

The Grace in Aging: Awaken as You Grow Older



The profound spiritual teacher Wei Wu Wei calls any conversation about *awakening* “the most important discussion to be had.”

My wish is that your reflection on the questions posed throughout this book will stir and deepen whatever longing you may ever have had to awaken, *to reach the deep, still heart of the great mystery we call life.*

I have tried to speak ecumenically, in broad strokes, to underscore the one Dharma, *the one truth underlying all wisdom traditions.*

If you are far along a particular path, you will note where some words or sentences are not quite accurate or resonant within the view of your path. *Translate. Use the words here lightly for inspiration* and the words of your own tradition precisely for progress.

My endless gratitude goes to all of the kind teachers who guided me toward making my life such a rich one. I also want to thank all of the aging and dying and grieving and growing people who have shared themselves with me and taught me so much.

To my generation, especially now as we enter our last chapters: *may we all grow in the beauty, peace, and grace of awakening.*

Introduction

The *Grace in Aging* approaches a topic that is, like death and dying, both difficult to contemplate and to experience. Aging and dying are topics that we tend to resist exploring in any but the most superficial of ways.

The truth, which many of us would prefer to resist, is that both aging, if we live long enough, and dying are inherent, inevitable aspects of every human life.

Dying is *a naturally transformative experience in a human life*. There is something undeniably powerful and sacred in either being a witness to another's dying or being the one in the process of coming close to death.

It is certainly possible to experience aging with some real measures of denial or unmindfulness.

Simply aging, simply becoming an elderly person, offers no transformative crucible. There is nothing in the process of simply getting older that, in and of itself, is going to make our eventual decline and illness and all of our losses either transformative or hopeful.

Whatever transformative experience we have of aging is *dependent upon our own intention*. There are many ways to deal with living our older years.

Some ways will have more wisdom and will lead to more peace than others; some ways will lack wisdom and will lead to more stress and hopelessness and bewilderment, the phenomenon psychologist Erik Erikson called "ego despair."

The *Grace in Aging* speaks directly to those who have been stirred in their lifetime by the wish to awaken, to live in more sane, more kind, and more peaceful minds, to live in a more deeply sensed connection with the sacred.

This book is directed at all those who recognize that these older years are all that remain of our time to commit and devote to awakening.

This time of our life can be seen to offer, to all of those who so choose, an opportunity to move our desire to awaken from a peripheral aspect of our lives to a central place—and on, even, to being the very reason for and experience of our moment-by-moment living.

The *Grace in Aging* comes from the perspective that with some *outer vistas* closing as we age, we would do well to recognize that *inner vistas*, peaceful and joyful and beautiful beyond imagining, can open.

These *inner vistas* have always been within, available to us; we often just didn't have the time to explore them in any depth while we were immersed in the busy-ness of our lives to date.

Aging can offer us the time to deliberately reorient ourselves toward the inner life, an infinitely more reliable refuge than anything the world can offer.

To open these *inner vistas* is to enter a time of awakening, to lighten our attachment to self, the cause of all of our unease.

Lightening our attachment to self is the only thing that is going to get us through the decline, illness, and loss that we will, almost inevitably, face from now until we die with some equanimity and peaceful sanity, rather than with weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

Using these last years of our life as a time to awaken can help us cope and even grow in love and wisdom as we confront decline, illness, and loss.

Because the process of aging each day does not provide the circumstances that facilitate awakening, we ourselves need to create the causes and gather the conditions to do so. These causes and conditions are revealed in the dying process.

There is much that the living can learn from the dying. These causes and conditions are skillful means, taught in all authentic spiritual traditions. Creating the causes and gathering the conditions of transformation in these later decades of our life will enable us to reveal and experience our own essential nature, to open into the grace of awakening far before we die.

We can, if we so choose, dedicate these last years to waking up.

Each chapter [in the book] is a contemplation, offering views to consider and steps to take—for those who wish to do so—to *make the most of our remaining time and use these last few years wisely*.

There are many challenges awaiting us as we age. To the degree that we feel lost in our own small self, separate from others and from spirit, we will find those challenges difficult.

This [book] is an invitation to enter a noble path and finally awaken.

Opening to Our Own Mortality

The longer we are together the larger death grows around us. How many we know by now who are dead! (Wendell Berry)

We cannot speak about *aging and awakening* without speaking about *death and dying*; it certainly seems to come up at every turn.

Meditating on death opens us up deeply to the precious gift of this life and the boundless gift we can make of it. It begs us to look at what remains frivolous in our lives, what remains careless.

Most of us have lived so many decades on the surface of being, whistling around the outskirts of awareness.

We rarely pause to question, to look. Where have I not forgiven? Where have I not apologized? Who have I not loved well? Who have I not thanked? Where do I still cling? What fears do I still harbor? Such deeply and thoroughly honest contemplation allows us to change what can be changed and die with less regret.

Meditating on death is one of the special conditions that facilitates spiritual transformation, illumination. Wisdom traditions have employed it as skillful means for millennia.

It [meditating on death] is, at the end of life, one of the most powerful of the special conditions that facilitates the grace in dying.

When we are deeply aware of our own impermanence, every fleeting moment is recognized as precious. Our desire to be present in each moment amplifies.

Contemplating the fact that we truly do not know if we will still be alive in this human body with the next breath, we can witness a stunning decrease in our attachment to and interest in anything but now. Presence begins to blossom.

Meditating on death instantly calls us to question on the deepest of levels. What am I doing? What do I want? What does this all mean? What is it all about? What is spirit? What is self? Who or what is the "I" that is asking the questions? Our desire to explore, to inquire, to see, intensifies in urgency. We have no idea how much time each of us has left to clearly see—which is to say, awaken.

Contemplating our own mortality, taking in the fact of our mortality, our precariously impermanent existence, can call us to complete and thorough accountability. It can call us to instant reordering, a rearranging of our priorities and our intentions.

A deep opening to our own mortality brings us to our knees and down to the nitty-gritty. It blocks off all of our habitual detours into denial. It forces us to face the way we've lived our lives, the choices we've made, the polestars we've chosen.

Contemplating our own mortality can spur a sense of urgency. The urgency is not to panic and try harder, squinching up and exerting and striving. The urgency is to become more earnest, more sincere, more aligned in our spiritual intention. The urgency reminds us to become less frivolous, to remain mindful of our deepest intention, to not allow our experience of being to sink so carelessly into mindlessness.

The Pali language has a word, *samvega*, that refers to the urgent need to practice, to engage in awakening practices. It denotes a healthy desire that can arise out of a heightened sense of our own mortality, our own ephemeral impermanence.

Meditating on death allows us to take the conceptual understandings that we will die and that the time of our death is uncertain to the level of our heart. That distance—from head to heart—is a long journey with many roadblocks, many obstacles, many bumps in the road.

Meditating on our own death allows us to open to a truth. Opening to the truth, we marinate in it. We allow understanding and insight into that truth to percolate and permeate our being, pruning the old neural connections of mindless habits, and allowing new neural pathways, new and more beneficial habits of mind, to come into operation and flourish.

Contemplating our own mortality can bring concept into direct experience. It is a journey from nodding intellectual understanding of the concept of impermanence to the experience of it as a moment-by-moment reality.

To take in that we will die and that it is uncertain when—that it could be anytime, even this moment—at the level of our heart is an understanding of the whole being that can actually affect and transform us.

If we keep the fact of our mortality at the level of conception, in our head, it remains as just another piece of information, like the number of calories in a dish of ice cream or how to plant a tomato seedling. When we take it into our heart, the truth of the recognition knocks every cell in our being with the shock. We get it. It is so. We cut off a lot of recognition at the level of our neck. We block the very truth that will set us free.

There is nothing that can keep us from death. No pleading, begging, or bribing. The world offers no shelter from death. There is no one who can protect us. When we die, the world our mind experienced will be swept away.

When we die, all of our thoughts and concerns, all of our prides and attachments—our universe—will cease. Our eyeglasses will be useless to anyone else. The objects we so loved will be priced for a tag sale, a penny on the dollar. Someone else will access our accounts and sell the car we dreamed of for so long. Someone will cut down the roses we planted so many years ago and tended so carefully. Someone will paint the house a different colour or maybe even raze it. Everything that we are concerned about in this very moment will not matter at all: bills, quarrels, sensed inadequacies, the sale at the mall, fears, vanities, hopes for the stock market, what to have for dinner. They will not matter at all.

One of the biggest spurs for our journey can come with deep and regular contemplation of our own mortality as a focal point, as an ever-present truth to hold in awareness. It, more than just about any other contemplation, forces us to ask questions at a level of depth from which we may never have inquired before. Where am I most deeply attached? Where am I most deeply anxious? What will be lost? What is it that dies?

Augustine ... counseled all who sought his heart-felt advice to "die daily." When we sit to meditate on mortality, we can think that this may be the last time we may ever be able to do this. The power of that thought lies in the fact that the statement holds truth. We can sit to meditate with the intention to imitate death. We can sit to meditate with the intention to let it all go, inspired to explore what lies beyond self.

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