

Essentials of Elderhood

**A course for fulfilling your potential
as an Elder in today's society**



Course developed by Richard Clarke

from an earlier course developed with
Rev. Matt Alspaugh based on
"From Age-ing to Sage-ing"
by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

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Richard Clarke on the web

Free Books

<https://sites.google.com/view/infinite-pie>

Spiritual Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/c/richardclarkeadvaita>

Podcast

<https://ramanacommentary.podbean.com/>

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INTRODUCTION TO THIS BOOK

This is the healthiest and longest-lived generation ever. For most of human history, the elder was a highly respected member of society. But this changed with the Industrial Revolution, and now the image of an elder is not so good. So our generation of elders does not really have much of a model as to how to live a fulfilled elder life.

This elder stage of life should crown our lifetime of learning and growth, and finding ways to express ourselves, and contributing to those around us. We don't really have a good social model for this, so we have to discover it for ourselves.

So I invite you to come take this elder journey with me. This is valuable work. If you take it seriously, it will be a major part of your life for the next few months.

Come, keep learning and growing. What else is there to do?

HOW IT CAME ABOUT

This book is derived from a course that was developed for the unique elder community that resides in Ajijic, Mexico and on the shores of Lake Chapala. It was presented as a six-session course given over six weeks. This book should be a resource to those who have been through the course. It can also be used by people anywhere who are starting to deal with these issues, opportunities and challenges of aging. This is what the course is about.

Our first eldering course has no particular religious orientation, but was put together by me, working with our Unitarian Universalist (UU) minister, Rev. Matt Alspaugh. We based our work on an Elderhood course I found on-line written by another UU minister, Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer. That course, in turn, was based on *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* a book written by a Jewish scholar and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. We felt that this Elderhood material was just what was needed for many of us here at Lakeside. The first iteration of the course was offered in the autumn of 2018.

As a result of renewed interest in the first course, I offered the course again, one year later, in the fall of 2019. I have continued my research into the topic of aging, and in particular into the changes that occur in the aging brain. The second year's material includes more and newer research into the topics. In addition to using Rabbi Zalman's *Age-ing to Sage-ing* as recommended reading for the course, I have added the book *Buddha's Brain* by the American neuroscientist Dr. Rick Hanson, to emphasize the need for inner development and meditation,

COURSE OVERVIEW WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO IN SIX SESSIONS

The first session presents an introduction and gets you started on a key element of preparation for Eldering work – meditation.

The second will introduce the life review process that is a key element of this course.

Session three continues this life review with restoring ourselves to wholeness.

Session four takes up the pain you have felt, and gives a way forward from it to your vision of purpose and meaning for your life.

Session five is about having a conscious death.

Session six wraps all this up and asks, "Now what? How can I live a happy and fulfilled Elder life?"

ABOUT RICHARD CLARKE

I am a part of this generation of elders. I am an early "Baby Boomer" born in 1943, so I am on the leading edge of the Boomer generation. I have had a life filled with both high-tech work and with spiritual inquiry. I lived and worked in California's Silicon Valley. I was almost a hippie but got a job at IBM instead. I was Buddhist for 25 years, and then was attracted to the deep teachings of the 20th century Indian sage, Ramana Maharshi. My wife and I lived in India for 8 years before coming here to Lakeside. I have meditated regularly for about the last 35 years. My mother was a family therapist, and living in California, I have been in the

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middle of a variety of courses and approaches to personal growth, like EST in the 1970s, and many meditation retreats. So one part of the course is from my own life experiences and what I have been able to learn from them. Another part is from the latest scientific research.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The material was presented in a series of six two-hour meetings. With around twenty participants, I wanted to create an interactive situation, with lots of time for group discussion, guided meditations, and one-on-one discussions, “dyads,” among the participants.

Each session contains a mixture of inspirational quotations, instruction, group discussions, one-on-one conversations, journaling exercises, and reading assignments as “homework.” In addition, there are guided meditations sprinkled throughout the 6 sessions, as well as worksheets that can be filled out to track your progress.

If you are reading this material by yourself, I encourage you to use the discussion topics as opportunities for reflection and journaling work. For each topic suggested in the course, it will be very valuable for you to create your own “discussion” by writing your thoughts down, in self-exploration.

As for the guided meditations, I invite you to read them to yourself, line-by-line, and take the time to sit quietly and consider each sentence. Read, reflect, and meditate to make them your own experience.

Alternatively, it would also be fun for you to go through this book with a partner. One of you can read the guided meditation to the other, and then switch roles. You may find it fruitful to explore the dyad discussions with a partner as well.

Whether you are reviewing the course, or exploring this material on your own, or with a friend or friends, I wish for you a productive and meaningful encounter with these principles to make the most of your senior years.

SESSION 1: PREPARATION FOR ELDERHOOD

*Elderhood is a time of unparalleled inner growth
having evolutionary significance in this era of
world-wide cultural transformation.
It is a call from the future,
a journey for the health and survival
of our ailing planet Earth.*

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Our society gives us so many negative images of getting old. It is seen as a period of physical and mental decline and withdrawal from life and responsibilities. But these are just ideas from an earlier age. We are the oldest and healthiest generation ever. The negative ideas still plague us though. We ourselves are being ageist when we forget something and think, "I am just getting old." Ageism is a funny thing though; while other "isms" like racism or anti-immigrantism are ideas held by one group about another group, ageism reflects ideas we have about ourselves. So it is particularly harmful.

This course aims to break through our ageism and help you find the vital, creative and full-of-life's-wisdom person that you are. Maybe this is hidden behind some ageist ideas. Maybe we can start to see that these ageist ideas are not true so they will not impact our thinking anymore, and they will no longer affect our ideas about ourselves.

GROUP DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING TOPICS

Ideas about old people and getting old.

Do you have any "elder heroes?"

Ideas about your own aging

THE SINE QUA NON* OF SPIRITUAL ELDERING WORK

By Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

1. To be willing to deal with life completion, and overcome a denial of aging.
2. To come to terms with one's own mortality.
3. To acquire the skills for inner work by learning
 - Journal writing
 - Spiritual intimacy
 - Meditation
 - Socialized meditation – two people in close open conversation.
4. To pay attention to body, feelings, mind and spirit, to be guided by them and maintain them well.
5. To really listen to one's own inner voices, witnessing all the elements within the whole person.
6. To begin to do life repair, in health and practical matters, in relationships between the generations, and doing one's own forgiveness work.
7. To do the philosophical homework, pondering the meaning and purpose of life.
8. To serve as an Elder to others, on behalf of family, community, and the Earth.
9. To prepare for a serene death and afterlife.
10. To do this work nobly, in connection with one's own spiritual traditions.

*Sine Qua Non is a Latin expression for "Without which, nothing." In other words, a basic requirement.

SPIRITUAL ELDERING

In *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi talks about what he calls "Spiritual Eldering" as a key element for this stage of our life. It is "spiritual" because it cultivates and draws upon our innermost resources, our intuition as well as our rational mind. This elder stage of life calls us to this—the highest life fulfillment. It happens when we keep growing and learning and finding ways to give from the depths of our life's experience and wisdom. This is the Sage, sharing

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with their family, friends and community the fruits of lessons well learned from a life well lived. This “sage” is what we are aiming to learn to be in this course.

For most of us, for this to happen, we need to do three things. The first is to really marshal all our inner resources so we can apply everything we are to this process, The second thing is to harvest the past, so we come to peace with it, and take from it what we need now. The third is to move forward in peace and love.

DISCUSSION - THINGS TO PONDER

What do you hope to experience through this course?

THE VALUE OF MEDITATION AS AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP: CHANGE YOUR BRAIN

Most of us have mainly used only one part of our brains all our life—this is the part of the brain that knows things where one thing follows another. This is the linear thinking that is needed for most jobs. There is another whole brain part though. Some call it the intuitive mind. It is the part of the brain that knows whole things, rather than piece by piece. One way to open up this part of our brains is through meditation. That is why it is so recommended in this course.

The most important thing that we can do to bring our inner resources to full readiness is to meditate regularly. Meditation opens up this intuitive mind, so you can use your entire mind and apply it to the learning and growth that is now possible, given your life-experience.

Meditation is especially important to us, in this stage of life, because meditation is one of the few things that slow down the aging of your brain. People age at different rates. Those people who keep the brain active age more slowly. And, as I will talk more about later, meditation grows the brain, actually adding both grey and white brain cells—processing and connection cells.

And meditation also reverses aging in our chromosomes and boosts our immune system. Scientific findings show that 20 minutes of meditation each day slows this decline, and also fills our lives with joy, energy, and creativity.

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Especially important is that meditation allows you to “rewire” your brain. Maybe instead fear and stress you will feel curiosity and peace. Your brain grows and changes based on how you use it each day. When you meditate you focus this growth in ways that are beneficial, that are good for you. As you continue to meditate, this brain growth continues.

You can use a simple daily practice and re-wire your brain and get the most from these years

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation is deliberate attention. Paying full attention on purpose. Deliberate attention, to improve our well-being and health. This attention can be applied to internal or external experiences: senses, body, feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Scientists have discovered what is happening to your brain when you meditate. Normally there is a brain network that uses several parts of the brain. For the most part, this network is activated, “on,” all the time, even when we think we are not thinking. Because it is the base state of the brain, this network is called, “the default network.” But when you do something, like pay attention to things like body sensations, the default network turns off. This default network is what generates the thoughts we are flooded with all the time. When it turns off, the thought stop.

Most meditation has the focus on a body sensation, or a sense experience. These do not use your rational cognitive mind; it is more akin to feeling rather than thinking. The Buddha said, “Stop, stop. Do not talk. The highest is to not even think.”

For most kinds of meditation, you do not “lock” you mind on the focus; it becomes the “anchor” for the meditation, the place you return to when your mind inevitably wanders.

Most people get a sense of peace and calm from meditation. It has to potential for much more, though. Many have the experience of absorption, when you are

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completely forgotten about, lost, as the focus on the meditation gets stronger. I often wonder that this is why you have vacations, for this moment of self-forgetting.

My experience is that I “see” things in meditation that I do not see otherwise. It is like when I meditate, I put down everything I am holding in my mind. And sometimes when I pick them up again, they are in a new order, or I see something about them that I did not before and know them in a new way. Sometimes there is a creative idea in a flash. Sometimes they are about something I am working on, or doing. Sometimes – the most powerful times – are when I see some idea I had about myself that no longer applies. Maybe it was wrong to begin with, maybe something I have outgrown. I just see myself in a new way. And, since how I see the world and everybody in it, is based on my idea of myself, when I see myself differently, I see the world differently, too. These come as flashes, where I see the whole thing in a instant, not as pieces to put together.

Inherent in the idea of meditation is that we have the ability to change the way our minds work and how we think and act. We see ourselves more fully in meditation, and can choose to change. The brain’s natural plasticity means that we can become an agent in the changing of our brain.

There are many forms of meditation. It is practiced all over the planet. Mindfulness is the easiest to get started with, and is a great long-term practice.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL MEDITATION:

Fully receive all experiences without judgment no matter how difficult.

Investigate the nature of experience in various ways.

Then let go of the experience, no matter how pleasant or unpleasant it may be.

What is needed is 20 minutes of daily meditation. This is basic self-care, like getting a little exercise each day. As you are getting started, be easy on yourself. Start with, say, 5 minutes, and then add time as you are comfortable. Once you start looking, you’ll discover many aids for meditation. A good way to begin is to go to YouTube and search for “meditation.”

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Whatever you choose, be patient, the effects are gradual. And don't judge yourself for not making progress faster, or for thoughts returning.

LET'S TRY IT! BREATH WATCHING MEDITATION

Start with a duration that is comfortable for you, maybe 5 minutes, and work up to 15 minutes.

Maybe you want to use something like the timer on your phone, or a cooking timer.

Sit comfortably, back upright, eyes closed.

Notice the feel of your breath, maybe in the nostrils.

Feel each breath coming in, feel the breath as you exhale. Don't try to control it, breath naturally. Just feel the in breath, the pause, the out breath, the pause ...

If a thought comes, notice it, then don't follow it to the next thought, instead return to watching your breath, in and out.

When you are finished, open your eyes, and take a moment to re-enter the space you are in.

Throughout these sessions we will offer you a variety of guided meditations.

THE SCIENCE OF MEDITATION

The discoveries about the brain since the introduction of the functional MRI in the early 1990s give us a new understanding. Now we can look into the brain, and see what parts of the brain are active at any moment. It's kind of like being able to see what you are thinking, and where in your brain you think it.

It's been pretty amazing, turning earlier ideas about the brain on their heads. When I first started learning about the brain, it was thought that the aging brain just had a "natural" decline, and that no more brain growth happened after about 25 years of age. What scientists have found now is that the brain keeps growing, making new brain cells, and, especially, new connections within the brain. These connections are really what the brain is about. Every day the brain makes and renews many of these connections. New research has now found the number to

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be over 1 million connections per second. The brain can be thought of as a connection machine.

And not only does the brain keep developing; you change the connections within your brain by how you use it. This ability for the brain to reorganize itself is called “neuroplasticity.” It turns out that we can use this feature to change our brain and make our life better, to be more authentic, creative and happy.

Plasticity is found in the brains of meditators, with new connections and actual increases in the number of white (connection) brain cells and grey (processor) cells. The more you meditate, the greater the changes. So it turns out that the thoughts you think shape your brain.

To me, this is profound. This is one of the main messages of the course.

On the other hand, while meditation grows the brain, Stanford University found that stress, depression, and complaining actually shrink the brain. They have the opposite effect from meditation. Is this what we want for ourselves?

BRAIN AREAS AFFECTED BY MEDITATION

Meditation affects many areas of the brain. These changes continue as long as meditation is regularly practiced. This thickening of these brain systems counteracts some of the body’s natural brain-aging processes, which thin it.

Meditation also has a positive effect on your immune system, and various aspects of bodily and mental aging.

MEDITATION AND CRITICAL BRAIN AND BODY CHEMICALS

Meditation positively affects the level of many critical brain and body chemicals, including boosting Endorphins. A journal study reported that meditation produces more endorphins than distance running.

MEDITATION AND AGING

Meditation slows and even reverses the brain atrophy common as we age.

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IMMUNE SYSTEM

Studies show the mindfulness meditation is associated with reductions in inflammation, increases in cell defense, and increases in enzyme activity that guards against cell aging. Meditation also increases antibodies and T-cells.

MANY KINDS OF MEDITATION TO TRY

So it's clear that meditation is beneficial for all of us. Meditation is something that most people can succeed with. The single most important element is your desire to be the best you can be, to have the best life you can. If desire is strong, you will find a way. You will overcome whatever barriers seem to be in the way.

Here's how I do Walking Meditation, as an example of what you can do, too. This combines several meditative practices. I walk every morning. I practice mindful walking along the way. I do it one of two ways.

I might just stay with the mindful walking, paying attention to the feel of my feet. My attention naturally closes in and my vision focuses maybe on the ground about 15 feet ahead. When my mind wanders; I notice, then I bring it back to the body experience, to the feel of my feet.

The mindful walking puts me in the present moment. In this moment, I experience something that makes me feel good, or happy, like a patch of vibrant green. I relish this while it lasts, maybe I take it deep, and really feel this moment. Maybe I can smell it. Maybe I notice the feel of my skin. When it passes, I just let it go. I keep walking, noticing the feel of each step, the weight of my body on my feet, my legs.... The experience of savoring the moment makes each walk a happy time.

Here is another easy and rewarding thing you can do each day that uses your brain's plasticity to give you a happier life: Reflect on your day and relish the good parts. Before you go to bed, take a few minutes, maybe sitting in a comfortable chair. What is there to be grateful for? What were some things that went your way, things that you were happy about? That felt good? Take some time and really savor these. Bring up mental pictures, smells, feelings, body sensations;

whatever is involved with your experience of that moment. Take some time, a few seconds, up to maybe 30 seconds. If you do this every day, as a part of your end of the day routine, you start changing your brain. This starts the opening up of new vistas in your life.

IN ANOTHER VARIATION OF MEDITATION WE CAN LEARN TO DEAL WITH OUR INHERENT “NEGATIVITY BIAS.”

If you're having trouble getting started, you might want to consider how the negativity bias is holding you back. The book *Buddha's Brain*, one of our chosen books for this course, says that one issue for most of us is our evolution: the hunter-gatherer had to pay higher priority attention to threats – the growl in the bushes – than to anything else – the fruit in the tree. This is a “Negativity bias,” and we all have this. And we can change it.

Their recommendation to overcome the negativity bias: For a few minutes each day, reflect on your day and notice things that you enjoyed, that you liked, that went your way, maybe for which you are grateful. But do more than just notice them, really savor them, spend some time with them, feel them deep inside maybe in your body, for a few seconds, up to half a minute. Doing this deep reflection reprograms your brain to appreciate instead of fear. The fear program is deep, so, to really overcome it may take a while, maybe months of practice. Imagine, though, what it would be like if, when you encounter something new and strange, you were curious instead of afraid? This mental reprogramming has great effect if it is regularly done as a part of your daily routine.

I've taken this further for myself. Now, in this present moment, I may notice something that makes me happy, that brings a natural joy. I stop and notice it, and savor it while it's there, then let it go when it passes. Savor the experience in real time, right now. Enjoy it, taste it, feel it, then let it go. That's all you have to do to change your life. In a few weeks your brain starts to change. So get started, and then keep it up.

It is your choice.

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You shape your brain each day with your choices; what you choose ... and what you don't choose. We all have the capability to build our brain and to take advantage of each day, to feel more joy, to be happy. So choose. If you think this is too much for you, you are choosing, anyway.

GROUP DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING TOPICS

What are your ideas about meditation?

What are your experiences with meditation?

How do you think could meditation benefit you?

GUIDED MEDITATION: "CHANGE THE BRAIN"

If you do this for five minutes each day, you start reprogramming your brain to open up to the good moments.

Sit in a comfortable position, both feet on the floor, hands in your lap, eyes closed. Take a couple of breaths, in... and out ...

Just reflect on the day. Recall moments that felt good, moments for which you might be grateful, instances where things went your way. Do more than just recall them, really savor them, dwell on them for a few seconds, maybe half a minute. Let the feeling of that moment sweep through you, feel it within yourself. Let yourself have the joy and happiness of that moment. Then just let it go, and maybe recall another moment from your day.

AFTER THE SESSION

SUGGESTED READING

- *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*: chapters 1-3
- *Buddha's Brain*: chapter 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF JOURNALING TO ELDERING WORK

Journal work invites you to become better acquainted with the many parts of yourself and to get in touch with your deepest feelings and relationships within the safety and privacy of your own writing, at your own pace, and in your own time.

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