

# CONSCIOUS AGING: ENJOYING THE GIFTS OF GROWING OLDER

Kadampa Center  
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*Conscious Aging: Enjoying the Gifts of Growing Older*

*What do we mean by conscious aging?*

The process of utilizing the natural process of growing older as an opportunity for spiritual growth through cultivating wisdom and awareness, and thus a means to make all phases of our lives fulfilling and meaningful.

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**The first step: Becoming aware of the reality of aging**

**The second step: Moving beyond mere awareness to a fuller acceptance of the reality of aging**

**The third step: Going beyond acceptance to genuine growth and appreciation of the reality of aging**

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**The first step: Becoming aware of the reality of aging**

➤ **The Buddha's experience with aging**

➤ **My own experience with aging ... and yours!**

➤ **Aging as part of the nature of reality**

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The Five Contemplations

The Buddha left us five contemplations, which he advised us to reflect on frequently:

1. I am subject to aging. Aging is unavoidable.
2. I am subject to illness. Illness is unavoidable.
3. I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable.

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The Five Contemplations

4. I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.
5. I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for ill, to that will I fall heir.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, pp.13-14

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The Five Contemplations

This isn't the cheeriest set of reflections in the world, and most people, when they first hear them, feel some resistance. They don't mind contemplating the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence in the world around them, but this is getting a little close to home.

- Larry Rosenberg, *Living in the Light of Death*, pp.13-14

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The Five Contemplations

What is being asked of us as meditators is to come face-to-face with the law of impermanence in an intimate way.

- Larry Rosenberg, *Living in the Light of Death*, pp.13-14

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*In the garden of gentle sanity, may you be bombarded  
by coconuts of wakefulness.*

- Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

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“Lightning Strikes”

One way to describe the experience of awakening to the reality of aging is set out by Lewis Richmond in *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, where he calls it “Lightning Strikes.” He tells a story about his father to illustrate this (pp.11-12, 14)

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“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.

- Lewis Richmond, *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, p.14

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“Lightning Strikes”

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.

- Lewis Richmond, *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, p.14

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**The second step: Moving beyond mere awareness to a fuller acceptance of the reality of aging**

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*Samvega*

In Pali this phenomenon is known as *samvega*: the urgent need to practice that can grow out of heightened sense of the perishable nature of life. It can include a real feeling of shock and a sense not only that life doesn't last forever but also that the way we have been living is wrong.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, p.15

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*Samvega*

It might turn our world upside down, sending us off to a whole new way of life. Even if it doesn't have so dramatic an effect, it can light a fire under our practice. We get much less caught up in power, prestige, money, lust, the acquisition of goods.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, p.15

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*Samvega*

Dharma teachings start to make real sense to us, and we begin to live them instead of just assenting intellectually. *Samvega* leads to a conversion of the heart, from an egocentric existence to a search for that which is timeless, vast, and sacred.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, pp.15-16



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*Pasada*

An important accompaniment to *samvega* is the Pali concept of *pasada*, which might be translated as clear and serene confidence, a conviction that our situation isn't hopeless, that the practice of meditation can take us beyond sickness, aging, and death.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, p.16

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*Pasada*

The problem surrounding these phenomena is not external to us. It has everything to do with our cravings and attachments. Suffering is not a dead end but a gateway to realization. The proper application of the practice – of the eightfold path – can turn the pain of sickness and death into the joy of liberation.

- Larry Rosenburg, *Living in the Light of Death*, p.16

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**“Aging, illness and death are treasures for those who understand them. They’re Noble Truths, Noble Treasures. If they were people, I’d bow down to their feet everyday.”**

**- Ajaan Lee, as cited in *Living in the Light of Death*, p.11**

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**The third step: Going beyond acceptance to genuine growth and appreciation of the reality of aging**

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

Kathleen Dowling Singh in her book, *The Grace in Aging: Awaken as You Grow Older*, sets out several "special conditions of transformation," which are "skillful means by which we can organize our life around our intention.(p.91)"

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

Special conditions are actions we can impose upon the self, things that we can do with the self until we can be free of the self. Any gathering of spiritual practitioners from every tradition assembles a body of wisdom regarding how to till the soil. Remarkably similar conditions are engaged in all wisdom lineages.

- Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Aging*, pp.89

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

Each of these special conditions is a powerful catalyst for transformation. They release us from grasping to self. Working skillfully, we can introduce and make use of these conditions in the midst of life, in these very chapters of being old.

- Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Aging*, pp.89

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Presence and commitment that arise from having recognized some level of urgency and thus seeing the need to shift one's priorities towards awakening

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Simplicity that arises from withdrawing from life's "busy-ness," narrowing one's activities, and letting go of self-imposed external measures of our lives

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Humility that arises from discerning the futility of superiority and arrogance as well as the advantages of letting go of the illusion of perfectionism and releasing into ordinariness

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Gratitude and generosity of spirit that arise from appreciating one's blessings and good fortune, and then wanting to reciprocate

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Forgiveness and reconciliation that arise from seeing the weight of holding on to past resentments and opening to taking responsibility for healing and restoring harmony in our relationships

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The Special Conditions or "Gifts"

- Insight that arises from having embraced solitude and silence and then opening to investigating the true nature of reality, of the self

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Prayer for the Passing Away of Things

*As everything ages and passes away, may each of us be kind to ourselves;*

*As everything ages and passes away, may each of us accept joy and sorrow;*

*As everything ages and passes away, may each of us be happy and at peace.*

- Lewis Richmond, *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, p.214