



Aging and Awakening - Dharma Talk

David Chernikoff

Recorded: 1-20-2024

I wanted to share some reflections upon the theme of this retreat, Aging and Awakening. Hopefully, to round out some perspectives that were brought up in the previous discussion, among other things. And I'd like to start by sharing a little bit about my own interest in this topic. My interest in aging and what it means to age wisely actually began when I was very young, when I was a toddler. Although I didn't fully realize what was happening at the time. One of the most important people in my early life was my maternal grandmother, who was essentially a simple Russian peasant lady. Who came over when she was chased out of what was then Russia, modern day Belarus, because of pogroms, because she was Jewish.

But I noticed growing up in a middle class, upwardly mobile suburb, that as a young person, really starting at a very young age, there was a pressure to perform and achieve. And the message I was given, although well intended, was somewhat misguided in that the emphasis on achievement and attainment was very strong. And the feeling I had was that I wasn't there yet, and I needed to push most of the time for good grades and for high athletic performance and for various other aspects of my life. To make me someone who stood out from the crowd, essentially, yeah? And so there was a sense of what one of my friends and who's a Zen teacher calls a lack project much of the time, where I didn't feel like I was enough the way I was. But if only I could arrive at point X, I would be enough, so to speak, yeah? With my grandmother, however, when I spent time with my maternal grandfather, she was the only adult in my early life with whom I felt like I was enough. She seemed to understand the relationship between being and doing when I look back at this particular situation. I didn't understand this at the time, but my parents and the people in the community I grew up in were so focused on upward mobility and performance and trying to get into an Ivy League school and things like that.

That you never really got to be a finder. You could be a spiritual seeker or a seeker of some other kind, but you were never really a finder. And my grandmother had a relaxed way of being so that when I walked in the room, her face lit up in a way that said to me, I'm really glad you're alive. And that was a critically important message for me. So I used to like to hang out with her and her friends sometimes. She had a group of women she played cards with. And I would sometimes hang out and visit and secretively raid the candy dish on a regular basis, essentially, yeah? But that planted a seed in my life in relation to an interest in older people.

And when I was in my 20s, because I had a number of sudden unexpected losses when I was growing up, including my father when I was 13, and a number of other people, I became interested in hospice work. So something else that supported my interest in older people, since most of the hospice patients I worked with were elderly, that work also fueled the interest that I had. And I recognized, as many people later did come to recognize, that the ways in which we often treated our older people at the end of life did not honor them spiritually in many cases, and the spiritual significance of approaching the end of one's life. The hospice movement took off for that reason, I think. We had so medicalized the dying process, just as we had medicalized the birthing process in our culture. Those processes needed to be reclaimed. And I found a great deal of inspiration in the hospice work that I did.

What supported that further was that when I was an undergraduate at 21, and I was first introduced to meditation and spiritual practice and yoga, subsequently becoming a yoga



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

teacher and a meditation teacher in my early 20s, two of my major mentors were Ram Dass and Stephen Levine, both of whom talked frequently in their teachings about the fact that for them, working with people at the end of life felt like the most transformative of any of the spiritual practices they had ever done. And because I respected Stephen and Ram Dass as much as I did, to hear them say that that was the most important spiritual practice and the most powerful spiritual practice they had done really inspired me, because I knew they had explored many different spiritual practices. So that supported the process further and fueled my interest in spending time with older people, exploring the life experience and wisdom of older people, and wondering about ways in which our culture could learn to be more compassionate and wise in relation to the aging process.

The contrast between our culture and indigenous cultures, who recognize their elders as lineage holders and wisdom keepers, was something else I was very aware of, from having traveled in different parts of the world. What really shifted it for me most directly was that in 1995, when I was teaching in the transpersonal psychology department at Naropa University, the religion department at Naropa created a new chair called the World Wisdom Chair, and invited Rabbi Zalman Shakhtar Shalomi to be one of the early people to have that chair. I'd known about Rabbi Zalman as his students and friends call him for many years because he was a close friend of Ram Dass. And I had worked for Ram Dass' dying center in Santa Fe and later for another organization of his in Nepal called the Seva Foundation.

Rabbi Zalman came to Naropa University and was this really inspiring elder because he loved being an elder, among other things. He was the founder of what was then called the Spiritual Eldering Institute, later renamed Sage-ing International, which I mentioned previously. And in 1995, when he came, he began to teach at Naropa. He and I established a close personal connection. And like a good Jewish grandfather, he coaxed me onto the board of directors for the Spiritual Eldering Institute, after which I went through their training program and trained as what they call a certified Sage-ing leader. And I began to teach the kind of material we're talking about here, both in the United States and in some cases outside of the United States.

What's interesting now is that when I met Rabbi Zalman, I was 45 years old. Aging was largely theoretical to me. And when I would introduce myself at workshops and at trainings that I was leading for the institute, I would introduce myself as an elder in training with an element of apology. At this point, a few days short of 74 years of age, the aging process is a lot less theoretical and a lot more real on the physical, emotional, and spiritual level of my own life. And what I've noticed at this point is how inspired I feel to look really deeply at what Buddhism and other contemplative wisdom traditions have to say about how to experience late life in a wise and compassionate way, and how to help other people do that as well.

So I have a tremendous passion for this work, because as a lot of us know, our society has quite a diluted general perspective on the aging process that's rooted in a kind of obsession with youth and a lack of recognition of the incredible contribution that wise elders can make in a society. Since we've got a limited amount of time, I've chosen a couple of aspects of Buddhist teaching that I think have particular relevance for those of

us who want to age consciously, compassionately, and wisely. The first one that I want to talk about has to do with the Buddhist emphasis on seeing reality clearly. The word vipassana, as some of you know, often translated as insight when we talk about insight meditation, literally in Pali means to see things clearly or to see things as they are.

And as some of us alluded to in the sharing that we did just a few minutes ago, there's something important about looking honestly with an open heart and with self compassion at the truth of our experience as we move through different stages of the lifespan. Yeah? I



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

remember reading the shortest short story I ever read was written by a woman named Lydia Davis. And it really captured in a nutshell in one sentence, our culture's attitude toward aging. The sentence was, "At 28, she longed to be 24." Right? That was the whole short story in a nutshell.

If you look at the Hindu tradition, for example, in one of the great Hindu scriptures, there's an exchange between the guru, the sage, and the sage's major disciple. And the sage says to the teacher, "Teacher of all the wonders in this world, what is the most wondrous of them all?" This is sort of a spiritual version of mirror, mirror on the wall. Yeah? And the question was, and the teacher thought about that and said to the disciple, "Of all the wonders in this world, the most wondrous of all is that human beings can live in a world surrounded by people who are dying day in and day out. And persist in believing it's not going to happen to them." Right? And that's how powerful the denial is as a psychological defense mechanism. In all of us as human beings, it's built in by evolutionary biology. Yeah? And that's part of what leads us to fear and dread the aging process the way a lot of us do, because we know it's approaching physical death. Regardless of what we believe about metaphysics and what happens after the physical body dies.

There's a practice I imagine some or many of you are familiar with, that's done as part of the daily liturgy in various Buddhist monastic communities. I worked with it on and off in my own practice as part of my daily practice for many years. It's called the five recollections. Sometimes translated as the five remembrances. And it's one example of a wise way that we can use our capacity for wise reflection, like water on stone, to erode the denial of the aging process and of the dying process.

So just as a brief little experiment, take a nice deep breath. I'm going to read these five recollections to you. And I would invite you to simply notice without judgment what goes on inside when you hear these statements, which are examples of how Buddhist teachings teach us to see clearly what's true. Yeah? So just take a moment, take a nice deep breath, drop out of your thinking mind into your heart and your body. And hear these statements. "I am of a nature to grow old. I cannot avoid aging. I am subject to illness and infirmity. I cannot avoid illness and infirmity. I am of a nature to die. I cannot avoid death. I will be parted from all that is dear and beloved to me. And the fifth one is a summary of the law of karma, as taught by the Buddha. I am the owner of my actions and heir to my actions. Actions are the womb from which I have sprung. My actions are my relations. My actions are my protection. The fruits of all my actions, both wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, I will inherit."

This is the kind of teaching that leads some people upon their first encounter with Buddhist teachings to see it as grim and depressing. What's really helpful to understand, and I can say this from experience, having worked with this particular teaching over many years, Buddhism isn't particularly optimistic or pessimistic. I would say and suggest to you Buddhism is realistic. It's about seeing reality as it actually is. And it's when we do that, that we can begin to stop adding unnecessary emotional suffering to the changes inherent in the human lifespan.

I remember years ago, the weekly group I've met for many years was meeting at a Unitarian Church here in Boulder on a weekly basis. I invited a monastic named Bhante Rahula, who lived in West Virginia at a monastery with a wonderful Sri Lankan teacher named Bhante Gunaratne. If I remember correctly, I think Bhante Rahula had been a mathematician before he ordained as a monastic. And he gave a wonderful Dharma talk after our sitting meditation period in silence. And about halfway through his talk, he interrupted himself essentially. And with great excitement, he said to us, "I have to tell you people, I've come up with a formula for suffering, a mathematical formula." And, you know, Boulder is a college town. It's got the



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

flagship university of the University of Colorado system in it. So when you say something like that in a college town, people sit up and listen.

And Bhante Rahula looked at us and he said, "S equals P times R. Suffering equals pain times resistance." And what he was doing when he said that was something that a lot of Buddhist teachers talk about. He was using the word suffering and pain with a particular nuance in each case. Pain in this case refers to the existential suffering inherent in the human condition. What the Buddha talked about in the first noble truth, that if we're born as a human being, as was said a moment ago in the five recollections, we will experience aging, illness, loss, and death. That's unavoidable. Now, suffering, the way it's being talked about here, involves our emotional response and reactivity to those existential givens. Said another way, it's one thing for me to be suffering when I'm physically sick, as we talked about a little bit in this gathering. Our bodies can have pain and we can suffer. There's no question about that. How I respond, however, either increases the suffering and adds to it, or minimizes it and allows me to see it as what it actually is. For example, if I grow up in a particular religious environment, and my belief about my physical pain is that it's a punishment of some sort, from a punishing divinity, punishing God. There's a whole secondary layer of suffering that takes place on top of the reality of the physical experience of discomfort.

This is what the Buddha called the second arrow in Buddhist teachings. There are the inevitable difficulties of loss and change and growth and diminishment as we move toward the end of our lives. Those are not something we have control over. What Buddhist training is teaching us is how to develop wise ways to respond to the changes inherent in the aging process and in life in general, so that we less and less frequently add this unnecessary second arrow to the experience itself.

!

I remember years ago, when I was hired by the Spiritual Eldering Institute as their Director of Education and Training in 2000, I was at a meeting at one point and we were developing curricula for training people to teach our material. My friend, Lori, who was the Executive Director at the time, asked me if I would write a piece for the newsletter. We had a monthly newsletter. She brought up this interesting question. She said, "You know, David, we sit at these meetings all the time and we talk about conscious aging." And she says, "What does that really mean?" And then she said to me, "Would you write a definition of conscious aging for the next newsletter?" Without really thinking about it, I said, "Yeah, sure." As if it would be an easy task.

I then spent the next two and a half weeks wrestling with what I understood conscious aging to mean and how to put it into some kind of a definition. This is what I came up with. This is not gospel, but this is a way to think about the aging process that runs directly counter to all of the mesSage-ing we get from this culture about what bad news aging is from the age of fill-in-the-blank on. I guess if you're Jack Benny, 39, right? It's bad news after 39. For other people, it's 49 or 59 or 60. But as we all know, the mesSage-ing is so pernicious and so negative it plants very powerful seeds in us that come to fruition when we actually start to age physically.

This is what I wrote about conscious aging. Conscious aging is a growth-oriented way of living that emphasizes the cultivation and celebration of wisdom, love, and insight into the nature of ultimate reality. I'll read that just once more, just as food for thought. Conscious aging is a growth-oriented way of living that emphasizes the cultivation and celebration of wisdom, love, and insight into the nature of ultimate reality.

That leads me to the second of the Buddhist teachings that I want to talk about in terms of its relationship to the aging process. First, we need to be willing to see reality clearly and not



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

distort what's true. Secondly, we want to work with a teaching that the Buddha called "attachment to view." What he pointed out, and we certainly see this on our planet right now, given the polarization in our country politically, for example, and the range of different beliefs we have about the ecological crises on our planet, and so many other powerful current events that we're all struggling with, I imagine, and feeling heartache about in many cases.

What do I mean by "attachment to view"? Every one of us has some kind of viewpoint of aging. When I was training in Nepal with my primary Tibetan teacher there, he often referred to the fact that the Dharma could be understood in regard to three primary aspects that were woven together like a braid, and those were view, meditation, and action. View was the conceptual model or the map that I understood myself to be working with. Meditation involved the formal practices that we were trained in and learning in the monastery and various other places, and action was how we integrated the view and the formal practices in regard to living ethically and moving through the world in a more conscious way.

Well, part of what comes into play here is that view matters, and it matters a lot, as it turns out. Western cognitive and social psychology agrees with this completely. Let me give you one example of a view that some of you may have heard on another occasion. This is George Carlin, one of our great sages, on the process of aging. He writes, "Do you realize that the only time in our lives when we're excited about getting older is when we're kids? If you're less than 10 years old, you are so excited about aging that you think in fractions. How old are you? I'm four and a half. You're never 36 and a half. You're four and a half going on five. That's the key. You get into your teens and now they can't hold you back. How old are you? I'm going to be 16. Look, you could be 13, but hey, you're going to be 16. And then the greatest day of your life comes. You become 21. Even the words sound like a ceremony. You become 21. Yes. But then you turn 30. Ooh, what happened there? Makes you sound like bad milk. He turned. We had to throw him out. There's no fun now. You're just a sour dumpling. What's wrong? What's changed? So you become 21, you turn 30, and then you're pushing 40. Whoa, put on the brakes. It's all slipping away. And before you know it, you reach 50 and your dreams are gone. But wait, you make it to 60. You didn't think you would. You've built up. So you become 21. You turn 30, push 40, reach 50, and make it to 60. You've built up so much speed, you hit 70. After that, it's a day-by-day thing. You hit Wednesday. You get into your 80s and every day is a complete cycle. You hit lunch. You turn 430 and you reach bedtime. And it doesn't end there. Into your 90s, you start going backwards. I was just 92. And then a strange thing happens. If you make it over a hundred, you become a little kid again. Someone asks how old you are and you say, "I'm a hundred and a half." May you all make it to a healthy hundred and a half. Right?

Now, there's humor in what Carlin is talking about. And if you're honest and take a look underneath the surface, there's also pain. Because he's mirroring back the cultural attitudes that we have. Right? Why is this important? Because our beliefs about aging partly determine the way we experience our aging process. Right? And there's good research to support this. Let me give you an example. Right? Here's a brief excerpt from the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. From an abstract. The title of the study was, "Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging." Here's the summary. This research found that older individuals with more positive self-perceptions of aging measured up to 23 years earlier, lived seven and a half years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions of aging. And then they go on to say, "This advantage remained after age, gender, socialization, and socio-economic status, loneliness, and functional health were included as co-variants." Said another way, "They isolated the belief a person had about aging, whether it would be a positive or negative experience. And people who had more positive views and perspectives lived seven and a half years longer on average."



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Now, I don't say this to scare you, as much as to show you the power of perception and view. Yeah? If someone discovered a pharmaceutical drug that would help us live seven and a half years longer with no side effects, it would be on the front page of the New York Times in two-inch letters. Right? Trust me, this information did not make it into the Times at all. Right? But it's very important to recognize because our views begin at early ages, messages we get from movies and magazines and hearing people talked about and all kinds of things. Right?

I felt so blessed to meet Rob Zalman and Shakter Shalomi when I was 45, so I could start flushing out all of this negative programming about what it meant to be an older human being. Yeah? And my invitation in this work and a lot of what I talked about when I wrote Life Part 2 was ways to flush out all of these deluded views about the reality of aging so we could actually see clearly the truth of what happens when we age. Right?

What's beautiful about this is that we can choose other models. My good friend and colleague Drew Leder, who's a professor at Loyola College in Baltimore, in 1995, the same year Rob Zalman came to Naropa, Drew was given a grant to study the dominant models of aging in American culture. Yeah. He identified three primary models. The first he called the sociomedical model. This was the model that was used and embraced in geriatric medicine, gerontological studies and psychology. It recognized the difficulties inherent in an aging person's life and the positive side is that it developed compassionate ways to ease some of the suffering associated with those difficulties as we grow older. The downside or the shadow element was that in too many cases the tendency in medical environments was to see the older person in a two-dimensional way, to treat them almost like they were their symptoms in some cases, not to condemn anyone in the medical community. I know how hard the work is from doing it myself. Yeah. But what's it was a very there was a lack of appreciation for the richness and the fullness of the life of that 92 year old person sitting in front of the practitioner in many cases.

The second model that Drew identified, he labeled the productive model. Right? This is the model that says basically stay busy, stay productive, don't worry about aging, then you won't have to think about or feel any of your fears or concerns, just busy yourself, right? Which in our society and culture, especially with the digital assistance we now have for being busy, is a really easy thing to do. Yeah. What's unfortunate about that model, there's some truth to it. The use it or lose it concept is true. If we use our brains and we use our bodies and we're physically active, we tend to have healthier lives. That's true. Yeah. What's also true though, is that as we pass through midlife into late life, the inner agenda for a spiritually oriented person starts to change and we start to be interested in what Rev Zalman called life completion. That is asking ourselves, looking back at our lives, working with what we call in the work life review, identifying areas where we need life repair, where we have unfinished business with people who are important to us, addressing that in a skillful way when possible, reflecting upon what kind of legacy we want to leave when our lives come to a close and understanding legacy to be partly financial, but oftentimes much more than that. What kind of teachings or messages do I want my life to leave behind? What kind of model do I want to be for my children or other young people or students that I work with and so forth, right? So the productive model is helpful up to a point, but it becomes what Rev Zalman called the die-in-the-saddle model. He gave an example of a hundred-year-old bank president who didn't want to give up the status of being president. So he continued to go into the bank, but all they would let him do was open and close the door for people coming into the bank, right? To me, that's very sad, right? Because we are not our roles, right? My friend Connie, who wrote a book called The Inner Work of Age, subtitled it From Role to Soul. And the inner work of aging is to know ourselves as spiritual entities that according to the wisdom traditions don't physically die in the way that the body does, actually. This is not something we have to take anybody's word for. We don't have to believe this on faith or anything like that. But if we explore deeply what all of these



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

world wisdom teachings are saying, they are saying that there's a dimension of who we are that is apart from and different from the limitations of our physical bodies and personalities.

When the Buddha taught about nirvana, he would refer to it as the deathless. He also would refer to it as the unconditioned, meaning that on the level of our Buddha nature, there's a dimension of who we are who is not subject to external conditions and can remain in the equanimity of awareness while at the same time fully embracing the vulnerability of our humanity. This is a both/and. It's as if we learn to live on two levels of consciousness simultaneously.

So, the third of these models was called the consumer model. This is the model that says, you know, I've paid my dues. If I had a family, I've put my kids through college or I've paid off a mortgage if I've been fortunate enough to have the resources to do that. Now it's my turn, right? I can play all of the golf I want. I can go on a cruise with 5,000 other people and overeat together or whatever you do on that kind of a cruise, right? I've got other choices and options, essentially, right? Which is wonderful. I felt that when my daughter left for college. There was a sense of we finished a stage of some sort, right? However, most of us, unless we're professional golfers, there's a limited amount of life satisfaction in golf. Right? Even if you read the Zen of golf or the Tao of golf. Yeah. Most of us want something deeper and more meaningful. That's why Reb Zalman in his own experience and in his work proposed a fourth model. There was a socioeconomic, the productive, the consumer, and then a model that was a spiritually oriented model. Recognizing that the later stages in our lives represent a wonderful opportunity to actualize our best human qualities. In Buddhism, we call these the paramis in Pali and paramitas in Sanskrit. Qualities like compassion, wisdom, joy, patience, one that we talked about a little bit earlier, and so forth, right? That's really what Reb Zalman proposed is the focus of a consciously aging individual. Yeah. And when people have lived this way, what's beautiful to see is how differently they relate to the aging process.

One of the joys of working in this field for many years now with incredible elders who come to trainings and workshops and teach our work that we developed over many years is what it's like to meet people who have flushed out the negative messages and learned how to celebrate the stage of life that they're actually in.

Here's an example, several examples just to give you a taste of what's possible for each of us, not to set up a comparing mind, but to just consider. This is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great writer at the age of 90. He describes his aging this way. "How much easier it is then, how much more receptive we are to death when advancing years guide us softly to our end. Aging thus is in no way and no sense a punishment from on high, but brings us its own blessings and a warmth of colors all its own. There is even warmth to be drawn from the waning of your own strength compared with the past. Just to think about how sturdy I once used to be. You can no longer get through a whole day's work at one stretch, but how good it is to slip into the brief oblivion of sleep and what a gift to wake once more to the clarity of your second or third morning of the day. And your spirit can find delight in limiting your intake of food, in abandoning the pursuit of novel flavors. You are still of this life, yet you are rising above the material plane. Growing old serenely is not a downhill path, but an ascent. What a different way to look at the aging process than what we've been told by our culture.

Here's another one written by a woman named Polly Francis, very gifted fashion illustrator, photographer and writer. And when she was in her 90s, she wrote a series of articles for the Washington Post. This is how she described her inner world. A new set of faculties seems to be coming into operation. I seem to be awakening to a larger world of wonderment to catch little glimpses of the immensity and diversity of creation. More than at any time in my life, I seem to be aware of the beauties of our spinning planet and the sky above. And now I have the



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

time to enjoy them. I feel that old age sharpens our awareness. That's not to say that the memory challenges all of us experience are not real. It is to say that what neurological science has shown that there's two different kinds of intelligence that come into play. One kind of intelligence is called fluid intelligence and it heightens and peaks in our 20s or 30s. It has to do with innovation and creativity and new input. Yeah? Another kind of intelligence that we now understand is called crystallized intelligence. Our memory may not be as effective, but we see the big picture and the big perspective of things. This is what in Zen is called grandmother mind. We can look back at our lives and see how the pieces fit together. We can talk to a young person who's struggling and understand the stage of life that they're in. We can embrace the ultimate mystery that none of us will ever completely intellectually wrestle to the ground and find a way to be at peace with it. A kind of peace that contemplative Christians call the peace that surpasses understanding. Yeah?

The last of these I'll read to you is one that Ram Dass wrote. Some of you know, he wrote a book called Still Here. If you want a good book about aging and I am going to give you a reading list. So just to give you a heads up in case you're interested when Rob sends out an email in a day or two including the recording from this retreat, there'll be a reading list attached with some of the books I would recommend and have found most helpful. But at the end of his book and some of you know Ram Dass was actually had a devastating stroke in 1997 and was sitting at his computer working on this book about aging when he had the stroke and then continued to teach for another 22 years in spite of his limitations and disabilities. This is what he wrote at the end of his book. This book is more of my advanced scout role. These days I'm the advanced scout for the experiences of aging and I've come back from the scouting party to bring good news. The good news is that the spirit is more powerful than the vicissitudes of aging. My stroke was a good test for my faith. The bar was high. I came away from the stroke firm in my faith and I now know that my faith is unshakable. That assurance is the highest gift I have received from the stroke and I can say to you now with an assurance I couldn't have felt before that faith and love are stronger than any changes, stronger than aging and I am very sure stronger than death.

So what is it I'm trying to say here? Let me see if I can sum this up a little bit and allow a little bit of time for some discussion. Yeah. I'm essentially suggesting to you a few issues and reflections I would invite you to take away. Yeah. One of them has to do with the fact that we can choose to see our aging process as a natural inherent aspect of our humanity rather than some kind of bad news that then becomes a filter through which we interpret our experiences. I'm further suggesting that the view that we have of aging plays a significant role in what we actually experience as we become an older person and if we unconsciously buy into the negative perspectives that this culture feeds us in a variety of ways, we're at risk for creating what Western psychology calls a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we don't examine these unexamined beliefs and views and ideas, we are very likely to simply create them as our reality in an unconscious manner. On the other hand, if we choose to work with Buddhist and other wisdom teachings that enable us to see reality clearly, which inevitably leads to recognizing the fact that we are all in the same existential boat fundamentally when it comes to uncertainty and impermanence and change and loss and transformation. By looking at things in a clear and open and honest way, our hearts of compassion naturally open to one another because we recognize that we have very similar experiences on one level, even though the details are unique. This is one of the great insights of the world's wisdom teachings that there's an intersection where the universal meets the unique. And when we live at that intersection, we can fully embrace our humanity and vulnerability and at the same time we can grow into inhabiting our Buddha nature, our true nature, our Christ consciousness, our true self. Yeah. So my suggestion here is that we can learn to see the changes inherent in the aging process as a curriculum for spiritual growth and development. We can't control the changes and at the same time we can develop wise and skillful ways to respond to them that turn us into wounded



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

healers and deepen our compassion and enable us to love ourselves and one another in a way that Sharon Salzberg described as cultivating a heart as wide as the world. Yeah.

I guess I would simply close by saying that's my wish for every single one of us, that we cultivate a heart as wide as the world that includes all of the stages of life, includes ourselves and one another and all living beings as well. I left a little bit of time here for any comments or reflections that you might have. It's not necessary. You don't need the class participation in terms of your grade or anything like that, but if you have a comment or a question or a reflection, we'll take a few minutes for that and then we'll move toward our wrap-up and do a closing dedication after Rob shares a brief announcement. If you do have a comment or question, you can put it in the chat or click on the reactions button as I talked about before and then click raise hand and Rob and I will see that you had a comment or a question.

Questioner: At the beginning when you said to write the question that you would like to come away with, I wrote something that would probably need a lot more time, but maybe you could direct some resources or give a brief feedback on your experience, but having just had a lunch date with someone who's turning 80 and who shared with me that three of her known people in her life have done death with dignity when they knew they were getting into the Alzheimer's phase and they didn't want to burden others or go through that. So my question is how does one wake up or continue awakening when the mind diminishes and retracts from awareness as in dementia and Alzheimer's? Where does the mind go and can awakening still happen when there is a loss of mind? How does one prepare for the onset of dementia when perhaps patience and compassion go out the window? That was my question.

David: So yeah, it's a wonderful question and I think it's quite important. I won't pretend to have an easy answer. What I would suggest is that every moment of our lives is part of a preparation process. And when the Buddha taught about karma, about cause and effect, his emphasis was on intentionality. Now, so if prior to becoming seriously symptomatic with dementia symptoms, the way that we live our life will play a significant role in what happens thereafter. Partly in relation to how other people treat us because if we've lived a life in alignment with the precepts, for example, and we've been generally kind with other people and try to live a life of non-harming, the way in which other people will generally relate to us will be caring and supportive, not exclusively, but generally speaking. So we will have laid some groundwork for us to receive care that we need. Exactly what goes on in the mind stream when dementia sets in and becomes quite advanced. I've observed that on many occasions in the work that I've done. And I don't honestly know what relationship that has to the process of awakening. It's an open question for me. And there's a whole range of questions as we approach late life and the dying process and death that for me fall into a realm that I call mystery. It's I just don't know. And yet at the same time, there's a place in me that trusts the life process all the way to the end. I can't explain that really well, but I simply trust the process. And ideally, my hope would be that that will be accessible even if my cognitive functioning is not. So I think as more and more of us live longer lives, this question will become increasingly relevant. And I have worked with a number of people here in Colorado where we have a death with dignity law. And I've seen that that can be a beautiful ending to someone's life. But it's really a mystery to me what happens in regard to the evolution of spirit when dementia sets in. It's about what I could say, you know, in terms of resources, I haven't seen the question addressed in a way that would add much to what I've just said at this point. But I think it's an important question to consider.

Questioner: Right. There's the question about what happens to the mind when you lose your mind and does awakening continue or is it stopped and you're just living out the physical realm of breathing and human life on that level? And then the other question is the death with dignity movement has, keeps growing and I hear more and more direct you know, relations with



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

people who are witnessing or have friends or whatever. And it's like, this is a whole nother thing that wasn't happening when I grew up, the death with dignity movement. And now it's becoming more and more common. And so I'm having to question both for myself and when I view it in the world, like what's happening? We're taking our own lives. What does that mean with, you know, like you, I believe in completing the whole life cycle. But what does it mean to be confronted with these choices of well, you can by choice, you know, check out early for various reasons. So it's a big conundrum.

David: I can speak to that one Cindy more directly, right? Because it has to do with intention. The intention behind that legislation is compassion and alleviating unnecessary suffering. Right. So in most cases, there are medical guidelines that have to be followed. Right. And it's most often applied when someone has a very predictable illness that involves intractable pain and intractable suffering. And cases in which a few more weeks or a few more months of intractable pain and suffering really will not benefit the individual. All right, and that person, according to the legislation, has a right to choose to end their life if the ending is sufficiently predictable and there are certain particular conditions and particular medical conditions that come into play. Yeah. That allows a person to say goodbye and come bring their life to closure and completion in a way that can be very beautiful. I understand that it's an ethically charged issue for many people and a powerful and confusing issue for a lot of us. But for me personally, it's a step in the right direction for us as a culture so that we're not misusing our medical technologies and capacities to unnecessarily extend someone's suffering when they clearly wish otherwise. No, thank you. Well, much longer conversation, needless to say.

Yeah. Yeah, another. Let me just I'd also like to thank every one of you for choosing to be here. I know that time is precious for all of us and I really savor and appreciate being with people who are interested in the kinds of material we've been talking about today and I'd like to bring us to a close with a traditional Buddhist blessing called the Pitanu Mudana. Just as water flowing in the streams and rivers fills the ocean. Thus, may all your moments of goodness touch and benefit all beings. Those here now and those gone before. May all of your wishes be soon fulfilled as completely as the moon on a full moon night. As successfully as from the wish-fulfilling gem. May all dangers be averted. May all disease leave you. May no obstacles come across your way. And may you enjoy happiness and long life. May those who are always respectful honoring the way of the elders prosper in the four blessings of old age, beauty, happiness, and strength. May it be so. Thank you.