

CHOOSING COMPASSION in a World that Needs Our Love

LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

**VISUALIZE A DAY
OF FORGIVENESS**

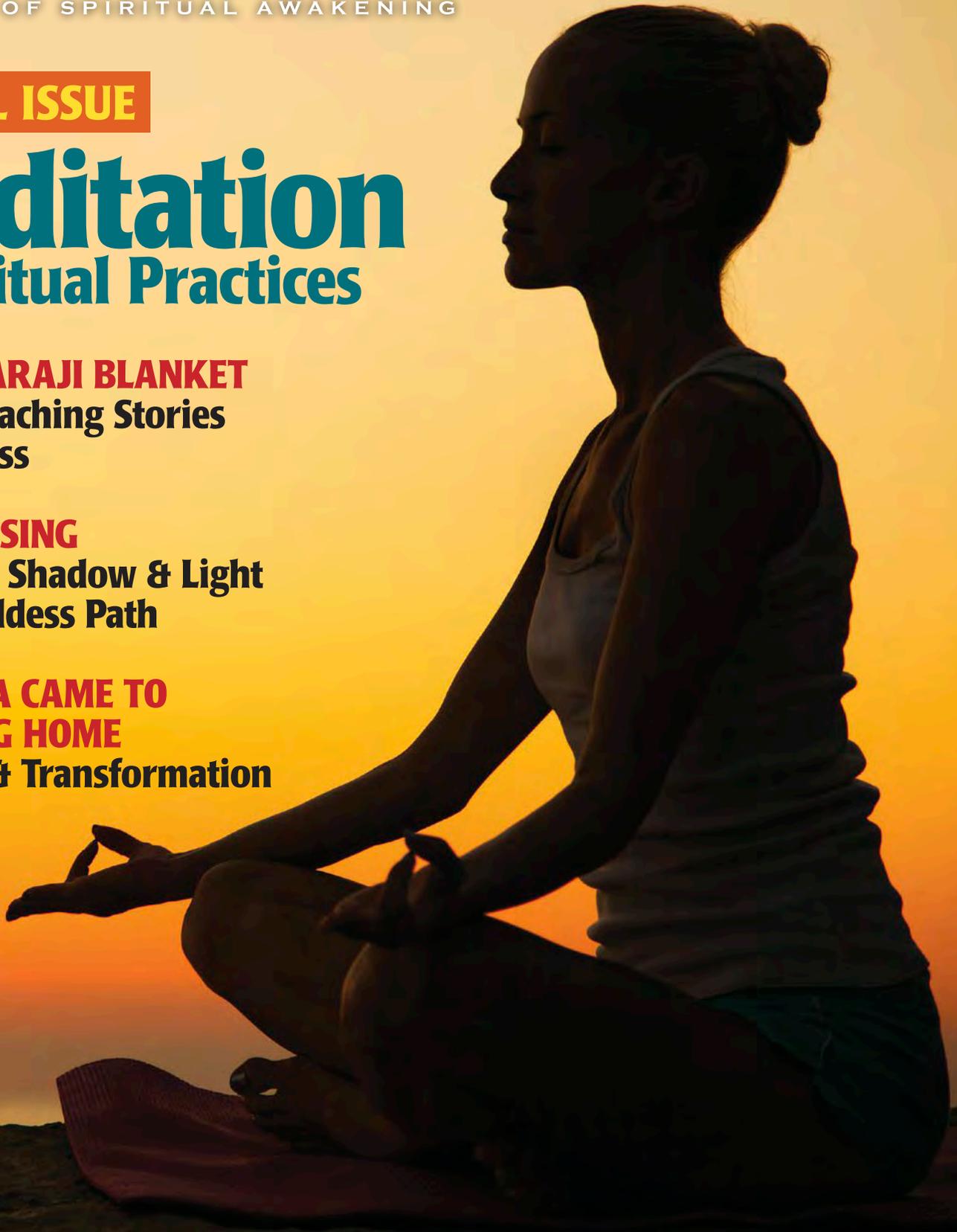
SPECIAL ISSUE

Meditation & Spiritual Practices

THE MAHARAJI BLANKET
& Other Teaching Stories
of Ram Dass

SHAKTI RISING
Embracing Shadow & Light
on the Goddess Path

**IF BUDDHA CAME TO
A NURSING HOME**
On Aging & Transformation



AUTUMN/WINTER 2019 VOL. 31 NO. 3

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Insight

As we prepare our 104th issue of *Light of Consciousness* Journal for press, it's time to pause and look back at thirty-one years of publishing this unique magazine, founded in 1988 by Swami Amar Jyoti. Much has happened in these three decades in the publishing world. The way people experience the written word has changed so much through the internet and social media. Publishing *Light of Consciousness* has been a very rewarding experience, from the Satsangs of Swami Amar Jyoti featured in each issue, and including articles, art and poetry celebrating myriad aspects of the spiritual path. We were fortunate to enter the digital magazine world early on, which has made it possible for more readers globally. Throughout this time, we have endeavored to keep the magazine sustainable. We have also listened to our loyal readers who value the print edition. This year, after much analysis, we decided to change to a biannual beginning with this Autumn/Winter issue. We will continue to offer single copies, subscriptions, and print plus digital subscriptions on our website and Amazon, as well as single issues and subscriptions of our digital edition on Apple, Google Play, and all major providers.

In this issue's Satsang, Swami Amar Jyoti explains how meditation has to be an integral part of our life, and that we cannot meditate with a restless, disturbed or distracted mind. "To put it differently: whatever you do in the other twenty-three hours of your day is going to affect that one hour of meditation." And, as He clarifies, "For spiritual growth and for Enlightenment, knowing thy Self, there is no other way than going through a Master. There is no easier way than burning a candle from a candle, a lamp from a lamp."

We offer a wonderful gathering of authors and topics in this issue, from teaching stories by Ram Dass, to deep insights on the Goddess Path by Kavitha Chinnaiyan; visualizing A Day of Forgiveness by Stephen Levine, and attaining Peace of Mind by David Hoffmeister. Lori Erickson writes on aging and transformation. Stephanie Kaza leads us on a midnight forest-walk. Anam Thubten writes about Choosing Compassion in a World That Needs Our Love. Mark Nepo inspires us to "discover, one experience at a time, that a life well lived is well expressed." As Deborah Anne Quibell reveals in Deep Creativity, "Loving much demands much. It demands letting the world in. And this is not always an easy task."

It is only with your support that we are able to offer this gift of Light in a world sorely in need. Our next issue, Spring/Summer 2020, available on March 1st, will be on Keeping the Inner Peace.

Sita Stuhlmiller, Editor



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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS was founded in 1988 by Swami Amar Jyoti and continues under His guidance. It is dedicated to our awakening into the Pure Consciousness that dwells within all. According to *Sanatana Dharma*, the Eternal Religion or Truth, Spirit manifests throughout creation in infinite diversity. The underlying harmony and eternal principles are common to all spiritual paths and traditions: *Truth is One, Sages call it by many names*. Whichever path we choose, the way is through each of us to realize the Divine within.

LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS (ISSN 1040-7448) is published biannually by Truth Consciousness, a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization, Desert Ashram, 3403 W. Sweetwater Dr., Tucson, AZ 85745, USA.
Postmaster: Send address changes to: LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS, 3403 W. Sweetwater Dr., Tucson, AZ 85745-9301.

We are grateful to all those who have contributed their work and to our subscribers, donors and advertisers. Responsibility for editorial content and opinion remains with authors; that of goods and services remains with advertisers. Neither necessarily reflects the views, claims and opinions of the publisher.

Advertising: ads@light-of-consciousness.org, 303-459-0616.

Submissions: Light-of-consciousness.org, info@truthconsciousness.org.

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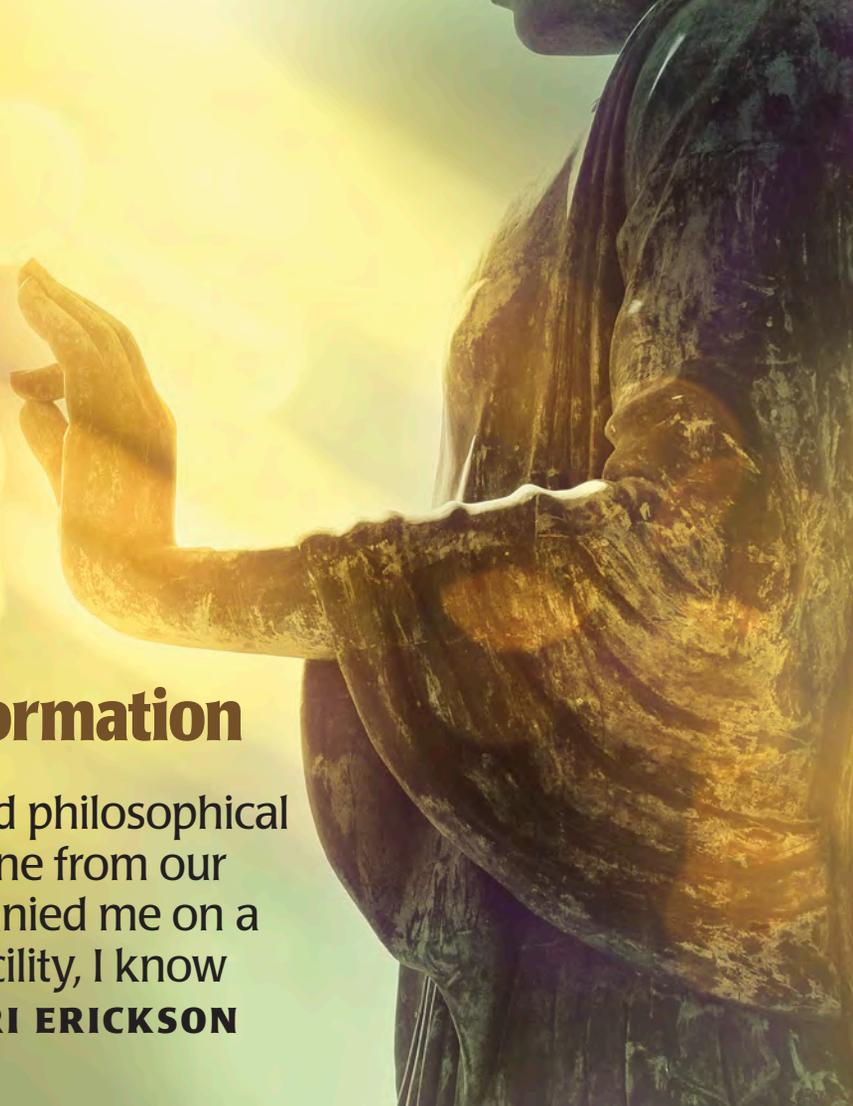


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If Buddha Came to a Nursing Home

On Aging and Transformation

The chance for a measured and philosophical appraisal of death is largely gone from our culture. If the Buddha accompanied me on a visit to my mother's nursing facility, I know he'd feel right at home. **BY LORI ERICKSON**



MORE THAN twenty-five hundred years ago, a young man had an encounter with an elderly person that changed the course of history. Siddhartha Gautama was born into a life of wealth and privilege, the son of a king.

His father, wishing to protect the young prince from knowing about the miseries of the world, raised him in a royal enclosure with no outside contact. But when Siddhartha was in his twenties, he decided to venture out on his own beyond the walls. For the first time in his life, he saw the ravages of age in the form of an old man. That sight—followed soon after by glimpses of a sick person and a dead body—triggered in him the desire to understand the sources of suffering.

After years of wandering, pondering, and meditating, Siddhartha became the Buddha, “the awakened one.” And ever since, Buddhists have recognized the importance of meditating on death. “Of all the footprints, that of the elephant is supreme,” said the Buddha. “Similarly, of all mindfulness meditation, that on death is supreme.”

This practice isn't unique to Buddhism, of course. When Roman generals led victory parades through the streets of Rome, for example, slaves would be stationed behind them in their chariots to whisper in their ears, “Remember that you are mortal.” During the Middle Ages, a less labor-intensive version of this was keeping a skull on one's desk, a practice common among philosophers, monks, and saints. Medieval artists often pictured the *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, with a personified figure of death waltzing with both commoners and kings. Puritan tombstones frequently bore images of a winged death's head or a skeleton with a scythe, sights meant to remind passersby of their own inevitable fates. And in Christian churches to this day, the season of Lent begins with clergy putting a smudge of ash on the foreheads of parishioners as they intone, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

But Buddhism, more than any other tradition, sees meditation on our Final Exit as a uniquely powerful form of spiritual practice. The Buddha summarized its precepts in the Five Remembrances,

a set of teachings that's the spiritual equivalent of a stiff shot of whiskey:

I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill-health.
There is no way to escape having ill-health.

I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love
are of the nature to change.
There is no way to escape being
separated from them.

I inherit the results of my actions in
body, speech, and mind.
My actions are the ground on which I stand.

The modern world has done its best to run the other way from these insights. We no longer have charnel houses with stacks of bones (and honestly, I don't think it's a good idea to bring them back, despite the opportunity they give for spiritual reflection). Increasingly, funerals have a tidy container of ashes rather than a body on display in a casket. The dead bodies we do see are fake, the faux corpses in movies and on TV. And when we do encounter the real thing, it's often the body of a loved one, viewed in a time of overwhelming grief. The chance for a measured and philosophical appraisal of death—sitting with it, pondering it, and growing comfortable with it—is largely gone from our culture.

So maybe nursing facilities for the elderly are the closest many of us can get to this time-honored practice of confronting aging and death. If the Buddha accompanied me on a visit to my mother, I know he'd feel right at home. He'd be full of compassion for the residents with their halting gaits, blurred vision, and trembling hands, but he'd also likely poke me in the ribs with his elbow, prodding me to notice the abundant spiritual lessons all around us.

"How wonderful it is to be here!" he'd say as we walked down the hallway. "So many opportunities to learn." Then he'd sit down next to a resident in a wheelchair, gently take her hand, and invite her to notice how beautiful the view out the window is. In the memory care unit of my mother's Lutheran nursing home, the residents wouldn't be surprised at all to be chatting with a robed Buddhist monk.

I found another wise Buddhist guide that summer after my mother's decline and my brother's death: Kathleen Dowling Singh, whose book *The Grace in Aging: Awaken as You Grow Older* describes the ways in which the sufferings and indignities of growing older can be the catalyst for spiritual growth.

The trouble with aging, according to Singh, is that it sneaks up on us. While a terminal diagnosis frequently jolts people into contemplating spiritual questions, aging often happens so slowly that we can easily miss the chance to learn from it. Instead of blossoming, we collapse like a balloon with a slow leak.

Singh writes:

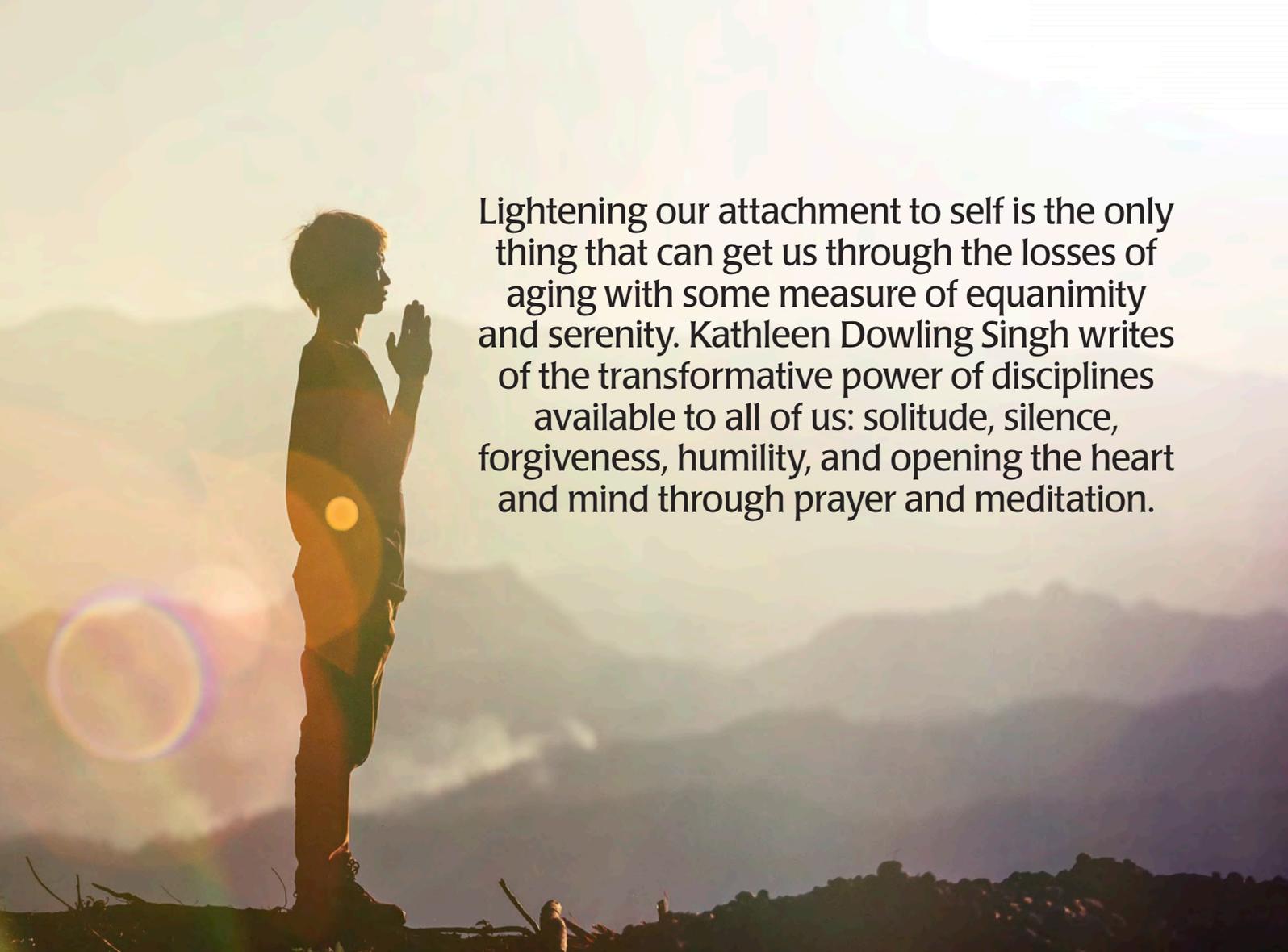
Although it becomes a little bit harder to do so each day, aging still permits us to evade the truth of our own impermanence in a way that dying does not. Such evasions obstruct awakening.

Aging simply does not have the gathered intensity of dying. That gathered intensity . . . is a crucible for transformation, for awakening. Simply aging, simply becoming an elderly person, offers no such transformative crucible. There is nothing in the process of simply getting older that, in and of itself, is going to make our eventual decline and illness and all of our losses either transformative or hopeful.

Whatever transformative experience we have of aging is dependent upon our own intention.

Lightening our attachment to self is the only thing that can get us through the losses of aging with some measure of equanimity and serenity. Singh writes of the transformative power of disciplines available to all of us, not just Buddhists: solitude, silence, forgiveness, humility, and opening the heart and mind through prayer and meditation. One of the reasons why our culture has a dearth of wise elders, she believes, is that so few take these paths. Instead we cling to status, unexamined habits of thinking and behavior, and a need to present a certain image to the world. Our world is full, alas, of elderly adolescents.

Singh's words resonated for me as I visited the nursing home during the first few months of my mother's tenure there. I realized that most of us simply become more comfortable in our ruts as we age. If we were judgmental and angry during our middle years, we'll likely carry those same patterns with us into advanced age. If our lives were centered on love, there's a good chance our final chapter will be illuminated by that emotion.



Lightening our attachment to self is the only thing that can get us through the losses of aging with some measure of equanimity and serenity. Kathleen Dowling Singh writes of the transformative power of disciplines available to all of us: solitude, silence, forgiveness, humility, and opening the heart and mind through prayer and meditation.

During her first months in the nursing home, my mother's main anxiety was money, which isn't surprising for a woman who lived on a modest income her entire life. She worried that she didn't have any cash in her purse. When I visited, she asked if we could go to the bank and then to the grocery store to buy food. I explained, over and over again, that if she needed anything she could ask the staff. My mother-in-law, in contrast, had other issues: her lifelong pride in keeping her house neat and clean meant that she was perpetually dissatisfied in a place where someone else was responsible for these tasks.

I look at their examples, and read Singh's words, and try to take these lessons to heart. I know that my mother isn't capable of philosophical ruminations at this point (and frankly, even in her prime she wasn't much of a fan of them). But change is possible for me. Instead of dreading my visits with her, I try, often inadequately, to see them as times to honor her and give thanks for the gifts she's given me, from my first breath

to a lifetime of love. I try to see the value of being forced to confront my own mortality as I visit her. And when I leave the nursing home, I breathe deeply of the fresh air, savoring how remarkable it is to move without pain or difficulty, to get into my car and drive wherever I wish. These days, I don't need a skull on my desk to remind me of the inevitable end of all life.

As a deacon I've long had an interest in working with the sick and have been trained in Healing Touch, a form of complementary healing. Because of that, I've often had the chance to be part of the last days of people, serving as a kind of midwife in reverse. Most of the deaths I've helped with have been from cancer, which slowly overwhelms a body cell by cell. But I've also been on the scene after sudden and unexpected deaths, from heart attacks to strokes and accidents.

To some people, the sight of a clergyperson entering a hospital room is synonymous with bad news. I recall a friend once recoiling when I visited him wearing a clerical collar.

“Good God, I’m not that sick!” he said. “Take it off. Right now.”

I removed my ecclesiastical dog collar with pleasure, happy not to play the role of the Grim Reaper’s Apprentice. But when I arrive at the hospital for a pastoral call, I sometimes wonder when it will be my turn to have a member of the clergy visit, and whether I’ll be happy or sad to see them.

I’m grateful to have made the acquaintance of death in a variety of forms, peculiar as that may sound. In a society where dying is so removed from most people’s lives, we lose the chance to become familiar with its outlines and psychic shape. Familiarity can bring understanding, and maybe a little less fear of the inevitable.

These experiences have made me rethink how I want to go. I used to think I’d like to die quickly—crushed by a falling boulder on a mountain hike, for example, or hit by a bus crossing a street. But there’s a lot to be said for knowing in advance you’re going to die. You have time to tie up loose ends, say good-bye, and give thanks to God and loved ones. You can remove any embarrassing items from your dresser drawers, safety deposit box, or storage unit. And if your sins are weighing heavily on your shoulders, you have the chance to get them expunged from your spiritual rap sheet.

During my tenure as a writer of Iowa ghost stories, I found it curious how many of them involved a sudden death, one that left the deceased with unfinished business of some sort. I heard numerous stories of spirits coming back to tell relatives where money is hidden or to ask forgiveness, things they didn’t have the chance to do in life. It’s an argument for having at least a little advance notice of your imminent demise.

Years ago, I attended a talk given by a palliative care physician about this process of getting ready to die. He began by asking us to list on a piece of paper three sets of things. First, we wrote down five possessions that gave us pleasure; second, we listed five activities that gave us joy; and third, we named the five people we loved most in the world.

After we completed our lists, the doctor began talking about a hypothetical patient, a woman whose days were filled with the usual routines, joys, and stresses of ordinary life. But after she discovered a lump in her body, there came a cascade of medical interventions: first a biopsy, then surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. After a year, it became clear that the treatments weren’t working, and the oncologist told her that she should get her affairs

in order. She entered hospice care, and gradually her world shrank to the size of her bedroom.

And throughout this story, the doctor periodically paused to ask us to cross an item off our list.

The possessions and activities went first, of course. Each was a choice—which would I hate to give up more, my laptop or my car? Biking or walking? Then it was time to start crossing off people, each decision an agonizing, *Sophie’s Choice* dilemma. By now it was clear where this exercise was headed, and most of us, even the men, were borrowing tissues from the women who were organized enough to keep a packet in their purses. By the time the doctor’s hypothetical patient died, all of us had gone through a similar shedding of what we held dearest, leaving us the emotional equivalent of limp noodles.

This stripping of possessions, status, and relationships happens to everyone as they die. Even those of us who believe death is not the final end and that we’ll get the chance to see our loved ones again can’t deny that in the short term, there’s plenty of sadness to go around. Spiritual teachers of many stripes, showing the kind of irrational optimism that makes them both beloved and scorned, insist that this is exactly when things get really interesting. Kathleen Dowling Singh says that as we approach death, we undergo a powerful inner transformation. Even if during our lives we don’t advance very far on a spiritual path, in the nearing-death experience we go through a series of spiritual stages, which include relaxation, withdrawal, radiance, silence, sacredness, transcendence, intensity, and perfection.

In case you don’t have time to read her book, let me give you Singh’s own summary of what’s most important about the nearing-death experience: “Dying is safe,” she writes. “You are safe. Your loved one is safe... Dying, remarkably, is a process of natural enlightenment, of finally coming home to our true self.”

In my own time spent in hospital rooms and at the bedsides of the dying, I’ve come to see the truth of her words. Especially for those with a chronic illness, death often comes as a welcome release from suffering and an anticipated next step on a journey to mystery. 🌸

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