine activity that normally is only a means to an end and giving it your fullest attention. For example, every time you walk up and down the stairs in your house or place of work, pay close attention to every step, every movement, even your breathing. Be totally present. The moment you realise you are not present, you [it]s[are] present. Or when you wash your hands, pay attention to all the sense perceptions associated with the activity: the sound and feel of the water, the movement of your hands, the scent of the soap. Or when you get into the car, after you close the door, pause for a few seconds and observe the flow of your breath.

3 Wherever you are, be there totally. If your here and Now makes you unhappy, you have three options: remove yourself, change it or accept it totally.

4 If you keep your attention in the body as much as possible, you will stay in the Now. You won't lose yourself in the external world and you won't lose yourself in your mind. The more consciousness you bring into the body, the stronger your immune system becomes. It's as if every cell awakens. It is also a potent form of self-healing. When you are unoccupied for a few minutes and especially last thing at night and first thing in the morning, "flood" your body with consciousness. Lie flat on your back. Close your eyes. Choose different parts of your body to focus your attention on briefly at first: hands, feet, arms, legs, abdomen, chest, head ... Feel the life energy inside those parts as intensely as you can. Stay with each part for about 15 seconds. Then let your attention run through the body like a wave a few times, from feet to head and back again.

5 If you find it hard to get in touch with the inner body, it's usually easier to focus on your breathing first. Follow the breath with your attention as it moves in and out of your body. Breathe into the body and feel your abdomen expanding and contracting slightly.

6 Stay rooted within. Then observe how this changes your state of consciousness and the quality of what you are doing. Whenever you're waiting, use that time to feel the inner body. The art of inner-body awareness will develop into a completely new way of living, a state of permanent connectedness with Being, and will add a depth to your life that you have never known before Edited extract from *The Power of Now*, by Eckhardt Tolle, published by Hodder Headline Australia, rrp \$24.95.

move'. There was a very strong pull, but I couldn't explain what I had to do there or why I had to go."

He bided his time between Vancouver and California, where he knew barely a soul, and began to write *The Power of Now*. By 1999, barely two years after it was published, it had become one of the best-selling spiritual books of the modern age. Its authority lay in the simplicity of its language and the depth of its inquiry into the human condition.

"I often talk about the importance of finding some stillness inside yourself," he tells me. "Because what we call stillness is consciousness itself. The essence of who you are is not your past, it is not your thoughts, it is not your emotions, but a space in which all these things arise. A space in which a thought comes and goes, a sense perception comes and goes, an emotion comes and goes."

Eckhart's words resonate deeply with Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, as well as the ancient mystical traditions of Judaism (Cabbalism), Christianity (Gnosticism) and Islam (Sufism). All of them speak in various ways of a timeless, formless inner space, a transcendental reality existing under the surface of things, out of which all life unfolds.

"This is the essence of spirituality," Eckhart says. "It is formless, or what Buddhism refers to as emptiness. Our essence is formless. Everything else is form. The world arises when consciousness takes on shapes and forms, thought forms and material forms."

And how do you access this formless state, this stillness underneath the noise? I ask him. "There are various methods you can use as entry points into that state of consciousness," he replies (see *The How of the Now*, previous page).

"Sometimes, people have that when they're out in nature. It's so beautiful that, for a moment, there's a stillness inside. Some people have it when they're engaged in a strenuous activity, like some sportsmen and women. Suddenly, there's a moment of intense aliveness and inner stillness. They have an expression for that in sport, which is 'in the zone', where something else takes over. An energy takes over. You're not thinking. You are just there as consciousness."

FOR THE PAST 31 years, ever since his "spiritual transformation", Eckhart has lived in a state of almost uninterrupted peace. Occasionally, he experiences "negative emotions", such as anger or sadness, but never for long.

"I just don't keep those emotions alive through my mind," he says. "Just a little flush that comes and then it's gone. For

example, a couple of years ago, both my parents died within the space of six months. First, it was my mother, then my father. Of course, tears came. Sadness came. Yet even then, I felt, 'This is the human condition and death is totally natural. And in a few years it will be my turn, which is also totally natural.'

"In other words, there was sadness and tears, but there was also a deep acceptance and deep peace underneath. The peace does not mean there are no emotions, but the emotions are not artificially kept alive by unnecessary thought activity."

This is the presence of mind that Eckhart will bring to Australia in early March, when he visits for the first time. (He's coming by ship so that he can avoid the jetlag and enjoy the vast expanse of the Pacific.)

Although he still regards himself as a recluse, a man whose natural inclination is to remain anonymous, he believes it's his duty, especially now in these troubled times, to transmit his teachings to as many people as possible.

"Whatever world we create is a reflection of our collective state of consciousness," he says. "We cannot change the world by trying to change the outer structures, if we haven't tackled the basic dysfunction in ourselves.

"And that's where the individual comes in. It's only in the individual where change can take place. If the change has taken place in sufficient numbers of individuals, then a new world is going to arise out of that new collective consciousness."

Eckhart believes it is already happening. The election of Barack Obama. The rising clamour to save the planet from catastrophic climate change. The growing thirst, particularly in the West, for a spiritual framework for living.

"Look at what is happening in the financial world," he says, finally, "and, again, we are seeing many of the structures that are a reflection of the state of consciousness of the ego now beginning to collapse.

"This is a time when a shift is happening in the collective consciousness. It will be challenging to many people, but it has to happen, it *is* happening. It's the rising of a new state of consciousness ... almost like a new species coming out of the old." ■

Eckhart Tolle will be presenting seminars in Sydney on March 7, Melbourne on March 10, Brisbane on March 12 and a weekend retreat on Queensland's Sunshine Coast from March 20 to 22. For details, visit www.hayhouse.com.au.