



EVERYDAY MYSTICISM: SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATER LIFE

by

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The Twentieth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Seoul, Korea August 21-26, 1995

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and the way of liberation as a means of spiritual development. It then looks at aspects of aging that can facilitate a spiritual journey and roles elders can play in fostering spiritual development.

The Nature of Spirituality: The Eastern View

Substantial threads of continuity tie together the history of Eastern thought about the nature of spirituality. Prime among these is that the essence of spirituality is not an activity or an idea, but instead is an *experience*--a silence that can be only very imperfectly described. This silence is conscious awareness that is free of attachment to the verbal mind and physical body. Awareness that is not fixated on worldly concerns is free to experience quiet, to directly experience "the peace that passeth understanding." Spiritual experience is impartial and *nonpersonal*. It is an awareness that transcends the constraints and agendas of the personal mind or ego. A nonpersonal way of being does not depend on concepts and language; indeed, concepts and language hinder the experience of nonpersonal awareness. This transcendent pure beingness is free to be quietly aware, without comment, of whatever happens here and now. Nonpersonal consciousness is unselfish because it is free of ego and it provides a clear view of how to be in the world and let the world be as it is. Pure beingness contains both clarity and compassion, not as concepts but as experiences.

In a nonpersonal state of consciousness, the total elusiveness of the world to human understanding and control is obvious. Nonpersonal consciousness reveals the value of attention to the here and now; it is free of conditioned loyalty to social or personal agendas and can therefore be spontaneous in response and action. Pure beingness is no thing and no body; it is both aware of and detached from the phenomenal world. A nonpersonal state of consciousness includes an enormous backdrop of profound mental quiet.

The development of spirituality does not require withdrawal from the perceptual world. Indeed, nonpersonal consciousness allows being in the world with only very minimal dependence on the calculative mind. Zen gardening

illustrates this point. Zen gardeners have no interest in imposing their own intentions on natural forms, but instead are careful to follow the “intentionless intentions” of the forms themselves, even though this involves the utmost skill and care. In fact Zen gardeners never cease to prune, clip, weed and train the plants, but they do so in the spirit of being themselves part of the garden rather than directing agents standing outside.⁴

The Process of Spiritual Development

Spiritual development occurs in response to an inner hunger of the soul for attention. An authentic, sincere determination to be open to spiritual development focuses awareness and concentration. At the beginning, practices such as formal meditation, study of spiritual texts, singing and chanting, ritual dance, breathing exercises, dialogue with sages, and ritual devotions can channel energy and instill discipline, but eventually spiritual development blossoms into a meditation on all of life all the time. “Being the Buddha” is being spiritual in the process of leading life, whether that life is in a monastery, a household, a nursing home, or a jail.

In Eastern thought, there is a great paradox in the relation between practices that point toward the development of spirituality and actual spiritual development. Practices such as meditation must be done patiently and for their own sake, not for ulterior motives such as a desire for enlightenment, because motives bring attachment, and enlightenment requires letting go of attachment. Passionately dispassionate practices and an attitude of mindfulness of the present moment⁵ can “keep the room clean”--keep the mind relatively clear--so nonpersonal consciousness can enter spontaneously. But neither practices nor mindfulness can “produce” pure beingness.

Once a nonpersonal state of consciousness is experienced, it cannot be forgotten. It remains a powerful magnet that steadily draws conscious attention toward the spiritual. In this sense, spiritual development is spontaneous and

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There Your Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

natural and does not require effort.⁶ Practices done spontaneously and naturally are effortless and are very different from practices done with an end in mind. But it takes time for practices to become so habitual as to be effortless. This path thus requires patience and faith in the natural and spontaneous growth of spiritual consciousness. In this view there is no need to hurry. To surrender to spiritual development is to let be; not grasping, not pushing away.

This is not to deny the pragmatic value of certain practices. For example, meditation teaches much about the mind's workings: the thoughts, motives, emotions, desires, fears, beliefs, and prejudices that make up the mental landscape. Meditation is practice in witnessing; being quietly aware, without judgment, of whatever presents itself within consciousness. Meditation can also lead to mental quiet. Letting thoughts flow and watching them in meditation leads to a slowing down of the flow of thoughts and eventually thoughts may stop altogether. This is quiet mind. The key is to abide in quiet mind, not to be bored with peace, but rather to go deeper into it.⁷ This boundless inner peace is pure being, without thoughts or feelings. It is a very pleasant experience. Quiet mind is unattached to thoughts and impulses to act on them. Thus, quiet mind is experienced as liberation. Silence is a powerful force in spiritual growth. Quiet mind can come from meditation, but the act of meditation does not "produce" quiet mind.

Some meditation practices focus attention on the breath. Focusing on the breath brings an intimate awareness of both natural and unnatural action. The breath is naturally spontaneous, but as soon as the human mind focuses on it, the breath tends to become unnatural and distorted by the thoughts, emotions, and expectations of the mind. Much can be learned from watching the effect of thoughts and feelings on the breath. To focus attention on the breath and yet allow the breath to remain completely natural requires a no-thought state of mind--quiet mind.

⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *op. cit.*, p. 7, quotes a student: "When I was a Buddhist, it drove my parents and their friends crazy, but when I AM a buddha, nobody is upset at all."

⁷ Maurice Frydman, *I Am That: Conversations with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*. Bombay: Chetana, 1973.

Rather than focusing on affirmations, Eastern views of spiritual development stress negations. The question “Who am I?” has no affirmative, objective answer. Questions such as who acts, who cares, who thinks, who wants, and who fears all resolve into the personal self, leaving the nonpersonal self to be the noumenal context of all dualistic conceptions of self. This practice of constant questioning is very difficult, but it also points to quiet mind, to nonpersonal consciousness, to beingness, to the pure sense “I AM.”

One does not have to be fed up with worldly life to develop spiritually, but it helps. Fully experiencing the burdens of the world can lead to readiness for liberation. Disillusionment can come from frustration with the concept of a perfectible personal self, with unrealistic goals that deny the dark side that attends all action, and with a neglect of the present in favor of preoccupation with the future or the past. Such disillusionment can spark an interest in exploring new directions.

Aging Can Uncover Spiritual Needs and Possibilities

Aging does not always result in spiritual development, but aging does alter the conditions of life in ways that can heighten awareness of spiritual needs and that can stimulate spiritual development. Physical and mental aging are not unitary phenomena; different individuals experience different patterns in terms of what changes occur, when changes begin, and the rates at which changes occur. Differences in genes, environment, and culture combine to produce a staggering variety of experiences of physical and mental aging. Differing age-graded social role expectations and life course scenarios across cultures add further variety to the outcomes of aging. Nevertheless, general statements can be made that describe the experiences of most aging people in most cultures.⁸

Physical aging represents a gradual decline of the body’s peak capacity to mobilize energy, fight off disease, and repair injuries. It also diminishes the

⁸ For an overview of scientific findings about commonality and diversity in physical, psychological and social aging, see Robert C. Atchley, *Social Forces and Aging, 7th Edition*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth, 1994.

acuity of the senses, slows psychomotor performance, and reduces drives such as hunger, sex, and activity. For a large majority of people, none of these changes deprives individuals of the capacity to function in most adult roles.

Aging has little or no effect on the physical and mental requirements for spiritual awareness. In fact, aging can be something of an advantage. In terms of capacity to be internally quiet, a prime requisite of spiritual development, young and even middle aged adults tend to be hyperactive, too restless to be able to foster quietude without strong repression of the impulse to act, and repression is a strong form of attachment. The moderate energy levels and biological drives brought on by aging are more conducive to patience, meditation and contemplation.

Psychological aging is accompanied by an accumulation of life experiences, with their usual share of paradoxes and contradictions, which in turn reinforce the notion that life is not controllable. Observing the consequences of human behavior shows that both actions and inactions inevitably have both positive and negative results, and outcomes are often not predictable in advance. In time, these observations can foster a "let be" attitude.

Psychologists generally agree that aging is accompanied by an increase in introspection or reflection. Most see reflection as an integrative process that leads to self acceptance--a view of oneself as a person of worth with both good and bad attributes. Learning to accept the self with all its frailties requires rising above personal desires and standards to a more transcendent viewpoint, and learning to witness the self without evaluating it is a skill that most definitely supports spiritual development.

Numerous scholars have observed that adult development is an incremental process involving mastery of increasingly transcendent aspects of inner life.⁹ Andrew Achenbaum and Lucinda Orwoll¹⁰ tied the development of wisdom to an

⁹ Erik H. Erikson, Joan S. Erikson, and Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age*. New York: Norton, 1986.

¹⁰ W. Andrew Achenbaum and Lucinda Orwoll, "Becoming Wise: A Psycho-Gerontological Interpretation of the Book of Job." *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, Volume 32, pp. 21-39, 1991.

increasingly transcendent attitude toward oneself, toward relationships with others, and toward worldly aims. Transcendence is a vital dimension of learning to BE as one is. In the language of the way of liberation, “being yourself” means dwelling in mindfulness and nonpersonal consciousness, which provides natural integration to all of one’s life. And aging provides the opportunity to develop the base of psychological and social skills from which one can exercise the freedom to reside in a state of nonpersonal consciousness. To let go of attachments to physical, psychological and social attributes requires being fully functional in these areas. Detachment requires a body and mind that can take care of basic needs with only minimal intervention and monitoring by the calculative mind.

Social aging is mainly a process in which society loses interest in the participation of aging people. Society willingly, even eagerly, lets aging people go. For example, Americans usually complete the launching of their children into adulthood by their early 50s, and most retire from employment in their early 60s. Society assigns no new responsibilities to aging people other than to be self-reliant. People who have launched their children and who are retired have two important advantages in terms of freedom to turn attention to spiritual concerns: a secure income and social permission to focus their attention as they wish. Many choose a simple household life that revolves around familiar and satisfying tasks and activities. Focusing attention on everyday activities can be an opportunity to focus on the task at hand instead of on the world of thought, which can foster the development of both mindfulness and a quiet mind. Most retirees also spend significant amounts of time alone, and this time alone tends to have a transcendent quality, either in terms of meditative activities or activities that transport the person out of the personal self.¹¹ The potential for spiritual development during this time spent alone is obvious.

By late middle age, most adults have considerable experience with materialism and social achievement, the conventional prescriptions for personal

¹¹ Roger C. Mannell, “High Investment Activity and Life Satisfaction Among Older Adults: Committed, Serious Leisure, and Flow Activities.” Pp. 124-145 in John R. Kelly (ed.), *Activity and Aging*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage, 1993.

contentment, and at best find them unpredictable sources of life meaning. By this time most adults have also struggled with the loss of meaning that can accompany the deaths of people with whom they had close personal relationships--friends and family members. If materialism, achievement, and relationships are not dependable sources of meaning in life, what is? This type of meaning question becomes much more salient in the early part of later adulthood. The lack of reliable social answers to the meaning question can be a powerful impetus for an inner, experiential quest for meaning.

The precise shape that the spiritual quest for meaning takes is often a matter of social background. However, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and most other sacred traditions contain a mystical, experiential strain that lays out a way of liberation in the language of that tradition.¹² People who become disenchanted with the formal, organizational aspects of religion are often attracted to a mystical path. But even for those who remain within the traditional organizational framework, aging tends to bring an increase in meditative prayer and a decrease in ritual or petitionary prayer.¹³

Evidence of growing spiritual development among elders includes gradual increases with age in the prevalence of: self acceptance and perceptions of one's life as having integrity¹⁴ ; selfless action, especially in the widespread providing of long-term care to others¹⁵ ; and patience with and interest in the young.¹⁶ These outcomes require an attitude of transcendence and a healthy measure of selflessness. They suggest that growing older represents going home to the silence from whence we came and that on the way home, a nonpersonal state of consciousness is gradually uncovered by conditions common in later life: a quiet mind, a simplified daily life, and a let-be attitude toward the world. The

12 Lex Hixon, *Coming Home: The Experience of Enlightenment in Sacred Traditions*. New York: Anchor, 1978.

13 James Peacock and M. M. Paloma, "Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Across the Life Course." Paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Pittsburgh, November, 1991.

14 Susan K. Whitbourne, *The Me I Know: A Study of Adult Identity*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986; Sheldon S. Tobin, *Personhood in Advanced Old Age*, New York: Springer, 1991.

15 Jeffrey W. Dwyer and Raymond T. Coward (eds.), *Gender, Families, and Long-Term Care*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992.

16 Maggie Kuhn, *No Stone Unturned*. New York: Balantine, 1991; Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick, *op. cit.*

deepening spirituality of later life is often subtle and nonconscious; it occurs naturally and spontaneously as a result of the physical, mental and social processes of aging.

Roles Elders Can Play in Spiritual Development

Despite, or perhaps because of, widespread ageism and age discrimination in society, a large number of elders, often unknowingly, follow an ancient mystical path of spiritual growth. With increasing independence and self-reliance, aware elders see the world as it is, not as they might wish it to be. Dispassionate observation leads to detachment, a diminished identification with personal and social agendas and personal attributes. Detachment quiets the mind and creates space in awareness for nonpersonal consciousness, an experience that clearly indicates right action. Right action affirms the value of pure being, which at its center is a massive, serene silence. The peace of nonpersonal consciousness gradually becomes an intimate companion and guide because nonpersonal consciousness is as close as we can get in consciousness to the great universal Self out of which we were born and to which we will return. To become “realized” is to become aware that this pure beingness has been with us all along and to begin to identify with it instead of the personal body-mind. Of course, these words are merely the menu. The dinner must be experienced first-hand.

Although spiritual development is ultimately accomplished alone and in silence, it can be stimulated and nourished. People are rarely taught to trust their inner experiences; in fact, just the opposite. Communities where interest in spiritual development is shared can be very important, especially for those at the beginning of their conscious spiritual journey. There is no legitimate role in our society for elders who could serve as guides, mentors and advisers to those on a mystical path; but spiritually-oriented communities can and do create such roles.

In the past, elders were often assigned the role of keeping and teaching sacred traditions. Fully realized mystics are typically elders. Because mysticism is based on experience rather than knowledge passed down through language alone,

teachers and guides can be very helpful. Each human mind has its karmic obstacles to liberation, and an insightful teacher can be very helpful in exposing these obstacles. But this enterprise depends on the existence of a language for talking about everyday mysticism, the mysticism of washing the dishes and tending the garden. Few elders today are confident in verbalizing their everyday mystical experiences or in helping others verbalize theirs. Safe places are needed where everyday sages can practice talking and listening focused on the everyday mysticism that is at the heart of the natural spiritual development that can come with age.

New institutions or formal organizations are probably not needed. What is required are opportunities for temporary alliances, periodic festivals of practice, sharing, teaching and learning where elders can share their insights and support each other's commitment to the spiritual journey. For example, in March, 1995, the Omega Institute sponsored a "Circle of Elders" led by Ram Dass in Clearwater, Florida. About 75 people age 60 or older sat in a large circle in a hotel ballroom and meditated on two questions: how had aging had affected their spiritual journey, and how had their spiritual journey influenced their experience of aging? The following quotes, each from a different participant, illustrate the quality of what was said:

"I was invited to a crowning ceremony. They hung a velvet cloak around my shoulders and reviewed my life and honored it. I realized that I am not a human being having a spiritual experience but a spiritual being having a human experience."

"I was just going along, aging and feeling bad about it. Then my husband died. I watched my feelings closely and watched my thinking. Gradually my attitude changed. I learned to let go, to release the things that tethered me."

“I watched my interests shift from having everything, to doing everything, to being. I follow a spiritual path, and as I follow the path, I become a teacher.”

“Aging is a blessing; the opportunity to learn so much more. Truth comes from everywhere. Dry tears in the presence of Truth.”

“Earlier in my life, I saw aging as a mountain journey. You climb the mountain, enjoy a brief time at the peak, and then inevitably slide downhill. I now see aging as a circle--aging, younging, going home, going back to the beginning.”

“I was proud of being an ‘active ager,’ but then a bunch of my friends died, some quite a bit younger. I could imagine myself dead. Now I see nothing to do, not even a goal. What will be important when I’m dead? Three things. Simplicity. Let fade away those things that weren’t that important, especially the ought-to’s. Let go of the kids; they’ll have to learn how to get along without me. Silence is important to me now.”

There is great value in a multitude of voices--all speaking with reverence about spirituality and its importance to a feeling of wholeness as we age. There is great value in realizing that many others have the same experiences of aging and spirituality that we do. There is great comfort in hearing first-hand from an old woman in a wheelchair that deepening spirituality has opened into serenity in the face of ravaging disease. There is encouragement in hearing many others speak of aging as a gentle slope that offers many opportunities to experience the spiritual. The everyday spiritual development of aging people should be celebrated throughout the world. It is a largely untold story that can restore spiritual balance to the concept of the human life span.

Everyday Mysticism: Spiritual Development in Later Life

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Despite cultural rhetoric proclaiming that old people are to be venerated, aging is dreaded and old people are relegated to the margins of society throughout most of the industrialized world. This contradiction is based, in part, on a serious neglect of the spiritual aspects of being human as well as the advantages aging can bring in terms of opportunities for spiritual development. Ancient spiritual texts of the East tell us that spiritual deepening is a special province of the old. For thousands of years, the Hindu concept of life stages has included turning away from worldly interests and taking up spiritual interests in the life stage of grandparenthood.¹ Among Taoists, attention to the great Way is pictured as especially appropriate for older people who have retired from active life in the community. Retirement is viewed as an outward symbol of inner liberation from the politically and economically dominated patterns of conventional thought and action.² The liberation of Zen Buddhism is said to be particularly attractive to those who have lived long enough to have mastered social convention.³ These traditions, and the wisdom behind them, have been relegated to the background in a world bedazzled by the fruits of techno-scientific materialism, but beneath the superficial brilliance of modern societies lies a large population suffering from malnutrition of the soul.

Meanwhile, many elders quietly gather wisdom and ripen spiritually. Physical and mental aging bring changes that tend to quieten the mind, simplify everyday life, and stimulate interest in the meaning of life. By casting elders out of the mainstream, societies create social conditions that can facilitate spiritual growth. Based on an Eastern view, this paper examines the nature of spirituality

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*. London: Unwin Hyman, Ltd., originally published in 1923, reprinted in 1989.

² Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Tao*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

³ Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage Books, 1957.

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