

SUMMARY

A NEW EARTH

ECKHART TOLLE



Summary of “A New Earth” by Eckhart Tolle

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Find your life's purpose by connecting with the
earth.

Introduction	5
It's A Mad World	6
Religion Isn't a Foolproof Cure	8
Get to the Root of The Problem	10
Let it Go (Because Your Ego Doesn't Want You To)	11
What's Your Purpose?	12
Your Journey Toward Peace	13
Final Summary	14



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Introduction

Raise your hand if you want world peace. That pretty much includes all of us, right? But despite the fact that an overwhelming portion of the population is in favor of achieving world peace, we don't seem to know how to find it. We struggle with the solution to ending such global tragedies as hunger, poverty, and child abuse. But what if we could discover the solution? Tolle posits that doing so requires us to attack the core issue of the problem; put simply, we need to find the root cause that prevents us from achieving peace. So, what is it? Well, Tolle puts our lack of peace down to two things: the inherent flaws of humanity and our minds. And over the course of these remaining chapters, we're going to examine the author's theories and solutions.

It's A Mad World

Have you ever noticed how many songs have titles along those lines? Or the wealth of poetry dedicated to reflecting on the violence, turmoil, and pain of the human existence? Sometimes-- especially during a global pandemic-- it's easy to feel like the entire world has gone mad. And in fact, the Hindu religion tends to agree! Citing an Indian proverb which affirms, "Mind is maya," the author acknowledges that in Hindi, "maya" means "mental illness." It's generally used not to indicate the illness of one person, but to acknowledge a type of mass delusion. But simply, the concept of maya posits that, yes, the whole world is basically crazy.

Buddhism shares the concept of maya, but with a bit of a twist. In Buddhist discourse, it's called "dukkha" and rather than indicating a collective state of madness, Buddhism contends that dukkha-- or misery-- is the default setting for the human race. Because our existence is inherently fraught and conflicted, Buddhism argues that we need a faith relationship to transcend dukkha and find peace. Similarly, Christianity defines the world's madness as sin. But in the Bible's original ancient Greek translation, the word used for sin translates literally to "missing the mark." This means that if peace or perfection is the state we should aspire to, when we sin, human beings miss the mark, falling short of our ultimate goal for existence.

The author acknowledges that although each of these religions define it differently, they're all a little bit right in their own ways. And despite their differences, they can also agree on one fundamental truth: human beings have the capacity to do a lot of good, but we are also inexorably driven by a toxic force that drives us to commit heinous acts against one another. Just consider the Holocaust, for example, or the prevalence of child sexual abuse. These acts are unspeakable and yet our torture of others is seemingly endless! In fact, as James Anthony Froude acknowledged, "Wild animals never kill for sport. Man is the only one to whom the torture and death of his fellow-creatures is amusing in itself."

So, whether you think of the fundamental human problem as maya, dukkha, or sin, the core question we should be asking is: how can we stop it? Is it through religion? Through therapy? How do we mitigate our inherently destructive human natures? We'll explore the author's solution to the human condition in the next chapter.

Religion Isn't a Foolproof Cure

Many people find comfort from cultivating a faith relationship. Whether they identify as Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or one of the world's many other brands of faith, people all over the world will attest that their faith is their guiding light. Without their faith, they argue, they would give in to their worst and most selfish desires. They would have no motivation to become better people. And the author acknowledges that this can certainly be true; his intent is not to argue that religion is ineffective or that no one should bother with it. Rather, his aim is to explore the ways in which religious principles have often been distorted, creating a subculture of violence and prejudice that is often practiced in the name of an otherwise peaceful religion.

Consider, for example, the teachings of the Bible. Jesus famously advised his followers to love their neighbors as themselves, to give to the poor, and to esteem everyone else more highly than themselves. Thus, you would expect that people who followed this model would be kind, loving, and accepting above all else. And yet, Christians are commonly among the first to engage in hate crimes against gay people, women who get abortions, and anyone else who doesn't align with their politically conservative stance. In these cases, the teachings of the Bible have been distorted to reinforce a personal agenda and give it the infallibility of religion. But of course, the author argues that this is wrong.

In this respect, although religion aims to make the world a kinder place and encourage us to relinquish our toxic traits, Christianity is being used to feed the world's ongoing madness! That's why the author argues that following religious teachings cannot be viewed as the only way to mitigate our madness. Although it might be divinely inspired, sadly, when practiced by people, religion can still be distorted. Tolle asserts that the same is true for science, technology, and the arts, all of which can be co-opted and corrupted by human minds running amok. In fact, the author posits that our advances in science and technology are actually just enabling us to

commit more reprehensible acts. So, if the answer isn't religion and it isn't science, where do we turn to solve the problem?

Get to the Root of The Problem

If you want to get rid of a stubborn weed in your backyard, what do you do? You don't just rip up the top parts that you can see, right? Because you know that it goes deeper and it will only grow back. That's why you dig beneath the surface and get to the root so you can attack the weed at its center of growth. And Tolle affirms that the same is true for solving the problems of humanity. That's why we have to start by understanding that the human ego is at the root of all our problems. Why? Well, let's start by thinking for a moment about what the ego does. Put simply, we can think of our ego as our identity. It's what defines us. It's what makes us think we know who we are and what we want.

But because it's self-centric, it also keeps us wrapped up in our own heads. And according to the author, the ego is our biggest barrier when it comes to developing self-awareness. That's because our ego helps us to learn more about ourselves-- what we like, what we don't, what defines our personalities-- but it also tricks us into thinking that we really know ourselves. In this case, knowing yourself means identifying your strengths and weaknesses. It means being aware of the areas where you struggle. It means confronting the parts of ourselves that scare us and learning to address them.

It also means learning to redefine our anxiety in realistic terms, like realizing that our self worth and our identities cannot be defined by our successes, failures, or the material goods we accumulate. Put simply, it means acknowledging that our conceptualization of ourselves is neither fully developed nor fully accurate. And according to Tolle, the anxiety, fear, and insecurity so common to the human condition all stem from our ego. So, as we learn to relinquish our ego, the author asserts that we will also learn to recognize it as the source of all our inner turmoil.

Let it Go (Because Your Ego Doesn't Want You To)

Is there anything in your past that you struggle to let go of? Anything that sometimes hits you out of nowhere like a lightning bolt and makes you cringe? Anything that fuels a sudden flash of rage? Whether it's something you did-- an action that brings you guilt, shame, or embarrassment-- or something that was done to you-- prompting you to feel angry, bitter, or hurt-- everyone struggles with these feelings. But, as is the case with most of life, the key lies in how we handle them. If you're like me, you might feel that it requires superhuman strength to avoid obsessing over the matter. Perhaps you can't resist the temptation to turn the problem over and over in your head, mulling over the What Ifs. What if I hadn't said that? What if they had never done that to me? What if everything had turned out differently?

It's no secret that over-thinking can be debilitating or that it can fill us with crippling anxiety about the future. But the author wants to reassure you that we were never meant to live that way. That's why he invites you to take stock of your life and consider a few things: is there something you need to let go of? Do you feel like you collect grievances, storing up a treasure trove of slights, offences, and small hurtful moments that drag you down? Do they prevent you from living your best life? For most of us, the answer is yes, so Tolle advocates learning to focus on the present moment and distance our minds from the incident.

What's Your Purpose?

As we discussed at the beginning of this book, identifying your purpose in life can be a daunting and tricky task. After all, if discerning the reason for our existence were easy, it wouldn't be one of the most-asked questions in the universe. It wouldn't be the subject of endless debate amongst philosophers, religious teachers, and psychologists. But one thing is for certain: no one can achieve contentment until they connect with their true purpose. So, how do you find it? Well, for starters, the author wants you to know that this question is multi-faceted: there is not one singular purpose for your life, but two. He calls them "the outer" and "the inner" purpose. So, let's explore those in greater detail.

The inner purpose is actually the same for everyone. That's because, at the core, every human being wants to achieve a state where we are present in the moment but devoid of over-thinking. Put simply, we want to be both aware and at peace, and that's often hard to do. Because it's so difficult, we frequently mistake our inner purpose for our outer purpose, basing our life's meaning on external sources. For example, let's say that-- like me-- a core facet of your identity was getting good grades in school. You always had the best grades in the class all the way through high-school and kept up the streak through college.

But what if somebody else gets a better grade? Does that mean your purpose in life is now invalid? You might feel that way because this worldview means your purpose depends on two things: you being "better" than everyone else and other people being "worse" than you. But Tolle reminds us that that's not a healthy way to live our lives! Instead, we should focus on the state of consciousness that motivates us to pursue certain goals. For example, if our goal is "to be the best" at something, we can know that it's motivated by our ego and therefore, is unhealthy. But if we realign our goals so that our new focus is to learn, grow, and develop your own personal best, that's a noble outer purpose you can be proud of. It will also align with your inner purpose and help you achieve peace!

Your Journey Toward Peace

As we discussed in the previous chapter, our ultimate goal as human beings is to cultivate a state of simultaneous awareness and peace. Although we may not articulate it that way, this is what motivates our core desire to “get away from it all,” to “simplify our lives,” or escape from the daily grind. So, how do we do that? Well, to begin with, Tolle wants you to know that peace will never be found by escaping your current circumstances or changing your external environment. (Obviously, however, this advice does not apply to anyone who’s in an unhealthy or abusive situation; in these cases, you should definitely get out of a toxic environment!)

Instead of quitting your job and sinking all your life savings into an impulse trip to Bali, the author advocates learning to cultivate peace and enjoyment in the life you have right now. In some cases, that means practicing acceptance. Put simply, acceptance means making peace with whatever you have to do right now. If, for example, you’re working in a job you hate because you’re trying to save money for college, don’t approach every day thinking about how much you hate your job or how much better life will be when you finally quit. Instead, learn to embrace and accept the fact that you have to do this right now and you can still find joy. You can do this even if you don’t actively like or enjoy what you’re doing because acceptance is about finding the will to persist, not making yourself love an unpleasant activity.

To help you practice acceptance, Tolle recommends remembering that even if you can’t control your circumstances, you can control how you feel about it. You can control your mindset. In fact, sometimes, this is the only thing you can control and that’s how you can regain a sense of empowerment. This in turn will help you to approach every decision you make from a place of joy and acceptance. And that’s how you will cultivate peace even in the midst of unpleasant circumstances.

Final Summary

We often feel as though the whole world has gone insane. Faced with senseless violence, evil, and hatred, it's easy to wonder what the point is, and by extension, to question our own purpose in life. But Tolle writes to make sense of this struggle by reminding readers that the world's madness stems from our own ego. At the core, our ego motivates us to pursue our own selfish wants and desires, to delude ourselves, and act only on impulse. That's why he theorizes that only understanding-- not science, religion, or medication-- will help us make sense of life.

By understanding the destructive nature of the ego, we can learn to transcend it. And as a result, we can relinquish the trivial struggles that dominate much of our daily existence. We can also use this understanding to develop our sense of purpose-- both outer and inner-- -and cultivate peace through enjoyment and acceptance.



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