

## MINDFUL AGEING: BECOME A HERO

When Shakespeare characterised old age as *“second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything”*, he portrayed a widely held view of ageing as a time of decline and decay. In the academic world this was reflected in theories such as Disengagement, and the pathological perspective which *“more or less equates aging with disease, and interprets various behaviours in old age as manifestations of a physical or mental pathology”* [Tornstam 2005]

But there is an alternative, in the more popular theory of Active Ageing. This embraces the Five Ways to Wellbeing identified by the New Economics Foundation: Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep Learning, and Give. For Vickery, physical and mental disuse are *“major factors that cause us to grow old”* – so Use it, or Lose it. More generally. *“activity should comprise all meaningful pursuits that contribute to the well-being of the individual concerned, his or her family, local community or society at large, and should not be concerned only with paid employment or production.”* [Walker and Maltby 2012]

Mindfulness has a major contribution to this. Thus the Mindfulness Based Life Enhancement [MBLE] course we have been running for several years has eight aspects, illustrated in the diagram which also indicates the links to the Five Ways to Wellbeing. We can **Take Notice** by savouring – the small as well as the large – and by taking joy in both our own happiness and that of others. Among the things we can **Keep Learning** are recognition of automatic pilots which are unhelpful, the harmful stereotypes we create about ourselves and others, the power of negative thinking, and the second darts we often fire at ourselves. We can **Give** by expressing gratitude, by practising tonglen, by forgiving [ourselves and others]. We can **Connect** through meditations such as the Four Immeasurables, and through informal practice such as Random Acts of Kindness and the expression of compassion. And we can **Be Active** through mindful movement and greater somatic awareness. Indeed mindfulness can help us to explore the barriers we often develop to physical activity, or to sensible eating – as Thich Nhat Hanh has argued.

So here we have two important themes:

- **Heighten physical and mental activity**
- **Enhance this through mindfulness**

But a big problem remains, illustrated by the title of Vickery’s otherwise excellent book: *“Live Young, Think Young, Be Young ... At Any Age”*. This encapsulates another dominant view of ageing – that it is something to be resisted. Young is good – do your best to avoid becoming old. Yet as Shunryu Suzuki said: *“Things change. For the usual person this is very discouraging. ... When you change your understanding and your way of living, then you can completely enjoy your new life in each moment. The evanescence of things is the reason why you enjoy your life.”* [2002]

The desire to stay young is challenged by the Swedish gerontologist Tornstam’s Gerotranscendence Theory. *“Gerotranscendence is a shift in meta perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.”*<sup>1</sup>

So here we have a very different view of ageing, as a time of transformation, a time to be embraced, not resisted. Accepting this does not require a rejection of Active Ageing – in the true Zen spirit, we can have both/and, not either/or. We can seek to keep active physically and mentally, but without this becoming an obsession with youth. In yoga we are taught to focus on our own practice, and not compare ourselves with others in the room. It is the same here: we focus on being as healthy as we can

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.soc.uu.se/forskning/forskningsprojekt/gerotranscendence/>

be, accepting change as it comes, and not seeking to compare ourselves with an 'earlier self'. No "60 is the new 40" here!



### MINDFULNESS BASED LIFE ENHANCEMENT AND THE FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

This means that our two themes of **Heighten** and **Enhance** are only half the story. The third theme is **Realign to the Positive**. Ageing offers the opportunity for reappraisal. Here it is useful to introduce the idea of the Seasoned Mind. Suzuki famously stated: *“In the Beginner’s Mind there are many possibilities; in the Expert’s Mind there are few.”* The Seasoned Mind has many characteristics in common with the Expert Mind – it is the product of experience and brings with it expertise, drawn from a lifetime of activity. It also brings with it the accumulation of habits, stereotypes and set patterns. Many of these habits are beneficial, some are not. Most, if not all, of the stereotypes are unhelpful. Mindfulness, in which we bring the Beginner’s Mind to the forefront, helps us identify and distinguish the beneficial from the harmful, and then address the latter.

Self-stereotyping is a good example. Langer comments *“older adults often hold negative feelings about the elderly that are as strong, if not stronger, than those held by younger adults”* [2009]. Levy argues *“research suggests that after a lifetime of exposure to a culture’s age stereotypes, older individuals direct these age stereotypes inwards”* [2001]. But Levy found that seniors with more positive self-perceptions of aging lived over seven years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions. Again mindfulness helps: we can explore the stereotypes that have become embedded in our thinking, and challenge them.

And this is completed by our fourth theme: **Open to New Possibilities**. To the Beginner's Mind we can add Langer's three aspects of Mindful Learning: the creation of new categories, openness to new information, and awareness of more than one perspective.

There is a lively debate on whether age brings wisdom. Here I make a simpler claim – that age offers the opportunity for insight – into ourselves, our relationship with others and with the world. Thus I have found that a simple but powerful approach is to begin a meditation by 'dropping in the question' – in this case, an adaptation of the final lines of Mary Oliver's poem: *"What will I do with my one wild and precious life?"*

And this is where gerotranscendence theory is helpful. Tornstam identifies 16 signs, including a new comprehension of life and death, acceptance of the mystery dimension of life, the removal of self from the centre of one's universe, a decrease of self-centredness, and a shift from egoism to altruism.

There is a debate also about the extent to which gerotranscendence is found in seniors. And again, I make a simpler proposal – that the theory indicates areas of change which we can choose to pursue, and mindfulness can help. Meditations on acceptance, on gratitude, and all the Four Immeasurables are very relevant here.

So we have **HERO – Heighten, Enhance, Realign, Open**. This is not a proposal for staying young – it is a proposal for ageing well and fully experiencing every moment, accepting that everything changes. As we age there are many losses, not least of friends and loved ones. But there are also many gains. As Rumi said, *"Welcome and entertain them all!"*

John Darwin

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