



Aging and the Ageless: Aging and the Dharma KM Group

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“What is aging in this moment? What is ageless in this moment?” These two questions, posed by Rodney in his homework on Aging and Dependent Origination, could well serve as an underlying theme for our Aging and the Dharma KM group. When we first met on Valentine's Day 2005, we were a group of twelve women in our fifties to early eighties seeking to share the journey of aging in the light of the dharma. Now, more than nine years later, we are a slightly different group of thirteen women ranging in age from sixty-three to ninety who continue to share this journey.

As with many of life's most fruitful journeys, that of our KM group (affectionately dubbed the “Granny Group” by one member's daughter) has evolved organically, drawing on the life experiences and spiritual wisdom of our members—always under the gentle shepherding of our wonderful facilitators, Nancy, Gloria, and (later) Parker. In 2009, we put together a statement of intention for our group: In the company of each other and befriended by the dharma, it is the intention of our KM group to bring into sharper awareness how the reality of aging and death will play out in our lives. We welcome the contribution of each member's life experience, and intend the camaraderie and sharing in our group to bolster our courage and momentum to whole-heartedly embrace all aspects of our aging.”

Meeting monthly for two hours in Gloria's cozy condo or another member's home, we've followed the suggested KM group format. We begin with silent meditation to center and ground us. This is followed by a “check-in,” which often takes the form of two or three rounds of “I could talk about...” After a brief but important tea, snack, and informal conversation, we discuss a topic related to aging and its relationship to the dharma. We then close with a “healing circle,” during which we extend compassion and love to individuals, groups, and all beings who are suffering.

During our time together, we've shared the joys and sorrows of our lives: marriages of children, births of grandchildren and great grandchildren; the joys and challenges of relationships with partners, adult children, grandchildren, siblings, parents (now quite aged or in the spirit world), and friends; and our own adventures, from Sooz's outings with her twin god daughters to Rosie's African safari. We've also shared the sadness of deaths and illnesses of loved ones; the challenges of living with cancer, injuries and surgeries, and just getting older. We've drawn on readings, dharma talks, and inspiration from retreats, as well as the wisdom—spoken and wordless—of the heart.

In our meetings, we experience the brahma viharas first hand. We've felt sympathetic joy when members spoke of their blessings and triumphs, such as the delight of Krista and Sooz after the first Teen Retreat at Cloud Mountain, Rosie turning her creativity toward painting water colors, Gloria publishing her first novel, Chris singing in a community chorus, Tomoko's pleasure in going to the opera with her husband, Julia's everyday joy with her cats, and Margaret's simple statement, “I am blessed.” We've felt compassion when a member or her loved one faced a serious illness or injury. We've felt uplifted by the equanimity with which our members have met the challenges of aging, such as when Margaret described trading in her purple car for a red scooter at age 90 or when Mary spoke of sitting on her porch steps with the neighbor's cat, conserving her limited energy and being present in each moment. We've been inspired

by Nancy and Parker's clarity and honesty as they finalized their advanced directives. And always a sense of loving kindness and connection has pervaded our time together.

The leadership of the meetings rotates, with the leader choosing the topic and informing the group in advance, often providing questions for inquiry and suggested readings. For example, for a meeting she led, Rosie emailed us the question, "What opportunities does the death of someone we love offer us? Those opportunities we choose and those we don't." At the meeting, Rosie shared her recent experiences of losing three of the most important people in her life and the gifts, openings, and insights she received as a result, leading to a heartfelt discussion as other members shared their experiences and insight. Indeed, death and dying is a subject we've visited and revisited on many different levels—practical and spiritual—with deepening understanding and, hopefully, acceptance of its reality for all of us.

Over the years we've used our life experiences and spiritual wisdom to consider many other aspects of aging and our responses to it. We've explored what it means to age in terms of our bodies, minds, and spirits and the dharmic implications of this process. We've considered such topics as asking forgiveness of ourselves and others; gratitude and generosity; asking for help (difficult for our group of independent women); fear (a big one as we face the uncertainty of what lies ahead for us); dementia (an uncomfortable subject); self compassion; the losses that can come with aging; and the blessings of aging (including the possibility of "gerotranscendence," a term used to describe the observation that some individuals, as they age, transcend habitual ways of looking at and responding to life in a process akin to spiritual awakening). In addition to discussions, we've watched videos, moved our hands and bodies and "babbled" under Krista's InterPlay leadership, and created dramatic dance and poetry when asked by Krista to develop a creative response to "unwelcome change." We've marveled at the ageless parts of ourselves—how a part of us feels "forever young." And we've realized how precious each moment of life is.

As our shared journey of aging continues, we will continue to explore the moment-to-moment aspects of aging and the ageless within us all. It seems fitting that this journey started on Valentine's Day, since it is, above all, a journey of the heart.

*Although our group remains closed, we would be most happy to work with SIMS practitioners who have completed the KM Facilitator training and are interested in starting a second Aging and the Dharma group. Please contact the SIMS KM Group Coordinator for contact information:
kmcoordinator@seattleinsight.org.