



Tricycle Teachings

# AGING

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of his great American novel *On the Road*, Old Buddha ancestor Jack Kerouac writes: “Nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old.”

True—to a point! While it’s true that the older we get the more we come to experience the inevitable Buddhist truth of change, it’s not necessarily true that it must be a sad and lonely affair. In fact, as Lewis Richmond proposes in *Aging as a Spiritual Practice* (Chapter 10), the journey of aging can provide the perfect opportunity to develop our contemplative skills. After all, working with the facts of old age—namely, illness and death—is central to Buddhist teachings.

What you hold in your (virtual) hand is our latest special e-book offering, *Tricycle Teachings: Aging*. Inside you will find tips and advice, from teachers young and old, on how to age gracefully.

A word to the wise: Remember it’s not just the old who are aging. These teachings are relevant for us all.—The Editors

1

BEYOND COPING

The Buddha's teachings on aging, illness, death, and separation

THE BUDDHA

TRANSLATED BY THANNISARO BHIKKHU

King Koravya: "Master Ratthapala, you say, 'The world is swept away. It does not endure.' Now how is the meaning of this statement to be understood?" Ven. Ratthapala: "What do you think, great king: When you were 20 or 25 years of age—an expert elephant rider, an expert horseman, an expert charioteer, an expert archer, an expert swordsman—were you strong in arm and strong in thigh, fit, and seasoned in warfare?"

King Koravya: "Yes, Master Ratthapala, when I was 20 or 25 years old... I was strong in arm and strong in thigh, fit, and seasoned in warfare. It was as if I had supernormal power. I do not see anyone who was my equal in strength."

Ven. Ratthapala: "And what do you think, great king: Are you even now as strong in arm and strong in thigh, as fit, and as seasoned in warfare?"

King Koravya: "Not at all, Master Ratthapala. I'm now a feeble old man, aged, advanced in years, having come to the last stage of life, 80 years old. Sometimes, thinking, 'I will place my foot here,' I place it somewhere else."

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

Ven. Ratthapala: “It was in reference to this, great king, that the Blessed One who knows and sees, worthy and rightly self-awakened, said: ‘The world is swept away. It does not endure.’ Having known and seen and heard this, I went forth from the home life into homelessness.”  
—*Majjhima Nikaya* 82

“There is the case where a monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present I am young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life. The time will come, though, when this body is beset by old age. When one is overcome with old age and decay, it is not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It is not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that dhamma—I will live in peace even when old.’”  
—*Anguttara Nikaya* 5.78

**Thanissaro Bhikkhu** is abbot of Metta Forest Monastery, outside of San Diego.

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HAGS, NUNS, AND  
MAGPIE SCHOLARS

Terigatha, poems of the sisters

BY ANNE WALDMAN

Poets are magpie scholars.

They follow their obsessions.

I am obsessed with what I call “hag energy” and am constantly on the scent of the ripened and withered female adept who cackles and rejoices in her freedom, going “beyond” her own vanity, grasping, fixation. The *dakini*, a Tantric energy principle, frequently manifests as hag, both a survivor and a teacher, who appears in old-woman guise as a means to waken the concept bound mind-sets around her. Her ugliness, her cronelike appearance, is a challenge to anyone. The 11th-century teacher Tilopa appeared to his principal student, the great Indian Buddhist scholar and yogi Naropa, as a hag. From the Buddhist perspective, the hag’s appearance is a teaching on the nature of impermanence. Every young woman, when she looks in the mirror, should see her face wise with desiccation. This is not a morbid suggestion. On the contrary, it’s recommended that as human beings we be “haunted by impermanence.” It generates compassion for others, makes you more generous, less stingy. There’s a Buddhist ceremony called the *amrit-kundali*, in

which children are blessed and splashed with a ritually prepared liqueur of deathlessness as they stand in front of a mirror. The “zap” is meant to cut their perception of themselves as solid entities, disclosing the insubstantiality of their projections, in this case the mirrored reflection.

***Sangha Speaks***

*Home I've left  
Child I've left  
Cherished herds—far behind  
Lust—even lust—left  
Left ill will too  
Gone ignorance  
Ignorance back off  
I'm okay without you*

***Soma***

*It's hard to get  
the perspective of a sage A two-fingered woman's intelligence  
won't do  
(like the child-woman who needs to  
test the rice with 2 fingers)  
Should being a woman be a problem?  
No! My mind's set  
I've insight on the Path  
I've seen the woman light*

*Tissa Speaks to Herself*

*Tissa,  
Get with it  
Don't let "it"  
pass you by*

Those who miss "it"  
grieve  
when they're  
stuck in hell

When I first came to the *Therigatha*, or the Psalms of the Sisters, I couldn't believe my ears. Here were texts composed on the tongue by Buddhist *women* that captivated my attention and imagination so completely that I could literally feel their presences hovering close by. These women seemed vivid inhabitants of the apparitional realm or "enjoyment body" the Buddhists call *sambhogakaya*, whose attributes are compassion and communication. The poems—really a collection of many diverse expressions of spiritual aspiration—were based on a much earlier oral tradition.

Legend places some at the time of the Buddha, though they were not committed to writing until 80 B.C.E., when they entered the Pali canon. There is difficulty ascertaining the historicity of the Sisters; to further complicate matters, the legends occasionally extend back to the nuns' former lives. The prenatal legends, rich and luminous, apparently derive from distant unknown sources. There is a good deal of conjecture about the texts. Some of the poems seem to reveal the hand of deliberate



literary artifice. Some use tag phrases, Buddhist slogans, party-line didacticisms. Yet what sings through are the goading circumstances that drive women to seek the dharma and the relief they feel having entered upon their chosen path. “Free at last” is the most common refrain.

These tender and tough poems reflect an active community of women who breathed the spiritual atmosphere, who chose *anagarika*, or the homeless life, as an alternative to prostitution, widowhood, despotic marriages, or to a life spent grieving over a dead child. These women were not virgins; they weathered life in real and very dramatic ways, and ultimately woke to the “wisdom eye.” They understood, they lived, and they crossed over the “truth of suffering.” One of my favorite poems is by Subha, in which the nun upon entering the tantalizing Jivakamba mango-grove is accosted by a young lothario, who engages her in a lengthy debate concerning the celibate versus the sensual life. Aroused by her dark lovely eyes, he seems about to rape her, at which point she plucks out one of her eyeballs. He recoils in horror, his amorous advances thwarted. This is a priceless and shocking and luminous detail, be it actual or legendary, and carries the sting of the hag. Another favorite is the dramatic monologue of the aging excourtesan Ambapali. Singing of the inevitability of beauty’s decay, her poem is every woman’s nightmare, every woman’s liberation. Again, the stain of the hag

Not being a scholar of Pali, and the type of Pali of the *Therigatha* being of a particularly ancient type, I’ve relied on earlier, largely outdated translations, as well as brief excursions into relevant documentation of the period. I’ve also consulted with Buddhist scholar-translators, hoping to arrive at modest and highly personal versions that might carry some of the original energy and aspiration of these cheerful and authoritative “awakening ones.”

***Citta Speaks***

*(Heaping up good karma in many lives  
Citta had been born  
a fairy in the 94th aeon)*

*Although I'm thin & weak  
Spring in my once lively gait gone  
I've climbed the mountain  
leaning on my walking stick  
I throw the cloak off my shoulder  
Overturn the little begging bowl  
Against this rock I lean & prop  
the self of me  
Break through the gloom  
that boxed me in AHHHHHHH*

***Virnala,  
the Former Courtesan, Speaks***

*I used to be puffed up  
high on my good looks  
intoxicated by a great complexion  
my figure, my beauty ...  
I was haughty, vain,  
looked down on other women*

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*I was very young  
All painted up  
I stood at the brothel door  
(like a hunter laying snares,  
showing my wares)  
Many a secret place was revealed  
I conjured, I mocked people  
Today I'm bald  
Clad in an outer robe,  
I go begging  
Sitting at the foot of a tree,  
I'm not even reasoning anymore  
All ties have been cut  
I said, cut*

### **Mutta Speaks**

*I'm free. Ecstatically free  
free from three crooked things:  
the mortar  
the pestle  
& my hunchbacked husband  
All that drags me back is cut-cut!*

### **Ambapali Speaks**

*Once my hair was black like the color of bees  
Alive—curly  
Now it is dry like bark fibers of hemp  
I'm getting old*

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*This is true, I tell you the truth*

*Covered with flowers, my head was fragrant  
Like a perfumed box  
Now, because of old age, it smells like dog's fur  
Thick like a grove it used to be beautiful—  
Ends parted by comb & pin  
Now it's thin, I'm telling the truth*

*This was a head with fine pins once,  
Decorated with gold, plaited, so beautiful  
Now bald*

*My eyebrows were like crescents  
Exquisitely painted by artists  
Now because of old age they droop down with wrinkles  
Ah, I'm telling the truth*

*My eyes used to be shiny, brilliant as jewels  
Now they don't look so good*

*My nose was like a delicate peak  
Now it's a long pepper  
This scarecrow is telling the truth*

*My earlobes once—can you believe it?  
Were like well-fashioned bracelets  
Now they're heavy with creases*

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

*Formerly my teeth were pearly white  
like the bud of a plantain  
Now they're broken & yellow  
Indeed, this is the truth*

*Sweet was my singing like the cuckoo in the grove  
Now my voice cracks & falters  
Hear it? These words are true*

*My neck used to be soft like a well-rubbed  
conch shell  
Now it bends, broken*

*My arms were round like crossbars  
Now they're weak as the petali tree*

*My hands were gorgeous—they used to be  
used to be gorgeous—  
Covered with signet rings, decorated with gold  
Now they are like onions & radishes  
This is true, I tell you*

*Formerly my breasts looked great—  
round, swelling, close together, lofty  
Now they hang down like waterless waterbags*

*My body used to be as shiny as a sheet of gold  
Now it is covered with very fine wrinkles*

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

*Both thighs—& this was once considered a compliment—  
looked like elephants' trunks—very interesting  
I swear I'm telling the truth  
Now they're like stalks of bamboo*

*My calves too, like stalks of sesame*

*My feet used to be elegant  
like shoes of soft cotton wool  
Now they are cracked & wrinkled  
This hag speaks true*

*Once I had the body of a queen  
Now it's lowly, decrepit, an old house  
plaster falling off  
Sad, but true*

**Anne Waldman**, poet, performer, teacher, is the author of over forty books of poetry. She is a Distinguished Professor of Poetics and director of the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

*—from Winter 1991*

3

ANTI-AGING CREAM

Perspectives on aging

“I listen to the sounds of nature and follow its suggestions in daily life. The whole universe is one nonstop motion of flowing time that all things are subject to. We’re born, and we decay. What a fuss. The use of anti-aging cream, if such a thing exists, seems a wasteful effort in my opinion.” —*Ann Setko Iversen*, potter

“‘Therefore, Sariputra, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no appearance...’ and no anti-aging cream.” —*Rosemary Bakker*, interior designer

“I’m 72 and I’m asking you what that has to do with Buddhism.” —*Helen Powell*, retired psychotherapist

“Why not? As a Buddhist I still like to look good.” —*Joan Hoeberichts*, management consultant

“We believe in the power of Buddha, so we don’t use any cream. Sometimes lipstick or eye shadow.” —*Suzie Hoathi Kilichowski*, hair accessories company owner

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“I suppose as Americans we can prevent *looking* like we’re aging. But we can’t prevent the reality of old age, sickness, and death.”

—*Aviva Scully*, espresso bar owner

“Why is this not funny, why is this not cute? Why is the trivialization of aging beginningless and endless?”

—*Jisho Cary Warner*, Soto Zen priest

“Everybody in Korea uses lotions. Even the monks. Except, of course, they avoid ones with animal fat.” —*Yun Yohe*, sweater designer

“Why not? Honoring the body as a vessel of life, one tends to it like a beloved plant, coaxing the maximum beauty, while respecting its natural cycles.” —*Nicolee Jikyo Miller*, Soto Zen Priest and therapist

“Actually, I’m getting a massage right now. Can I call you back?”

—*Laura Simms*, storyteller

“My understanding is that illusion, and even creating illusion, need not be a problem, unless one buys into it. As practitioners, it seems best to contemplate the inner meaning of a situation before we decide on the appropriate outer discipline.”

—*Agnes Au*, sportswear company co-owner and designer

“It’s all right to want to use something like ‘anti-aging cream,’ as long as you don’t take it too seriously. I also think it’s all right not to use ‘anti-aging cream,’ as long as you don’t take that too seriously either.”

—*Sylvia Bercovici*, psychotherapist and teacher

—*from Winter 1994*



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OUR REAL HOME

Finding inner peace

AJAHN CHAH SUBATO

Even the Buddha himself, with his great store of accumulated virtue, could not avoid death. When he reached old age, he relinquished his body and let go of its heavy burden. Now you too must learn to be satisfied with the many years you have already depended on your body. You should feel that it's enough.

You can compare it to household utensils that you've had for a long time—your cups, saucers, plates, and so on. When you first had them they were clean and shining, but now after using them for so long, they're starting to wear out. Some are already broken, some have disappeared, and those left are deteriorating: they have no stable form, and it's their nature to be like that. Your body is the same way. It has been continually changing right from the day you were born, through childhood and youth, until now it has reached old age. You must accept that. The Buddha said that all conditions (*sankharas*), whether they are internal conditions, bodily conditions, or external conditions, are not-self—their nature is to change. Contemplate this truth until you see it clearly.

This very lump of flesh that lies here in decline is a *saccadhamma*, the truth. The truth of this body is *saccadhamma*, and it is the unchanging teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha taught us to look at the body, to

contemplate it and to come to terms with its nature. We must be able to be at peace with the body, whatever state it is in. The Buddha taught that we should ensure that it is only the body that is locked up in jail, and not let the mind be imprisoned along with it. Now as your body begins to run down and deteriorate with age, don't resist that, but don't let your mind deteriorate with it. Keep the mind separate. Give energy to the mind by realizing the truth of the way things are. The Lord Buddha taught that this is the nature of the body. It can't be any other way. Having been born, it gets old and sick and then it dies. This is a great truth that you are presently encountering. Look at the body with wisdom and realize it.

You needn't worry about anything, because this isn't your real home. It's just a temporary shelter. Everything there is is preparing to disappear. If you look at it like that, your heart will be at ease.

You have been alive a long time. Your eyes have seen any number of forms and colors, your ears have heard so many sounds, and you've had any number of experiences. And that's all they were—just experiences. You've eaten delicious foods and all the good tastes were just good tastes, nothing more. The unpleasant tastes were just unpleasant tastes, that's all. If the eye sees a beautiful form, that's all it is, just a beautiful form. An ugly form is just an ugly form. The ear hears an entrancing, melodious sound, and it's nothing more than that. A grating, disharmonious sound is simply so.

The Buddha said that rich or poor, young or old, human or animal, no being in this world can maintain itself in any one state for long; every thing experiences changes and estrangement. This is a fact of life that we can do nothing to remedy. But the Buddha said that what we can do is contemplate the body and mind so as to see their impersonality, see that neither of them is "me" or "mine." They have a merely provisional reality.

It's like this house: it's only nominally yours, you couldn't take it with you anywhere.

It is the same with your wealth, your possessions, and your family—they are all yours only in name; they don't really belong to you, they belong to nature. Now this truth doesn't apply to you alone; everyone is in the same position, even the Lord Buddha and his enlightened disciples. They differed from us in only one respect, and that was in their acceptance of the way things are. They saw it could be no other way.

The Buddha taught us to scan and examine this body, from the soles of the feet up to the crown of the head, then back down to the feet again. Just take a look at the body. What sort of things do you see? Is there anything intrinsically clean there? Can you find any abiding essence? This whole body is steadily degenerating, and the Buddha taught us to see that it doesn't belong to us. It is natural for the body to be this way, because all conditioned phenomena are subject to change. How else would you have it be? Actually there's nothing wrong with the way the body is. It's not the body that causes suffering, it's your wrong thinking. When you see the right wrongly, there's bound to be confusion.

The more exhausted you feel, the more subtle and focused your concentration must be, so that you can cope with the painful sensations that arise. When you start to feel fatigued, then bring all your thinking to a halt, let the mind gather itself together, and then turn to knowing the breath. Just keep up the inner recitation: Bud-dho, Bud-dho. Let go of all externals. Don't go grasping at thoughts of your children and relatives, don't grasp at anything whatsoever. Let go. Let the mind unite in a single point, and let that composed mind dwell with the breath. Let the breath be its sole object of knowledge. Concentrate until the mind becomes increasingly subtle, until feelings are insignificant, and there is great inner clarity and wakefulness. Then when painful sensations arise,

they will gradually cease of their own accord.

In truth, there's no self anywhere to be found. There are only things continually arising and passing away, as is their nature. This is the way things are, yet everyone wants them to be permanent. This is foolishness.

So let go, put everything down—everything except knowing. Don't be fooled if visions or sounds arise in your mind during meditation. Put them all down. Don't take hold of anything at all. Just stay with this non-dual awareness. Don't worry about the past or the future. Just be still and you will reach the place where there is no advancing, no retreating, no stopping, where there is nothing to grasp at or cling to. Why? Because there's no self, no "me" or "mine." It's all gone. The Buddha taught us to be emptied of everything in this way, not to carry anything with us. To know, and having known, let go.

Realizing the dhamma, the path to freedom from the round of birth and death, is a task that we all have to do alone. So keep trying to let go and to understand the teachings. Really put effort into your contemplation. Don't worry about your family. At the moment they are as they are; in the future they will be like you. There's no one in the world who can escape this fate. The Buddha told us to put down everything that lacks a real abiding substance. If you put everything down, you will see the truth. If you don't, you won't. That's the way it is, and it's the same for everyone in the world. So don't worry and don't grasp at anything.

This is your own work, nobody else's. Your sole responsibility right now is to focus on your mind and bring it to peace. Leave everything else to others. Forms, sounds, odors, tastes—leave them to others to attend to. Put everything behind you and do your own work, fulfill your own responsibility. Whatever arises in your mind—be it fear of pain, fear of death, anxiety about others or whatever—say to it, "Don't disturb me.

You're not my business anymore." Just keep saying this to yourself when you see those *dhammas* arise.

What does the word *dhamma* refer to? Everything is a dhamma. There is nothing that is not a dhamma. And what about *world*? The world is the very mental state that is agitating you at this moment. "What will this person do? What will that person do? When I'm dead, who will look after them? How will they manage?" This is all just "the world." Even the mere arising of a thought of fearing death or pain is the world.

Thinking that you'd like to go on living for a long time will make you suffer. But thinking you'd like to die right away or die very quickly isn't right either. Conditions don't belong to us, they follow their own natural laws. You can't do anything about the way the body is. You can prettify it a little, make it look attractive and clean for a while, like the young girls who paint their lips and let their nails grow long, but when old age arrives, everyone's in the same boat. That's the way the body is, you can't make it any other way. But what you can improve and beautify is the mind.

As soon as we're born, we're dead. Our birth and our death are just one thing. It's like a tree: when there's a root, there must be twigs. Where there are twigs, there must be a root. You can't have one without the other. It's a little funny to see how at a death people are so grief-stricken and distracted, fearful and sad, and at a birth how happy and delighted. I think if you really want to cry, then it would be better to do so when someone's born. For actually birth is death, death is birth, the root is the twig, the twig is the root. If you've got to cry, cry at the root, cry at the birth. Look closely: if there were no birth, there would be no death. Can you understand this?

You needn't worry about anything, because this isn't your real home, it's just a temporary shelter. Having come into this world, you

should contemplate its nature. Everything there is is preparing to disappear. Look at your body. Is there anything there that's still in its original form? Is your skin as it used to be? Is your hair? It's not the same, is it? Where has everything gone? This is nature, the way things are. When their time is up, conditions go their way. This world is nothing to rely on—it's an endless round of disturbance and trouble, pleasure and pain. There's no peace.

One who is nursing parents should fill his or her mind with kindness, not get caught in aversion. This is the one time when you can repay the debt that you owe them. From your birth through your childhood, as you've grown up, you've been dependent on your parents. That we are here today is because our mothers and fathers have helped us in so many ways. We owe them an incredible debt of gratitude.

So today, all of you children and relatives gathered here together, see how your parents become your children. Before you were their children, now they become yours. They become older and older until they become children again. Their memories go, their eyes don't see so well, and their ears don't hear. Sometimes they garble their words. Don't let it upset you. All of you nursing the sick must know how to let go.

Let the patient remember the kindness of those who nurse and patiently endure the painful feelings. Exert yourself mentally, don't let the mind become scattered and agitated, and don't make things difficult for those looking after you. Let those who nurse the sick fill their minds with virtue and kindness. Don't be averse to the unattractive side of the job, to cleaning up mucus and phlegm, or urine and excrement. Try your best. Everyone in the family, give a hand.

These are the only parents you've got. They gave you life; they have been your teachers, your nurses, your doctors; they've been everything to you. That they have brought you up, taught you, shared their wealth

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with you and made you their heirs is the great beneficence of parents. Consequently the Buddha taught the virtues of *katannu* and *katavedi*, knowing our debt of gratitude and trying to repay it. These two dhammas are complementary. If our parents are in need, they're unwell or in difficulty, then we do our best to help them. This is *katannu katavedi*; it is a virtue that sustains the world. It prevents families from breaking up; it makes them stable and harmonious.

Anyone can build a house of wood and bricks, but the Buddha taught that that is not our real home. Our real home is inner peace.

**Ajahn Chah Subato** (1918-1992) trained in the Theravada practice of meditation and lived as a simple forest monk in Thailand for more than seventy years. His teachings are collected in the volume *A Still Forest Pool*, edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter. "Our Real Home" is reprinted with permission from Wat Pah Nanachat.

—*from Fall 1997*

5

AGING INTO DYING  
AND DEATH

The great adventure of growing old

KENNETH HENRY JONES

Buddhist writer Larry Rosenberg maintains that “we’re not really afraid of dying—we’re afraid of the *idea* of dying.” The discussion of ideas about dying has become quite fashionable—though they are not usually recognized as nomore than ideas. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its famous variant, Sogyal Rinpoche’s *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, have become best sellers. At any public meeting on Buddhism you can be sure of at least one question about rebirth.

In meditative inquiry it is important to distinguish between ideas and personal experience. Buddhist ideas about death are an expression of the experience of highly evolved yogins, raised in or living in traditional, spiritually saturated cultures. Such ideas can sustain faith. They are also valuable in that they may contain specific meditation and visualization instructions, which, in gifted and advanced practitioners, can lead to altered states of consciousness.

However, it is all too easy to forget that these are mere ideas, which we may have made into fascinating and consoling mind pictures. They



then become, in effect, evasions, in that they make it more difficult to sustain a *don't know* mind, empty and open to receive whatever gifts of insight may be offered. The ancient Chan scripture *On Trust in the Heart* warns us that, of death and all the grave and constant concerns of life, “the more you think about it, the more you talk about it, the further from it you go. Put an end to wordiness and intellection and there is nothing you will not understand. For what can words tell of that which has no yesterday, tomorrow, or today?”

Similarly, many centuries later, the great Zen master Dogen, who emphasized death as the central concern of practice, urged us not to analyze it or speak about it. “Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of Buddha; then all is done by Buddha.”

If we ask ourselves questions like “What is my death?” and “Where do I go after I die?” we may be able to come up with some interesting ideas. But in the shadow of death, we shall need more than fascinating explanations to sustain us. Our salvation lies in sustaining holy ignorance, the open, receptive mind of bare awareness. This requires faith, courage, and determination, because when we penetrate beyond *ideas* about dying, we uncover what we really fear, and with good reason—our *feelings* about dying.

**Kenneth Jones** is a founding member of the Network of Engaged Buddhists and an authoritative interpreter of Dogen. This article was excerpted from *Ageing: The Great Adventure; A Buddhist Guide*, © 2003 by Kenneth Henry Jones. Reprinted by permission of Pilgrim Press, Abingdon, Wales.

—from *Winter 2003*

6

TOO MUCH

Approaching the limits of suffering while caring for aging parents

RAFI ZABOR

Not long after my parents' deaths—my mother's from Alzheimer's, my father's from emphysema—I was visited by my friend Elan Sicroff, a concert pianist, who had come to town to see his friend the Venerable Bhante Dharmawara, a 100-year-old Cambodian Buddhist monk who was, as usual, just passing through. In this instance Bhante's passage involved the inauguration of a Buddhist temple in a rambling wooden Brooklyn pile on Rugby Road, not half a block up the street from the high school gym where I used to go Friday-night dancing. I'd never met Bhante, but Elan invited me to come along and I thought why not. I'd heard about him for years and particularly liked the story about how a bunch of his students, some years before, had put him on a plane from New York to California—his only steady pied-à-terre, I'd heard, was some vast underground bunker in, of all places, Fremont—when he kept telling them insistently that he really wanted to go to Vienna. It was a nonstop flight—so went the tale—that landed in San Francisco, where the people waiting for him were confused by his absence. Bhante deplaned happy, unawaited, and in his robes at Austria's principal airport, and while I'm pretty sure a stopover in Chicago or someplace had a hand in the events, it was an irresistible story anyway.

Elan and I approached the temple across its impressively pillared

porch, and once inside the front door we were met by two young Cambodian men who spoke no English in response to our own. They startlingly, silently guided us through what had once been the living room, now massed with six-foot-tall candles in monumental sconces, a golden effigy of the Lord Buddha seated at the head of the room and much devotional art arrayed about him along the walls, then up three flights of creaking stairs to the plain, barely furnished attic bedroom in which Bhante, taking note of our arrival, rose from his daybed nap to say hello, ancient in his faded orange robe, his translucent, lined, hardly still human face breaking into a smile of greeting. He had unusually small and even teeth which might actually have been his own, a shaven head and long-lobed, pointed ears. His skin was the color of blonde Virginia tobacco and had a healthy sheen. He moved terribly slowly, as if prone to breakage, but with a definite frail grace, and at so evenly measured a pace as to seem in another region of space-time, inching along beside us in parallel but with an entirely different relationship to the velocity of light.

Elan and Bhante had some things to catch up on; a few familiar names percolated through the conversation, although I could not follow the plot, and then Bhante, like a very slow, experienced planet, revolved in my direction from the daybed's edge. On the wall behind him were a number of color photographs of Cambodian men and women who had evidently come to the attention of the Khmer Rouge, some with missing limbs, others with enormous burns or slashes on their torsos; some were living and others dead; it was not always possible to tell which. I had never seen a photo of a woman with her breasts hacked off before. After asking me a very few questions and receiving terse, shy, uninformative answers about my parents' deaths and my so far unsteady attempts to find a life in the aftermath, Bhante reignited his grin and his eyes took

firmer hold of me. "To take on the suffering of others," he said in his small, quavering, accented, barely audible voice, "is the . . . *noblest* . . . thing a man can do," and here the crawling pace of his speech accelerated to its conclusion: "*but you have taken on too much.*" He paused, perhaps not for effect, but the pause was effective all the same, then repeated: "You have taken on too much." He began chuckling and nodding his head yes. Elan and I couldn't help it, we both laughed.

Perhaps that's what I had done, imperfectly and inexpertly at the very least, most often in a disorderly fugue of intertwining, inevitable failures. I had tried to get between my parents and heal, I suppose, the pain that was tearing all of us to pieces. I didn't have much luck, and neither did they.

During the two or three worst years of their decline, I was, at least for a while, dividing my time between a house full of musicians in Woodstock and my folks' apartment in Brooklyn, attempting to maintain the fact or fiction of a personal life, although by then my parents' drama had begun to obliterate my own and my time down in Brooklyn to exceed my stays upstate; it would not be long before it would dawn on me that, however shell-shocked and in need of a retreat I was, my proper business lay back in town. But that was still to come.

In early March of that year, I was awakened one morning, lying on my thin bit of mattress on the living room floor, by the sound of my father choking to death in the kitchen. On second thought, it occurred to me, maybe he was only having a little more difficulty than usual coughing up his gob of phlegm, although I had never heard this particular long, drawn-out strangulation of a sound before. I lay there on my back beneath the blanket, hoping for the best or perhaps, already wearied by the daily pain deposited like a newspaper at my door, too beat to move unless I knew for sure. I heard a plastic water glass clatter and splash to

the kitchen floor and then my father's panicked footsteps coming my way, and I knew that he was having one of those spasms I had heard about but never seen, in which his windpipe shut and he began to suffocate. These spasms were caused by one of the medicines he used—each year a few dozen asthmatics are found dead on their floors, a portable inhaler clutched in their hands or lying beside them: one of the risks of the treatment—and he had saved himself, once, by falling belly-first over the back of a chair, and once, having tried the chair and failed, by rushing in his underwear out of the apartment into the hallway in what had seemed his last living moment and attempting to shout for help at the closed brown doors of the other apartments on the floor: on the third try his windpipe popped open and out came the sudden sound of his voice. The most recent such attack had come only a little earlier in my mother's accelerating senescence: with his armchair pulled up to the bedroom TV and my mother awake in bed behind him, he had looked at her helplessly over the chairback, gargling in strangulation as she canted her head to one side like a parakeet and looked back at him, saying, "Harry? Harry?" I forget how he got out of that one, but there was always the possibility that one of these attacks would finish him off.

As his footsteps came my way I threw off the blanket, flung open the folding fiberboard partition in the archway to the foyer—a gesture toward my privacy, installed years before, when I drifted home on visits—and went to meet my father. I saw that he was not wearing the length of oxygen hose that usually trailed him around the house; either the spasm had surprised him without it or, more likely, he had torn it off when his windpipe shut. The squat brown oxygen machine wheezed and shuddered at the foyer's other end, its red eye blinking.

We acted quickly and efficiently for once: he pointed at his open mouth, I nodded yes, he turned away from me and backed into my arms,

arranging them around his deep barrel chest and over his rounded stomach so that I could administer the Heimlich maneuver and unblock his windpipe. I hadn't had the chance to put any clothes on, so I was standing naked behind my father. He was wearing an old beige woolen bathrobe open over faded cotton pajamas. Four or five inches taller than he and feeling awkward, incompletely awake, and well aware that my father could die in my arms, with me standing there naked holding on if this didn't work, I held my breath and gave a hard pull and squeeze across his belly. I heard a number of cracking sounds and thought, good, as he shook his head no, did not begin breathing and repositioned my arms lower, well, at least I've adjusted his spine for him. The second pull worked—I could feel his stomach give way and his breathing break open—but the sound that came out of him on the first breath was a groan of pain in extremis. When he tried to straighten up, he groaned again. When he raised his arms, the pain was audibly unbearable. When he tried to turn sideways to face me, it was the same. I saw the look of shock in his eyes.

On the first pull, my arms too high around him, where he and I together had placed them, I had dislocated six of his ribs, as I found out later that day when a chiropractor friend came by to examine him. She put a struck tuning fork to each of his ribs in turn to check for fracture—had one been broken, she told me afterward, the pain of the fork's vibration on the contiguous edges of bone would have sent him screaming through the living room ceiling: a nice test. As it was, my father would be in serious pain, she told me, for at least the next couple of weeks.

I felt defined: accused, judged, and condemned. I was trying to help my parents, but in the real picture I was increasing their suffering. Now, thanks to my most recent aid, my father could not only hardly breathe, he could barely move.

My mother, her most needling and unconsciously cruel tendencies brought further forward by the Alzheimer's, would hover darkly about the apartment, her eyes uncertain, ready to pounce if she could make out, through the fog of her disintegrating perception, any sign of weakness in him.

"Please, Sadie," my father would beg her, "Let me read for a little, a little peace, a little quiet. I'm a sick man," and she would return with, "Sick? Sick? You're making me sick. You're making me *cra-zy*."

She would not attack me. You could see the look in her eyes, wanting to, but then pulling back when she saw that I was too well armed against her. But my father refused to protect himself from her torments. "She's as innocent as a little bird," he would tell me—correctly, as I was later able to agree—in his rumbling, heavily accented voice, that of a warmer, kinder Boris Badenov. "How can I say a word against her? A little bird." He would not even distance himself from her emotionally, as I told him he should, if only for his own protection. Any backward step felt cruel to him.

That night my father came briefly out of bed to see if he could read for a while in the kitchen. Reading had been one of the first and was now the last of his pleasures, although he only read junk now, the autobiographies of actresses and the like. "I can't take any more sadnesses," he would tell me when I came at him with some new novel I liked or recommended that he have another go at his beloved Tolstoy.

There was a line in *War and Peace*—the book that dominated the bookshelves of my childhood, thick and red, its title gilt on a contrasting black band, and for frontispiece a multicolored map that compared Napoleon's advance into Russia with Hitler's; an edition printed in the darkest days of the war that early on consumed my father's family—and which like so many others had struck me, in my most recent reading of

the book, as a definitive pronouncement of an all-seeing, God's-eye genius. It comes late in the book, after Pierre's capture by the French, when he is trudging west as their prisoner through the lethal snows of their retreat. He has been imprisoned, marched up to a firing squad, seen other men executed and expected himself to be shot next, then marched starving through the white death of the Russian winter: "He had learned that there is a limit to suffering and a limit to freedom, and that these limits are not far away . . . that in the old days when he had put on his tight dancing shoes he had been just as uncomfortable as he was now, walking on bare feet that were covered with sores." It is an audacious statement in the middle of a stretch of narrative that may be the most fully realized portrait of the activity of Enlightened Mind in the whole of Western fiction, but it is untrue.

Even without recourse to the concentration camps my father had escaped by getting to America just in time, or to the increasingly quotidian incidents around the world to which the mutilated bodies on Bhante's bedroom wall bore prosaic witness, it was possible, even within the relative comfort of a three-room petit bourgeois Brooklyn apartment, to set sail for another country in which pain was infinite, exquisitely well-aimed by a mysterious knowledge of your most occult and tender workings, and utterly without recourse. Sitting in that kitchen, and still able to acknowledge that his suffering represented a small drop in the world's oceanic supply of the stuff, I could see, over the shoulders of the border guards as they poked at me with their pocketknives or laughed at the inadequacy of my papers, I could see my father lost in the depths of that country, stunned and without a passport, progressively stripped of his human attributes, his memories, his ability to think and feel, his identity, his name. I could see the look of shocked recognition in his eyes, and hear the echo of the blows as they came up from the depths.



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

His eyes were beginning to fail him too, and he read with a lamp drawn down close to the pages of his book through a large, round magnifier in a brown imitation tortoise-shell plastic frame. Most of my father's hair was gone and the skin on his head was blotched cancerously with brown, and in addition to the fairly new black and gray bristle on his upper lip he wore a second moustache of clear plastic with two prongs that went a small way up his nostrils: oxygen. The fat brown machine huffed behind him, visible in profile through the open doorway to the foyer.

It was painful for him to sit at the table, but more painful to lie in bed, with some of his weight invariably pressuring his dislocated ribs. I sat in my chair at the oval table's opposite end.

"I'm so sorry about the ribs." I must have said this a number of times that day and night.

If he tried to shrug, it would have hurt him.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's terrible, the pain." Not once did he admit to complicity in the placement of my hands on the first try. This omission amazed me: for all the accusations I had hurled at him over the years, with the unspeakable cruelty that only a loving, beloved, too-symbiotic son can manage—sharper than that Shakespearean serpent's tooth by a long shot—this was the closest he had ever come to accusing me of anything.

We heard my mother's smallish footsteps shuffling up the corridor from the bedroom. She paused at the dining room door, stooped and uncertain.

"Sadie," said my father.

"Sadie," she replied, not in confirmation but in the identical tones, an echo.

"Do you want it maybe a glass of hot milk with water?"

“Water with milk?” she inquired, her voice faltering upward.

“Or water with milk,” my father allowed. “Pull up a chair. Sit down with us awhile.”

I got up to heat a pot of water on the stove.

“Where are you?” my mother might have asked him.

“Sadie,” he would have answered, “I’m here, in the kitchen, with you.”

“I saw a cockroach in the bathroom,” she said.

“Sadie, it’s not a cockroach. It’s a crack in the tile. Do you remember? We put your finger on it? It didn’t move. It didn’t run away.”

“A cockroach. Look,” she said, pointing, then paused as she realized she was not in the bathroom anymore.

“Sadie.”

My trained ear could hear the beginnings of a modulation toward fury as she insisted: “A *cockroach*.”

And I would have gone to the stove to tend to the water. I would have selected two clean highball glasses, poured an inch or two of milk into them, then filled the remainder with the heated water: an insipid drink my parents had taken to in recent years.

I would have sat down at the table with them, and hoped for something milder than catastrophe.

And if no special horror intervened, later that night I would have put them to bed, and still later my mother would have insisted on lying atop the blankets instead of beneath them despite the cold of the night—“I always lie on top of the blankets!” she would insist, shaking with increasingly cold rage, or, shocked, ask my father how dared he, dirty man, to come into my bed, and then my father would begin to weep like a child because if she stayed like that she would be stiff with ache by morning and because he could do nothing with her, and I would come in

from my momentary refuge (ice cream, television) in the living room and get inside my mother's timing, ask her to excuse me a minute but would she get up—hah?—and, yes, okay, you can lie back down now, there, I'll tuck you in, have a good night's sleep, good night, Mom.

And looking at the small mound of her under the blanket my father would ask me, how did you do that?

And I would say, you just have to distance yourself a little from your emotions and see what will work in a purely practical sense.

And he would say, I can't. And I would say, because you think it would be cruel?

And he'd say, helplessly, yes.

And I'd say, but by doing it you can actually help the situation a little, reduce the suffering all around.

Yes, he'd painfully admit.

And I: do you have to take every arrow directly in the heart?

And he wouldn't know what to say, because taking every arrow directly in the heart was the best he could come up with (taking on the suffering of others is the . . . *noblest* . . . thing a man can do).

And I would say, good night, Dad.

We had fetched up, the three of us, on a bare and unimplorable shore on which all human gesture failed, and we would be there for a while.

**Rafi Zabor** is the author of *The Bear Comes Home*, which received the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1998 as the year's best American work of fiction. This essay was excerpted from his memoir, *I, Wabenzi*.

—from *Winter 2005*

7

# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

The joyful unfolding of a deep appreciation.

AJAHN SUMEDHO

Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years . . . moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures—not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why! Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, introduce them to the world.

Yet, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents and settles and establishes them in morality, or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity, or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom—such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.

—the Buddha, *Anguttara Nikaya* 2.32

My father died about six years ago. He was then 90 years old, and he had never shown love or positive feelings toward me. So from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling

through most of my life. I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory “Hello son, good to see you.” And he seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, “Remember, this is my house, you’ve got to do as I say.” This was his greeting—and I was almost 50 years old at the time! I don’t know what he thought I was going to do.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression. Then in ’29 the crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes to support us. Then the Second World War started, but my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in Seattle. He didn’t like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. He never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. He had sacrificed his own preferences to support my mother, my sister, and me.

When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause us to suffer now. I didn’t realize then that suffering was natural. Of course my mother was not perfect, so naturally there were things she could have done better. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there—and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister, and me as good and as happy as could be. She asked very little for herself, and when I think back like this, *katannu*, Pali for gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father.

The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us

by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whomever; and to do this intentionally, to cultivate it, rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

My students who have a lot of anger toward their parents ask me how they can develop gratitude toward them. Teaching lovingkindness, or *metta*, on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading metta to her parents, would go into a rage. Then she felt very guilty about it. Every time she thought about her mother, she felt only rage. This was because she used only her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of metta, but emotionally felt anything but lovingkindness.

It's important to see this conflict between the intellectual and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in the heart we feel "I can never forgive them for what they've done." So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we begin to rationalize: "Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can't forgive or forget." Or: "There's something wrong with me. I'm a terrible person because I can't forgive." When this happens, I've found it helpful to have metta for my own feelings. If we feel that our parents were unkind and unloving, we can have metta toward the feeling we have in our hearts; without judgment, we can see that this is how it feels, and to accept that feeling with patience.

Once I began to accept my negativity about my father rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, we can let it go and free ourselves from its power. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

A life without gratitude is a joyless life. If life is just a continuous complaint about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we don't remember anything good ever done to us, we fall into depression—

not an uncommon problem these days. It is impossible to imagine ever being happy again: we think this misery is forever.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand, I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, known widely as Ajahn Chah, who became the catalyst for the gratitude in my life. At that time I was 33 or 34 old, and I must say gratitude was not yet a part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, what I wanted, what I thought. However, after training as a Buddhist monk for some years, in about the sixth year of monastic life, I had a heart-opening experience that was very much the experience of *katannu katavedita*, or gratitude to one's parents.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Ajahn Chah. I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism, as well as an eagerness to study and practice it. But it was still coming from the sense of my doing it, my studying it, my trying to practice it. When I became a monk, there was still this tendency: "I want to get rid of suffering. I want to be enlightened." I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents, or even about Ajahn Chah, with whom I was living at the time. I thought that it was very nice that he was helpful to me, but I did not feel a deep gratitude.

I had the idea that life owed all this to me—an unpleasant kind of conceit. When we are brought up in middle-class comfort as I had been, we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought that they should have worked harder, and that I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had: people should give me these things; my parents should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint, it was Ajahn Chah's duty to teach and guide me!

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

In Thailand, I practiced with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After participation in five rainy season retreats (*vassas*), a monk is no longer considered a novice and is free to leave the monastery. I felt that being with a teacher was fine, but I wanted to go away on my own. I left for central Thailand from the northeast. After the vassa I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was in about 1974, and I decided to go as a *tudong-bhikkhu*, wandering from place to place as part of an austere form of monastic practice. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found myself in Calcutta with my alms bowl, my robe, and, abiding by the rules of monkhood, no money. In Thailand it had been easy, but in India the prospect of wandering around with nothing more than an alms bowl seemed quite frightening at first. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure, and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of a mendicant worked in India. Of all countries, it should work there, where the Buddha lived and taught.

I began to think of Ajahn Chah and to recognize the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, given me the teachings, and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate—and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling toward. In the States, the role models for men were not very attractive to me—John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not my role models. Film stars and athletes were given great importance, but none of them inspired me.

But then in Thailand, I'd found this monk. He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised me, because he had such an enormous presence. There was this feeling



about him that attracted people. So I found myself going over to see him in his hut in the evenings, or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. I asked him once what it was in him that drew people to him, and he said, “I call it my magnet.” He used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not in the service of his ego, but to help people.

The Lord Buddha, after his enlightenment, at first thought that the dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it, so there was no point in teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, “Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the dhamma.” The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realized that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practicing with him before, and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This makes me feel *katannu katavedita* to the Lord Buddha. It’s marvelous: here I am—this guy, here, in this century—having an opportunity to listen to the dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Just having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived twenty-five hundred years ago, it was actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, my gratitude began to become very strong. Then, thinking of Ajahn Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: “I’ve done my five years, now I’m going to leave. I’m going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the eye of the old man.” I realized then that I had actually run away.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

When I felt this gratitude, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that? I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out. Whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this *katannu*, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: my trying to get something, my desire for harmony, my desire to practice and have a peaceful life, free of responsibility. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier, and I found that life had become joyful to me.

The last time I went to see my father, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. In the last decade of my father's life he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain, and he had Parkinson's disease. Eventually he had to be put in a nursing home. He was completely paralyzed. He could move his eyes and talk, but the rest of his body was rigid. He was resentful of what had happened to him, because before he had been a strong, independent man.

When I saw him, his body needed to be stimulated, so I said, "Let me massage your leg." "No, no, you don't need to do that," he said. "You'll get bedsores, because you really have to have your skin massaged. I would really like to do it." He still refused, but I could tell he was considering it. "I think it'll be a good thing," I told him. "So you'd really like to do it?" he asked me. "Yes."

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck, shoulders, hands, and face; he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. Physical contact is quite meaningful, it's an expression of feeling. And I began to realize that my father really loved me, but didn't know how to say it. I had this great sense of relief and immense gratitude.

**Ajahn Sumedho**, the most senior Western disciple of the late Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, was the Abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Centre in England from 1984 until his retirement in 2010.

*—from Spring 2006*

8

AWAKE AND DEMENTED

What happens when an aging mind practices  
mindfulness of its own decline?

NOELLE OXENHANDLER

Dementia. “What’s that word?” my mother asked my sister the other day, when the nurse accidentally left her chart in plain sight.

“Oh, that’s the name of the doctor,” my sister said. “Doctor Dementia.”

Whew, another quick save—maybe. My mother never did like the hard facts straight up, and ever since we received her diagnosis three years ago, we’ve had to practice the spur-of-the-moment dodge, the ingenious distraction, the white lie....

*Dementia*: it takes a blizzard of white lies to soften the hard edges of that ugly word. To me, it’s as ugly as cancer—no, uglier. If I play the harrowing game I played as a child, *which-would-you-rather?*, then I would a thousand times rather have cancer than dementia. For the deep-down conviction, deluded or not, is that I could still be me if I had cancer, even a rapidly advancing fatal cancer—so long as it didn’t produce dementia. Isn’t this the horror of dementia, the way it subsumes identity, devours the *who* of *who I am*?

“What will happen if I forget myself?” my mother asked the other day.

Her words cut through us like a knife, yet we were grateful for the flash of clarity—for the moment in which the self was aware of its rapidly dwindling capacity to be aware. Dogen says, “To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things,” but he wasn’t talking about the self-forgetfulness of dementia. He was thinking about the self-forgetfulness of enlightenment. How different are they?

Utterly different.

And yet—

If, as they say in Zen, the rain falls equally on all things, the master’s golden staff is gold everywhere you break it, and outside the temple gate a dog is pissing to the skies...

Then doesn’t it follow that the bodhi mind—the awakened mind—is bright and vast enough to encompass the fog, despair, and disruption of dementia?

But what does this really mean? And what am I really asking? These are not idle questions, because the hard truth is that if dementia hasn’t already touched your life, it could—sooner than you think. Before you know it, someone you love—or, yes, you yourself—may be holding a passport to this strange new land you never wanted to travel to. It’s the Land of Non Sequitur, a kind of science fiction realm or Lewis Carroll dream where things *don’t follow* in an orderly way. Because the mind has lost its ability to create a coherent pattern of experience, it’s a place where shapes shift and numbers swirl, a place of tangled thoughts and dangling sentences, of lost keys, lost cars, mounting piles of unpaid bills, and aimless wanderings through once-familiar streets.

And then it’s not enough to spout beautiful ideas about the vastness of the bodhi mind, the goldness of the golden stick, one has to know *what to do*.

But how can you know what to do in the place where knowing

disintegrates? Doesn't the question itself shatter logic?

If you live where earthquakes, tornados, or hurricanes strike, then you have to prepare for the type of disaster that belongs to your realm. And if you live in the realm of hurricanes, you need to have special windows. Strangely, in wrestling with my painful questions about dementia, I've come to take solace in the remarkable design of the hurricane window.

What's remarkable about hurricane windows is that they simultaneously ward off and welcome in the huge and destructive power of water and wind. They do so by providing two layers of glass, separated by several inches of air space. The inside layer is made of extra heavy glass and is sealed on all sides, like an ordinary window. The outside layer, directly facing the elements, has a gap below. This gap lets the whooshing water enter and release some force within the air space, so that the inside layer won't shatter.

This double layer, it seems to me, is crucial in preparing for the disaster of dementia.

First, you need the strong inside layer of glass, the one that wards the danger off. How does one acquire it? While there is clearly a genetic link for some forms of dementia, such as Alzheimer's, I've found comfort in learning that there are quite a few simple and practical ways to help preserve the brain's optimum functioning. The list of tips is constantly being revised, but there are a few that hold their place on the short list—and they appear in "7 Tips for Keeping Your Brain Healthy" at the end of this article.

It's the outside layer of protection, the one that simultaneously wards off and invites, that's more difficult to envision. How can we make a space for dementia, as the hurricane window makes a space for the whooshing chaos of water and wind?

When I pose this question, what first presents itself is: mindfulness. For what is mindfulness, if not the practice of bringing the mind to those places where it goes missing? Again and again, we wake ourselves up at the point where drowsiness, distractions, and daydreams arise. In doing so, we are indeed making a kind of space for the chaos of obsessive thoughts, the fears, desires, and old hurts that swirl within even the most “normal” mind. Can this practice provide any kind of protection against the mind’s disintegration?

Already there is compelling evidence that the regular practice of meditation can ease the early symptoms of dementia. At last year’s International Conference on the Prevention of Dementia, which was sponsored by the Alzheimer’s Association and held in Washington, D.C., the results from a University of Pennsylvania study were presented. For twelve minutes a day over eight weeks, twenty patients who were all suffering from some form of memory loss and who ranged in age from 52 to 70 had been instructed to practice *kirtan*, a form of yogic meditation that involves chanting and finger movements to focus the mind. Follow-up testing confirmed significant improvements in memory, and brain scans revealed a dramatic increase in blood flow to the precise area of the brain that is associated with learning and memory—the area that is the first to decline with Alzheimer’s. According to University of Pennsylvania’s Andrew Newberg, M.D., who conducted the study, “For the first time, we are seeing scientific evidence that meditation enables the brain to actually strengthen itself and battle the processes working to weaken it.”

If a basic concentration practice such as *kirtan* can provide such clear benefits, what other forms of meditation might help to strengthen the brain against the onslaught of dementia? In asking this question, I feel as though I’ve set out for a vast and still-virgin territory. Though

years of diligent research will be required to produce an adequate map, it seems reasonable to explore those practices that intensify the flame of attention, carrying the thread of consciousness deeper and deeper in to dimmer and more inchoate states. In this context, along with various forms of awareness practice, researchers might find it relevant to investigate such diverse phenomena as lucid dreaming, in which one trains the mind to observe itself even as one sleeps. And what of the various stories about famous gurus who managed to keep their minds calm and stable while under the influence of powerful psychotropic drugs? At the very least, these stories point to a far horizon, encouraging us to think with great expansiveness about the mind's inherent resilience.

As I conjure this far horizon, my own mind is seized by the juxtaposition of two dizzying questions:

*Is the awakened mind one and the same with the conscious mind? And if so, is that consciousness dependent upon the health of the individual brain?* Traditionally in Buddhism, it is considered extremely fortunate to be born in human form, because the unique intelligence of human beings—along with the suffering of human life—places us in the best possible condition from which to attain enlightenment. Conversely, if our human intelligence is assaulted by illness or injury, then it's as if we've moved into another realm of existence—something perhaps closer to an animal realm. From this relative point of view, dementia is clearly an unfortunate demotion, a downgrade to a less auspicious rung.

And yet there is another question: *Is the awakened mind more accurately defined as a state of egolessness that transcends the conditions of any one individual's brain?* This is the absolute point of view, the one that lies within the koan: "Does a dog have buddhanature?"

These two questions are absolutely fundamental to understanding how the path-seeking mind meets the challenge of dementia—and they



provide another way of describing the hurricane window. From a relative point of view, we need to do everything we can to stay as clearly conscious for as long as we can: this is the sealed-up inside layer. From an absolute point of view, we need to surrender identification with the particular form that our own consciousness takes: this is the outer layer that lets the water in.

At death, all of us must surrender to the unknown as we face the dissolution of our own familiar states of consciousness. For those with dementia, this dissolution happens earlier. Perceptions are scrambled, the sense of time is fundamentally altered, and—perhaps most radical of all—personal history gradually disappears, until the afflicted no longer remember their own names. Because the greatest hindrance to such surrender is fear, we can turn to practices that encourage us to widen the field of our identification, to dissolve into the vastness of space without fear.

In her book *The Majesty of Your Loving*, Olivia Ames Hoblitzelle recommends “Clear Light Meditation,” a practice that, in her words, is designed to cultivate “a state of peace and acceptance, no matter what is happening.” As her husband entered the final stages of Alzheimer’s, she would sit beside him, encouraging him to visualize “a vast, boundless, ocean of light” as she calmly repeated certain phrases: “There is light everywhere...clear, radiant light... / There is light above...there is light below... / Letting go into the light... / Breathing into the light... / Everywhere light....”

This very accessible practice comes via the Clear Light Society, which was founded in Massachusetts in the 1970s. In its roots, however, it derives from certain ancient and complex Tibetan Buddhist practices, whose goal is to help one prepare for the altered states of consciousness that follow death. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the guiding principle

is that—while one is still conscious, in a familiar way and in a familiar realm—one learns strategies for navigating one’s mind through radically unfamiliar waters. Moving through the bardos, or intermediary zones, of “becoming,” one vividly imagines a spectrum of possible experiences—whether a state of terrible fear or a paralyzing attachment to physical form—thus imaginatively rehearsing for one’s actual transformation, from one life, through death, to the next birth.

In my own life, I’ve vowed to explore this bardo practice further, as a way of dealing with my own fear of dementia by training the mind to move, with equanimity, through frightening and unfamiliar states. It also seems wise to return, once again, to a simpler and less esoteric approach: kindness practice.

In a dharma talk, I once heard a meditation teacher recount a story about a longtime family friend who was suffering from dementia. Before his illness, this friend had been a highly intelligent and successful man, and he had always been very kind. When the teacher and her husband arrived for a visit, he threw open the door and exclaimed: “I have no idea who you are, but do come in and make yourselves at home!”

Both literally and metaphorically, this story is about opening the door to the unknown with a trusting and welcoming heart. To train oneself to act in this way, it would seem that no elaborate practice is required beyond the practice of kindness. Paranoia is a common feature of dementia, for as people become increasingly helpless in a world that is increasingly chaotic, they are prone to believing that others are causing their distress, whether stealing their possessions, causing their food to taste bad, or making their clocks and calendars go out of sync. If an established practice of kindness can make us more resistant to paranoia, this in itself would be a powerful balm.

Whether or not the practice of kindness makes it easier to face the

demons of dementia for oneself, it certainly makes life easier for others. In his book, *The Wise Heart* Jack Kornfield tells a story about an elderly Tibetan monk who was visiting Spirit Rock, the meditation center of which Jack is a founding teacher. The rinpoche was obviously disoriented and suffering from significant short-term memory loss but as he wandered about the grounds looking for his room, people delighted in the great warmth and deep calm of his presence.

If I look within my own small circle, I see other versions of this story. Within the last two years, the husbands of two of my closest friends have been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. Both men are in their early fifties, and both of them spent most of their adult lives devoted to spiritual practice. Though the situation has been enormously painful and difficult for all concerned, their wives report that they have remained very kind. Such kindness does help to ease the daunting task of caregiving—and it could very well have medical consequences. As anyone who has spent any length of time in a medical facility can attest, when patients are cantankerous, a negative spiral can result. Friends and family become less eager to visit, the medical staff begins to recoil—and the patient is left vulnerable and isolated.

In essence, both the bardo practice and the cultivation of kindness evoke the neuroscientific notion of the greased neural pathway. Whether speaking Spanish or playing squash, when we acquire a new skill, we forge new neural connections in the brain. Initially these connections are tentative and easily disrupted, but as they become firmly established through repetition—"greased"—a once-laborious process becomes more effortless and requires less conscious control. If we cultivate a certain mental habit over and over, it is more likely to become automatic, to activate when we need it most—as when, for example, we are facing the bardo of dementia.

With this cluster of practices, I've gone as far as I currently can with my hurricane window. And actually just now, as I wrote those words, the phone rang. It was my friend Anne, whose husband, Jake, was diagnosed last year with early-onset Alzheimer's. Because of the stigma of Alzheimer's, they ask that I not use their real names, but here's how our conversation went: Anne was calling from the beautiful old cemetery in upstate New York near where they live. She sounded breathless on the phone. "We just had to call you, Noelle! This morning we went out for a Spanish omelet and now we're hiking through the cemetery!" In her voice I heard both exuberance and relief: their day was unfolding in such a natural way, with one happy activity following the next. This was in marked contrast, I knew, to the many days where they both felt overwhelmed by the question "What is Jake going to do today?" For how do you organize a day when your mind itself is succumbing to entropy? Then Jake got on the phone, and I heard his familiar voice say my name. "Jake! How are you?" There was a pause, and the words came out both labored and ecstatic. "It's just—" There was another pause. "It's just unbelievable here! Unbelievably beautiful!"

Listening to him, I remembered that the word "savor" is linked to the Latin verb *sapere*, to know. It's a link I've always loved, and it's comforting now to realize that, even as our brains may lose much of their ability to think in an organized fashion, we may still be capable of the wisdom of savoring. Indeed, for my family this has been one of the great and unexpected blessings of my mother's affliction. No longer able to engage in anxious planning for the future or rumination about the past, there's a serenity about her that we rarely saw before. She loves to look at trees, birds, clouds moving across the sky. Though her predicament has plunged my family into a morass of stressful medical, logistical, and financial concerns, the truth is that after visiting her I often come away

feeling refreshed.

To paraphrase Shantideva: *If you can solve your problem, do so. If not, then what is the use of worrying?*

What more can we do except commit to keeping our bodies healthy and being as fearlessly aware of our own minds as we can in each moment?

As the Zen koan goes: How does the wooden Buddha walk through fire? And though I've switched from hurricanes to flames, the koan belongs here. For the answer is: He burns, wholly. Not just his body, but his brain too. For this is who and what we are: constellations of matter, vulnerable, impermanent, and—for moments? for lifetimes?—illuminated by the miracle of awareness. Whether fleeting or eternal, it's a miracle that we must never take for granted.

## 7 TIPS FOR KEEPING YOUR BRAIN HEALTHY

- 1) What's good for the heart is good for the brain. Get regular aerobic exercise and avoid high blood pressure and high (bad) cholesterol.
- 2) Stay mentally active, regularly presenting yourself with new challenges—whether they come in the form of a foreign language, a musical instrument, a dance or computer class, or a complex game or puzzle.
- 3) Maintain a daily meditation practice to help relieve stress and reduce anxiety, while activating the memory and learning center of the brain.
- 4) Stave off depression.
- 5) Stay socially engaged.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: AGING

6) Practice good nutrition. Avoid “bad” fats. Be moderate in your alcohol consumption. There is evidence that a daily Omega-3 supplement, a low-dose aspirin, a pinch of cinnamon and tumeric and a blast of the polyphenols (antioxidants) found in fruit or vegetable juice may provide some degree of protection.

7) Stay tuned to new developments. A great deal of research is being done in this field, and soon it may be possible to take certain simple tests to gauge one’s risk of some common forms of dementia—and take appropriate preventive action (such as taking certain medicines) before the brain has sustained significant damage. The latest findings in neuroscience suggest that the brain remains far more plastic than has ever been imagined. Even late in life and in the wake of serious injury and illness, it can forge new neurons and new neural connections - and this is cause for hope.

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—*from Fall 2008*

9

THE AUTHENTIC LIFE

A Conversation with Lewis Richmond

One thing that makes Lewis Richmond so interesting to speak with is that he is a person of so many interests. As a Buddhist teacher, an accomplished musician and composer, an author, a software engineer and entrepreneur, and someone whose curious and agile mind has garnered a great store of all manner of knowledge, he moves easily in conversation among diverse fields of culture and takes obvious enjoyment pursuing the unexpected turn toward wisdom.

Lewis is also interesting because he is genuinely fascinated by the experience of other people. This became abundantly clear to us at *Tricycle* when we invited him in March of last year to import to our community website a discussion that he began, and continues, on his blog *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*. Very quickly, the aging discussion became our most popular thread, thanks in no small part to the skill with which Lewis led it. His participation seemed not to be that of an authority figure, really, but of what in Buddhism is called a *kalyana mitra*, a spiritual friend. He guided the discussion gently—posing questions, sharing from his own experience, supporting what others had to say, contributing a timely quote, and so forth—and in that way, he helped the participants bring forth the best in themselves.

Lewis is a Soto Zen priest and a dharma transmitted teacher in

the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi (1904–1971), the founder of San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, and the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Lewis is the founder and leader of the Vimala Sangha, in Mill Valley, California, and the provost of Shogaku Zen Institute, a Buddhist training seminary. Recently he has also begun co-teaching, with Lama Palden Drolma, the founder of the Marin-based Sukhasiddhi Foundation, a series of workshops called Zen Heart Vajra Heart, which bring together the teachings of Zen and the Tibetan Mahamudra tradition.

—*Andrew Cooper*

**You have had a long and varied life in Buddhist practice. What have been some of its key events, benchmark experiences, turning points, and the like?** When I graduated from Harvard with a degree in music in 1967, my future was promising and clear: I was going to compose, perform, and perhaps teach music. But I walked away from my life. I didn't really know what I wanted, but I knew that the course that was laid out for me wasn't it. I returned to California, where I had grown up, and entered a seminary in the San Francisco Bay Area to prepare for a career as a Unitarian minister. One of my field assignments was to check out the Zen temple in San Francisco led by Shunryu Suzuki. Meeting Suzuki Roshi changed my life.

**How so?** Before encountering Suzuki Roshi, I didn't know what I was searching for, but afterward, I knew that I had found it. It was authenticity. I would look at him and think, Okay, this is the real thing, and that touched me deeply. Later that year I dropped out of seminary to study with him, which I did until he died. During that time I was living, with my wife, Amy, in the rapidly growing community of the San Francisco



Zen Center. Suzuki Roshi had ordained me as a priest. At his cremation I cried rivers of tears.

I continued my Zen training under Richard Baker Roshi, Suzuki Roshi's successor. In 1974, I was installed as tanto [head of practice] at Green Gulch Zen Temple, [in Marin County], one of our three practice centers. I was 30 years old at the time; I held that position for seven years.

**Thirty was pretty young to take on the responsibilities and burdens of teaching Zen.** We were all young in those days. Zen Center was an enormously exciting and innovative place to be at that time. We all felt we were creating something special and groundbreaking. I fully expected to live out my life there, serving Buddhism and fulfilling my vows as a Zen priest.

**Why did you leave?** The community went through a wrenching crisis in 1983, which culminated in Baker Roshi's resignation as abbot. At its core were long-simmering questions and resentments about his leadership style, but I won't go into any of the details here; it has been widely written about elsewhere. Shortly afterward, Amy and I left the Zen Center. We moved to Mill Valley, and I got a job (Amy already had one). I took off my robes, I let my hair grow, and we lived the life of ordinary folks, raising our nine-year-old son and going to work every day.

Most people thought that our departure from the community was due to the crisis of 1983. That was partly true, but it was also true that spiritually and developmentally I was ready to leave. I felt a need to take the carburetor of myself apart and reassemble it piece by piece, so I could figure out what had actually happened to me through those fifteen years of Zen practice and residential spiritual living.

**Would you say that you once again walked away from the life that was laid out for you?** Yes, I would. And as when I graduated from college, the change of direction had to do with a search for authenticity. After Baker Roshi left, I was one of the most senior priests in the Zen Center community, and I was close to completing my studies for dharma transmission, so there was a clear expectation shared by many people of the course my life would take. My leaving was confusing to some, upsetting to some, and I think generally controversial. But it was something I had to do. I walked away from my career in music because it didn't feel authentic, and then I walked away from Zen Center because my life there had ceased to feel authentic.

I wanted to live an ordinary life as a householder, which I did. At the same time, I continued my study of Buddhism, especially in traditions other than Zen, such as Vipassana meditation and Vajrayana. I wanted to know what Buddhism looked like in other guises.

This "ordinary" life took an unexpected turn in 1985, when doctors found a cancerous tumor in my abdomen the size of a football. For the next year I lived the life of a cancer patient. The chemotherapy and radiation treatments made me sick as a dog, and even though I was able to return to work, my health was compromised for several years afterward.

For a while, I thought I was done with my priest vows, but over time I discovered that my vows weren't done with me. Slowly, I edged my way back into teaching; I started a small sitting group in town and began to do some writing. I was especially interested in the contrasts between my life in Zen and my life as a businessperson. Over time I came up with a book idea that connected my years of Zen training with my experience in the corporate workplace. The book, *Work as a Spiritual Practice*, came out in 1999.

Just after the book came out, life handed me another rude shock. I fell ill and soon was in a deep coma that my doctors did not think I could survive, let alone recover from. I had viral encephalitis, a devastating and often fatal illness, and when I awoke after two weeks I had brain damage and a slew of other disabilities. It took me three or four years to fully heal. Out of that experience, I wrote my second book, *Healing Lazarus*, which described my coma visions, my illness, and my slow recovery.

**It sounds like this time your life walked away from you.** This illness totally changed my life. As a software developer, I had made my living with my brain. Being smart and capable was central to my identity, and suddenly that was all snatched away. When I awoke out of my coma, I was like a newborn baby. I could barely move; seeing, hearing, and thinking were all difficult. I had to learn to stand, walk, eat, and perform basic bodily functions all over again. For weeks I was unable to talk—that was especially hard!

Essentially, I had to reboot my whole life, including my life of Buddhist practice. During the early stages of recovery, I felt I had lost most of my practice resources; I couldn't sit, meditate, or concentrate. So I chanted the *nembutsu*—the recitation of the name of the Buddha of the Pure Land, *Namu Amida Butsu*—asking Amida Buddha to help me. As time went on, I realized that not only had my practice been helping me all along but that something had happened while I was in the coma that had completely changed me. During the coma, I was totally unaware of the outside world. I had no body and no sense organs—just consciousness. I was fully conscious and awake the whole time. I went to the edge, and when I came back, I was different.

**This reminds me of a question we asked a number of people to respond to several issues back: “How has a mistake, shortcoming, or misfortune enriched your Buddhist practice?”** Without the misfortune of my illnesses I would not be able to teach in the way I do today, which includes advising and counseling people about illness and loss. So in a dharmic sense, my illnesses were also gifts. The encephalitis brought me to my knees; but in Buddhist practice, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I got to find out what is really important, whether we’re talking about Buddhist practice or life in general.

When you take everything away, what have you got? That was the situation I had to work with. Having had everything stripped away, I understand that Buddha-mind does not depend on our capacities. The engine of practice is always there going. I unlearned a lot.

Sometimes when I’m asked to describe the Buddhist teachings, I say this: Everything is connected; nothing lasts; you are not alone. This is really just a restatement of the traditional Three Marks of Existence: non-self, impermanence, and suffering. I don’t think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as “you are not alone” before my illnesses, but now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means we are all in the same boat, and that’s what allows us to feel compassion.

**In addition to authenticity, do you discern any other themes that have provided continuity as your practice has assumed different forms?**

Yes, I can think of two. One has been a search for a universal and non-sectarian form of wisdom that can be made widely accessible and available to all people—priest and layperson, young and old, rich and poor, Asian and Western. I think this was Suzuki Roshi’s vision in coming to America. He saw Buddhism as an innate human treasure and as funda-

mental as breathing. He was curious, broad-minded, and willing to try new things in order to make Buddhism most approachable. But he only started a process that I believe he fully expected us, his disciples, to carry forward in ways he could not have foreseen.

The other theme begins with the recognition that we are in a time of planetary crisis. The core Buddhist teachings of interconnection, selflessness, and universal compassion are a most appropriate medicine for this crisis, I think. Buddhism is not just for inner transformation; it is for our common survival, and we Buddhists all need to do what we can to apply what is best in Buddhism to help heal our world.

**Let's take these two themes a little further, beginning with the idea of presenting Buddhism in a way that is approachable and widely accessible. This runs counter to how Zen has operated historically, where, like other meditation sects, its practice has generally been the province of a very small, often elite, monastic culture. In fact, making Buddhist practice universally available was specifically the intention of Honen [1133–1212] and Shinran [1173–1262], the founders of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and Nichiren [1222–1282], yet they are barely given attention by most meditation-oriented Buddhists in the West who might well support that very goal.** That's an interesting point. Suzuki Roshi used to say that Zen in the West would fit neither the traditional categories of priest nor lay practice, which is an idea that originated with Shinran. I think in coming to this country, Suzuki Roshi wanted to plant the seeds of dharma in fresh ground, so that something new could develop. Of course, it can't all be about innovation; there has to be a real relationship to one's tradition as well, which he also emphasized. You need a kind of dynamic tension between the traditional way and trying new things. I think that most of us who have been at this for

a while are working with what that means. Neither priest nor layperson is simply where we are, and I'm just trying to express that in the particular flavor of the Suzuki Roshi lineage.

**Regarding the second theme, while it seems evident that interconnection, selflessness, and compassion are good medicine for our poisonous times, it is also true that Buddhism has historically had little to say—and usually nothing to say—about how these values are to be applied to social and political systems. In other words, Buddhism may indeed have much to say to our current crises, but doesn't it also have much to learn about how to go about saying it?** That's right. In terms of relieving the material ills and injustices of society at large, Buddhism doesn't have a particularly distinguished track record. Buddhism does have a lot to learn about addressing the social and political sources of suffering, and where is it going to learn it? Well, from us.

Look at some of the areas where Buddhism has had considerable success penetrating the mainstream of Western society—for example, pain management, mental health, death and dying, and neuroscience. In each case, Buddhism became a resource in a field that already existed and is making a substantial contribution to each of those areas. Similarly, Buddhism can be a resource for existing disciplines, groups, and movements confronting different aspects of our planetary crisis. Buddhism might not have a lot to offer in the way of political or economic analysis, and in fact may have a lot to learn. But it might have much to say about how ecological or social justice concerns are grounded in fundamental wisdom about the nature of how things are, and it might offer guidance on how to put that wisdom into ethical practice.

**You came to Buddhist practice young. Over the decades, what in Bud-**

**dhism have you changed your mind about?** When I started practicing, I assumed, as many of us did, that the forms and methods of Asian Buddhism, just as they were, would lead us forthwith to enlightenment. All we had to do was practice them. Now my view is that wise and deep though these methods may be, the Western psyche also needs its own transformative approaches. I find the distinction in Tibetan Buddhism between absolute and relative practice useful here. The absolute practice of pure meditation is beyond culture, but the relative practices that develop compassion and transform ego may need to be more culture-specific.

The psychologist John Welwood, who has long been at the forefront of exploring the relationship of Buddhist practice and Western psychotherapy, identified this problem many years ago with his term “spiritual bypassing.” The superhighway of meditation practice alone can’t be a pretext for bypassing essential ego work; we also must traverse the local roads of personal and interpersonal transformation. This could be through psychotherapy, relationships and intimacy, group dynamics, learning about emotions, and so on.

In other words, buddhanature is the same for everyone, but ego-nature is not.

**There is a subfield of anthropology, often called psychological anthropology, that examines the specific ways in which the ego, the personality, the sense of being a subject are constructed in different cultural settings. When one reads some of the literature, what is fascinating is seeing the degree to which the very sense of subjectivity is culturally formed. It could be a long time before we grasp the implications of this for translating Buddhism across cultures. I think it may well be that many practices developed in Asia might not be psychologically ben-**

eficial for Westerners for just that reason. When I left Zen Center, I felt like I had a bad case of spiritual indigestion, as though I had taken in something that I couldn't fully break down. This idea of the ego structure being significantly conditioned by culture probably has a lot to do with this. It might also speak to a common experience among many longtime practitioners I know, including myself: the discrepancy between what the tradition says should happen as a result of practice and the reality of what actually happens.

**In exploring the topic “Aging as a Spiritual Practice” through online discussions, what have you been learning? How have you been surprised?** My original intention in launching my “Aging as a Spiritual Practice” blog and online discussion was to use the aging process as a teaching tool about suffering and impermanence. Aging is a natural dharma gate; we experience the teaching whenever we look in the mirror.

What has surprised me is how rich the topic is. Impermanence and loss are just one part of it. Certainly people have eloquently shared their experience of the death of a spouse, illness and disability, depression, disappointment, and being disrespected or ignored in public. But there have also been great expressions of freedom and insight. People talk about how liberating it is not to care what other people think anymore, about the freedom to know what you want to do and just do it. Gratitude and appreciation are important themes, too—the joy of grandchildren, the peacefulness of a garden, the beauty of a sunset, the thrill of just waking up in the morning. The young don't have these kinds of experiences, at least not in the same way. They seem to ripen with age.

**I think maybe life is an acquired taste.** Aging practitioners also de-



scribe the many ways their practice has had to change as they have grown older—not just physically, but also emotionally and energetically. None of us has the stamina we once did; some of us are losing our mental acuity, making it harder to concentrate or meditate. What is an appropriate practice as we grow older?

People do live longer now. I'm thinking that Buddhism needs to offer a young person's practice—rigorous meditation, retreat, monastic life, and so on—and then an older person's practice, emphasizing teaching, mentorship, care, compassion, and focusing on what is really important. It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a whole lifetime to raise a buddha.

Once, when someone asked Suzuki Roshi why we sit zazen, he answered, "So you can enjoy your old age." At the time we thought he was joking. Some joke! As we are now finding out, it's really hard to enjoy your old age sometimes, but a lifetime of practice helps. You can get through a lot of life's problems without a spiritual practice, but when you face your own mortality, you need a foundation in the deeper things.

**You are the head teacher of the Vimala Sangha, a lay community named for the legendary enlightened layman Vimalakirti. Do you see lay practice in the West as a complement to monastic practice, as a necessary adaptation in a culture that—for any number of reasons—is not yet ready for a robust monastic way of life? Or is lay practice something sufficient unto itself, with its own footing, logic, and perspective?** First of all, even though I lived in a spiritual community and did intensive monastic-style practice, I was married the whole time. Japanese Zen has its rather unique tradition of married priests, and that was the form of my practice. I have great respect for traditional celibate Buddhist monks and nuns, but I don't pretend to have ever been one.

It is true that Buddhism has come down to us as primarily a monastic tradition. It is also true that monks have been the primary scribes, authors, and record-keepers of that tradition. There is almost nothing from laypeople. Yet there were always thriving communities of laymen and laywomen in every generation of Buddhism. What were their practices, where are their voices? The very existence of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* suggests that those voices were there, and they were strong.

I love the character of Vimalakirti because he lived the life of a fully engaged person of wisdom. He went to sporting events and bars, he had riches. He managed a large house with servants, he had a family and children. He ran for political office, he taught in the schools. He also had an inner practice as a renunciate that allowed him to enter all of these situations and yet remain untouched and unsullied by them.

Vimalakirti was preeminently a bodhisattva, a master of skillful means working to liberate beings everywhere he went. I think today we need bodhisattvas of many stripes, people who are able to put the bodhisattva vows into action in many settings. Lay practice might allow people to develop a wider set of skills for doing this. In that regard, this could be, for Buddhism, the laypersons' time. Not that monastic forms are no longer important, but "engagement" seems to be the new watchword for Buddhists, and lay life may well better lend itself to that than monastic life.

**For you personally, how do you connect the legendary figure Vimalakirti and your flesh-and-bones teacher Suzuki Roshi?** Vimalakirti and Suzuki Roshi are my two main inspirations. There have, of course, been many others, perhaps the most important of whom has been Thich Nhat Hanh. In any case, I think of Suzuki Roshi's teaching as having two main aspects: zazen and life itself. One way to describe the second aspect

is simply to use the title of Zen Master Dogen's famous essay *Genjokoan*, which literally translates as "actualizing the fundamental point" and means manifesting zazen presence in everything you do, confronting the present moment with a completely open mind. This is what Suzuki Roshi meant by beginner's mind.

What I'm getting at is that meditation is not the whole show; life itself is the show. Living a good Buddhist life is not a matter of the more meditation, the better. What is important is manifesting beginner's mind.

**Andrew Cooper** is *Tricycle's* features editor.

—*from Summer 2010*

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AGING  
AS A SPIRITUAL  
PRACTICE

An interview with Lewis Richmond

A student once asked Shunryu Suzuki, “Why do we meditate?” “So you can enjoy your old age,” the Zen master answered.

In his 20s when he listened to the exchange, Lewis Richmond, Soto Zen Priest in Suzuki Roshi’s lineage, has had plenty of time to reflect on his teacher’s answer since. “It’s taken me a long time to get past the surface of that answer. I’m now pretty much the age he was when he said that, and it ain’t easy getting old!”

Yet in his most recent book, *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, Richmond sees in aging great opportunities for spiritual growth. In this interview, conducted at Richmond’s home in Mill Valley, California, I sat down with him to discuss the opportunities and insights aging offers.

—James Shaheen

When asked about the aging process by *The New York Times* last year, Woody Allen answered, “Well, I’m against it. I think it has nothing to recommend it. You don’t gain any wisdom as the years go by. You fall apart, is what happens. People try and put a nice varnish on it, and say, ‘Well, you mellow. You come to understand life and accept

**things.’ But you’d trade all that for being 35 again.” Funny, but is he right?** Well, I have tremendous admiration for Woody. I’ve laughed at all of his movies. But I don’t agree. Physically of course you do slowly deteriorate, but there is a deeper point about aging.

**But isn’t this the prevalent view?** I think we have to distinguish between the prevalent media view and the private experience. Certainly, ours is a youth culture and a consumer-driven culture, and advertising targets young people, period. But if you talk candidly to older people, I think they have an intimation that there’s something precious and new about growing old. They’re not quite sure what it is or how to get there. And I dare say if I could sit down with Woody and be more serious, I could probably get him to agree, too.

It’s helpful to take a more balanced view. Yes, there are all of the indignities of aging. But there are also gifts that come with age. Would I trade my life now for being 35? Of course it’s a silly question, really. We are who we are, but I would trade my body! *[Laughs.]* Anybody would, you know? But I don’t think anybody would trade their mind. I think that life is cumulative, and if I look at who I was at 35, it’s clear I know more now. I’m a deeper person. I have a deeper appreciation of other people. I’ve just lived a life—a full life. So that’s how I look at it, and that’s how I open the book. There’s a whole adventure waiting to open up for people who are aging, but they do have to get through that “I wish I were younger” phase.

**In your book you write that “not only is aging an ideal time for the cultivation of the inner life, but it’s also itself a doorway to spiritual practice, regardless of spiritual faith.” Can you talk a little bit about how aging itself can be a doorway to spiritual practice?** There’s some

point in your life, early or late, when it hits you that you and everybody else that you care about and love are not going to be here eventually, so now what? That's the gate. And when you're at that gate, life changes on you. It has a different coloration. It's more precious. It's more serious. You feel a loss of innocence. You say, "Gee, I'd like to go back to being 15," you know, where you didn't have to think about this stuff. But you're at that gate, and really the choice at that point is, do you go through the gate and really see that as an opportunity, or do you just rent some videos and pop some popcorn, or whatever? A lot of us nowadays will live to be 90, so part of the gate is, "Yeah, I'm getting old and I've got a lot of time left, so what am I going to do?" Play golf?

**If your knees hold up.** Yeah, if your knees hold up. [*Laughs.*]

**And if they don't?** Either way, the gate to spiritual practice begins with the visceral insight that everything is going to vanish, including me.

**When asked what the gist of Buddhism was, your teacher, Suzuki Roshi, answered, "Everything changes." That's it in a nutshell. We all know that everything changes, but usually it's just intellectual knowledge, and you make a distinction here between knowing it and really knowing it.** That's right. Until I had cancer at 35, impermanence was just an intellectual truth. Aging and Buddhism start in the same place, really. The penny dropped for me when it went from "Everything changes" to "Everything disappears" [*laughs*], which is a lot more serious, especially when it's *you*, and, in my case, when you have a nineyear-old son. It hits you like a ton of bricks. I was very lucky, I had a curable form of cancer. For a lot of people, the knowledge first comes when their parents fall ill, especially when it means getting them into skilled nursing,

or going back home to deal with the house or deal with doctors. It's one step removed, but people in my meditation group, in their 30s and 40s, are going through this with their parents, and it's the same kind of experience, whether it's happening to you directly or to somebody you love. It becomes experiential, as it was for Siddhartha when he walked out of the palace and actually saw old people. There's some point when you *really* see it, as opposed to, "Oh, yeah. That person's old." He *really* saw it. It's like, "Holy cow. I'm going to be that way, too. All my privilege isn't going to help me." And that was his starting point. I think that's true for everybody. That's a universal story. We all walk out of the palace of youthful innocence at some point, and we actually see what's going on. That's the Buddhist story. It's *our* story.

**How does meditation help us deal with old age?** Well, meditation helps because it grounds you in your experience at this moment, continuously. It's what I call in the book "Vertical Time." You're just here. You're actually just here. Over time, if you meditate regularly and go to retreats, that's kind of one of the deepest transformations and lessons. It changes your brain, really. You start to have that sense of being here and being rooted in what's going on right now as your primary reality, rather than, "I wish I had done this when I was younger," or "What's going to happen in five years?" All that mental static is why we can't enjoy our old age. There is a lot more static of regret and worry as you get older; that's why meditation practice can really help.

**Regret?** Yes. People spend a lot of time thinking about what could have been. "Gee, I never got that Nobel Prize," and so forth. They think a lot about what's coming, and without a meditation practice, it's difficult to accept those mind states. When you're meditating, you still have those

thoughts, but there's something else that releases you from being afflicted by it. Suzuki Roshi once said that we meditate to enjoy our old age. I think that statement, succinct though it might have been, was a straightforward response from his own personal experience. When he said it, he was already ill, and I think he was actually finding a way to continue to enjoy his life even so. And given that he died a couple of years later, he might have had an intimation that his time was limited, and so for him to say what he said was actually pretty serious. Since we were mostly in our 20s and 30s when he said it, it was a time capsule for most of the people who were there, including me. I had to revisit that statement when I was much older and look at it differently.

**How does your practice change as you get older?** Well, about half of my sangha sits in chairs. I don't, because I've been lucky with my knees, but I've had some hits to my body, so I can't sit the way I sat in my 20s. That's one of the things that changes. When you're younger, it feels heroic to sit, and the Buddha's own life story is a kind of hero myth—a masculine hero myth. It's what men imagine that they do in their life—vanquish obstacles. They go up against the enemy and they prevail—take a scalp, attain enlightenment, whatever it might be. I've been meditating since I was a teenager, for almost 50 years. There's not a sense of striving or gaining in the way that there used to be. There's much more a sense of surrender and just resting. The second thing is, when you're older, you're much more likely to have in your own life, or in the life of people you know, real problems, serious problems, intractable problems. So I think that meditation has a lot more serious material, there's a lot more to grab onto. You don't need to be sitting there, wondering, "Why am I doing this?" Or, "What's it going to get me?" It's right in front of you, you can see clearly what it's there for.



**What is it there for?** Well, I think when you're young—and I think a lot of people in the dharma world may still feel this— meditation is about arriving at some transformative experience that's going to make your life very different. By the time you're older, you may have had experiences like that and discovered that it doesn't change your life in quite the way you thought. In fact, in some ways, I think speaking very honestly, opening up in that way makes your life more difficult, because you're seeing things as they really are, and things as they really are, are not so wonderful, actually. And you have more of a sense of responsibility to have to do something about this, just like the Buddha. After his enlightenment, he felt, "I can't possibly express this." And in the myth, Brahma and the other gods came down and said, "No, you've got to teach. You've got to come down off the mountain. You've got to help people." And so he did.

We go through a stage where we think meditation is going to be some kind of panacea. I wrote recently on the *Huffington Post* about some of my 50-year lessons of dharma, and one of them is, "Meditation's not good for everything." And it's probably not really good for making your life wonderful.

**What's it good for?** It's good for knowing what's real and what isn't, and that takes time to emerge. There's a tremendous actual liberation in knowing what's real, and increasingly you can discern that in situations, through your meditation, "Well, this is just my stuff." Or, "This is solid. This is real." And you start to have that discernment. That's really useful. That can make a big difference in your life. So I'd say that's what it's really for, but I think it was Jack Kornfield who said that—and other teachers have said this, too—"Motivation is never pure." People come to practice for all kinds of reasons. In the end it doesn't matter what their

motivation is, as long as they stick with it. Eventually, they'll get there.

**You do write about regrets—the sense you might have done things differently. But regrets are interesting because one way to respond to them is to ask, how could it have been otherwise?** Could it really have been otherwise? No, it's what happened, and that's the inner teaching of regret. Regret is the ego trying to distort what is unchangeable, and we have various words for how that happens. One of them is denial, which is very powerful. Research shows that it is largely neurological. The neural circuits simply don't fire. The brain arranges to protect you from the pain; it's like you literally can't get there, and you arrange not to get there in terms of remembering, but I think transforming regret into appreciation is one of the main values of meditation. You asked about it earlier. That's one of the main things that happens because when you meditate, regret starts to surface and you start to think about your life. Meditation neutralizes denial after a while and opens up the circuits and things start to flow in, and then you begin to realize that regret is a distortion of what's real. What's real is that this is your life, and it happened, and there's no going back. There's only altering your attitude and perception about it so that you can go forward. So I think that regret looks like one of aging's challenges, but actually it's also an opportunity. It's the two sides of that gate.

Excerpt from *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*:

Once, when I was about 12, my father came into my room holding a book. He was in his forties at the time. "I want to show you something," he said.

The book was an autobiography of the poet Robert Graves. On the

front cover was a photograph of Graves as a young man: black-haired, handsome, and full of vitality and hope. My father turned the book over to show a photograph of the present-day Graves: hair white, face wrinkled, eyes shrouded in sorrow.

“Look at this,” my father said, turning the book over and over, showing me the startling transformation of youth to old age and back again. “You can’t understand this,” he said. He dropped the book on my bed, and, just as suddenly as he had come into my room, he turned and left.

I had not said anything. I sensed my father’s awkwardness and the poignancy of his effort, but he was right. I didn’t really understand, any more than I could understand Suzuki Roshi years later when he spoke of enjoying his old age. Now, at 64, I do understand, and I thank my father for his long-ago effort. The old understand the young better than the other way around. My father wanted to reach out across the gulf separating old age from youth and tap me with the magic wand of this hard-won knowledge, but he couldn’t. He could only show me the two photographs and wish the best for me as I set off on the journey to adulthood.

When Suzuki said “Everything changes,” he could just as easily have said “Everything ages.” That is what my father was trying to show me.

Intellectually we know this. We know that everything ages; we see it all around us. For much of our life it is like the house we live in or the air we breathe—a familiar fact that we barely notice. But as we grow older that fact is harder to shrug off. Aging is not just change, but irreversible change—for better or for worse. We did not get that sought-after promotion, and now it will never come. Or we did get the promotion, and life has never been the same. We are poor. Or we were once poor, but now we are not. We have a bad knee, and even surgery will not make it

new. Or maybe the surgery worked, and we can say good-bye to the pain we lived with for so long. We always wanted children, but now we are too old to have them. Or we adopted a child, to our never-ending joy. One way or another, our life consists of “the things that happened to happen.”

Irreversible change is different because there is no going back. Its triumphs sustain us; its losses mark us. The real question is: what do we do about it? In much of today’s world, people are living longer than they ever have. The life expectancy at the turn of the century was 45; now it is 80. Living into one’s eighties, nineties, and even past one hundred is a real possibility today, one that makes your fifties and sixties a time not for winding down but for gearing up—though for what, we may not be sure. In many ways society has not yet caught up with these new facts of life, and neither have we. We need to look afresh at this prospect of a longer life and ask ourselves: What’s the best use of this extra gift of time?

The answer, I propose, is that aging is an ideal time for the cultivation of the inner life: a time for spiritual practice. Why it should be so is captured in that image of the old Robert Graves that I still vividly remember. Graves’s white hair and lined face seemed to tell my father a story of loss, one that he was already experiencing in the disappointments of his own middle age. But I saw something else, something that made me want to open the book and read. The face of the old Robert Graves seemed to me to be the face of a wise person, one who knew something important. I wanted to know what that was and how he had gained it.

As I turned the pages and followed Graves’s life story from youth, to full adulthood, and finally to old age, I caught an inkling of what it takes to live a rich and complete human life from start to finish. And now that I myself am closer to the end of my life than the beginning of

it, I realize that my reading of Graves's story so long ago was the beginning of my interest in aging as a spiritual practice.

When my father barged into my room with the Graves book in his hand, I believe he wanted to say that the dreams he had when he was young were slipping away, and where was he going? What was he doing?

My father, a self-taught man who read Greek philosophy in the evenings and thought deeply about things, had touched upon a universal truth. I have heard some version of it from many people when I talk to them about their experience of aging, and I have given it a name: Lightning Strikes.

Lightning Strikes is the moment we truly wake up to our aging and can see the full significance of it in our whole life, from its unremembered beginning to its unknown end. Until that moment, regardless of our age, we spend much of the time not thinking too much about where our life is headed or what it all means. But once lightning strikes, it's different. We have reached a tipping point. We have stopped seeing things as we wished they were, and, for a moment at least, can see them as they actually are.

Lightning can strike in what seems to be a disturbing or negative way, as it did for my father, or in a positive way, as it did for Katherine, a 57-year-old chief of staff for a local politician.

As I sat in Katherine's living room one summer afternoon, appreciating the shimmering leaves of an aspen tree outside the open window, she sat a bit formally on the couch, quietly answering my questions. But when I got to the question "Is there anything you particularly like or enjoy about aging?" her face lit up. "My granddaughter!" she exclaimed as she reached for a photo album on the coffee table.

We spent the next few minutes looking through her album of new family photographs. As the interview progressed, I asked Katherine if

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she could say how the birth of her grandchild had affected her view on aging.

She grew thoughtful. “This sounds odd,” she said finally, “but it’s made me feel as though my life has really amounted to something. Isn’t that strange?” She laughed. “I didn’t feel that way when I had my own children, and I’ve accomplished a lot in my life.”

My father and Katherine represent the two faces of aging: the wrinkled face on the cover of Robert Graves’s book and the joyful smile of a new grandmother. Regret and celebration are equally important facets of aging.

### PRACTICE: WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES

#### A Contemplative Reflections Exercise

*First, ask yourself, “How did it feel?”*

I know when lightning struck for me. It was when I sat in my doctor’s office and he told me I had cancer. I was 35 years old, and until that moment I had never given much thought to growing old. I was in the prime of my life; everything was going my way. I walked out of my doctor’s office utterly changed. In the time it took me to drive from the doctor’s office to my house, I felt as though I had aged 20 years.

When did lightning strike for you? Can you think of a specific event that shifted the way you thought about aging, as it did for my father, or for Katherine?

If you can, focus in on that memory. Jot down your thoughts as you do so. Study that moment in all its detail; tune in to the feelings or emotions you had at the time.

Was the feeling positive or negative? Name the feeling: Give it a word.

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If the feeling was positive, did it change or shift your feeling about growing old? If it did, how would you describe that change?

Ask yourself the same questions if the feeling was negative. When I did this exercise myself, I recalled my feeling as negative. I felt confusion and anxiety as I drove home from the doctor's office, but it was not about having cancer; it was about what I was going to tell Amy, my wife.

But when I told her, she took it in stride. She was solid as a rock, and that gave me the strength to say to her, "Well, I'm not going to die." At that moment, I was visualizing myself living to grow old, having a long life.

How did you feel when lightning struck? And how did that feeling change your attitude toward aging?

***Then ask yourself, "How is it going now?"***

How is it going now for you? How is the moment when lightning first struck affecting your life today? Has the memory faded, or is the recollection still fresh? Have there been more such moments, each one building on the last? Write a single sentence describing how it's going now. Read it back to yourself. Has your present self fully absorbed the lessons of the past?

What spiritual lesson did you learn from the moment lightning struck?

What I would write is: That was the day I grew up. After 25 years, that spiritual lesson is still alive for me. Our whole spiritual life is like that, I think. It flows like an underground river throughout our life and surfaces to help us remember what is really important and who we really are.

**Lewis Richmond** was ordained as a Zen Buddhist priest in 1971 by

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