

INTRODUCING SENIORS TO **(I) VARIETIES OF MEDITATION** **(II) MEDITATION & MUSIC.**

A Report from Don Evans

Part I: Varieties of Meditation for Seniors

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A Series of Meditations for Seniors

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Introduction

1, Some Reflections on Being a Senior among Seniors

I'm a junior senior (83) living in a residence with seniors who are mostly over 90. In varying ways we all are experiencing a process in which abilities that we previously had are being replaced by disabilities. Some are still mentally very "with it" whereas others are moving into dementia. Some are very mobile whereas others need much assistance. Some are in constant pain, or are losing their hearing or their eyesight, whereas others suffer little in these ways. Whatever our personal challenges, we all need help from scientific and complementary medicine that can slow down the reduction of our abilities or stop it for a while. We all also need to engage in various daily activities, whether physical or mental, which prevent or delay disabilities. Another purpose of activities is to fill in our time; at worst (as in BBC comedies about aging) that is all that seniors are doing.

Old age, however, does not consist entirely of doing whatever we can to maintain our physical health or filling in time until (mercifully) we can die! Old age also provides a special opportunity to deepen spiritually, uncovering hidden resources for happiness in daily living. The growing limitations of old age provide a context within which we can learn new life skills. Although our physical quality of life typically declines, the way in which we live our lives can improve: more inner serenity and peace, more compassion and appreciation for both ourselves and others, more enjoyment of each present moment. Old age can help us to let go of our obsession with doing and controlling and to replace it with happier ways of being who we are.

Some "inspirational" literature for seniors presents us with examples of celebrities in their eighties who continue to do amazing things. This can be helpful in so far as it encourages us to persevere, rather than give up, in doing the physical and mental activities that we find increasingly difficult. For many seniors, however, the feats of the few are irrelevant. Such feats are remote from what most of us can do. We realize, moreover, that persevering in our treatments and activities is unlikely to reverse the overall trend. I can "hope for a miracle", but perhaps the "miracle" would not be a new cure for my physical ills. Rather, I might undergo some radical shifts in my attitude towards what's actually happening to me,

enabling me to respond realistically and creatively. Neither wilful defiance nor helpless resignation work well.

The title of one popular magazine for seniors is “Forever Young”. We are kidding ourselves if we understand this slogan as a claim concerning our physical abilities. Even seniors who run marathons or govern countries eventually decline, and in the end we all have to “shuffle off this mortal coil”.

It’s possible, however, to interpret the title differently. “Young” need not mean physically young. It can mean young-at-heart. . Some seniors do regain a child-like playfulness, spontaneity, light-heartedness and wonder. Some seniors also learn a new appreciation for simple, everyday gifts: food and friends and humour and flowers and sounds. Some seniors, having to spend much of their time alone, become aware of an inner stillness and silence that becomes for them a reassuring mystery. And some seniors experience glimpses of what life after death will be.

Meditation is a very important way to open ourselves up to such spiritual possibilities.

2. Adapting Varieties of Meditation for Seniors

In the 1960s “meditation” entered the main-stream of popular culture in a very specific form. The Beatles drew on Transcendental Meditation, a Hindu practice involving sitting very still and inwardly repeating a “mantra” (sacred word or phrase). This, however, is only one kind of meditation.

During the past three decades I have led hundreds of groups in meditation. I introduced them to a great variety of meditations, for people need to realize that there are many kinds. No one kind of meditation is best for everyone at every stage in their life.

The context for meditation groups has varied greatly: universities, health-care settings, interfaith events, Christian seminaries and shamanic gatherings. A very different context arose in 2009 because of a radical change in my life. On February 1, I became a patient at Toronto Western Hospital. When I was discharged on February 19, I had to move to a

residence for seniors, St. Hilda's Towers. My health had declined, but by June I was able to offer weekly 45-minute sessions in meditation to any of my fellow residents who were interested. The series began with basics and moved on to others that build on the basics.

None of the meditations require that participants are committed to any particular religious tradition, but religious believers can use any of them to deepen their religious experience. I chose these 18 meditations and adapted them for use with the senior seniors at St. Hilda's. In the next section I'll describe this very new context for leading meditations.

3. The Particular Context: St. Hilda's Towers for Seniors

Almost all the residents come from a Christian background and many of these had been churchgoers. Some attend Anglican services in the beautiful sanctuary that is part of the St. Hilda's complex. On the other hand, some from Christian backgrounds have become largely secular in outlook. So in my approach I have tried not to impose any religious beliefs on participants, stressing again and again that what matters is their own experience, which they can interpret in their own way. For some participants their interpretation comes from their traditional Christian faith. For others it fits with their secular world-view. And it seems to others that the experience itself is what gives rise to the interpretation.

Only two or three of the 15-20 participants in the meditation sessions had ever meditated before. The majority are in their nineties. When they were young meditation had not become part of the general culture. Their willingness to venture into something new is an indication of unusual "spark-and-spunk".

Some of the regular participants live mostly within their own private world, but this does not prevent them from being enlivened and comforted by the sessions. Even those with advanced dementia are usually sensitive to vibrations, including musical sounds, in a room. On the other hand, so far as I can tell, a few participants who are very mentally alert do practice meditation on their own during the interim between sessions. Those that do report that this or that meditation helps them to deal with severe pain.

Indeed, it soon became clear that coping with chronic, intense pain is central in the daily lives of many residents, who are reluctant to increase

their medications because of side-effects. I have no medical advice to offer, but I could offer meditations to help reduce being overwhelmed by physical pain. Other meditations have to do with accepting disabilities that replace abilities, cherishing the abilities that remain and appreciating the simple pleasures that remain in each present moment.

Within a month I found that some seniors who have never meditated have been learning in their daily lives a kind of serene acceptance that many dedicated meditators have not yet been able to find! On the other hand, leading meditations with seniors involves two practical limits:

(1) Sessions should not usually run over 45 minutes overall. Also, most meditations should be short because many seniors have a comparatively short attention-span.

(2) A skilled, sensitive and alert assistant (at St. Hilda's, from their Activities Department) must be present to attend to the needs of the seniors. Not only do they need help with their walkers before and after the meditation, but also they often need help during the meditation, which I'm engrossed in leading, often with my eyes closed!

I should also note that three basic meditations that I had used before didn't work with senior seniors. They might with a much younger group of seniors, but I don't know. Here they are:

(a) Bodily Movement: For most people, meditations involving full bodily movement are very important. For senior seniors, however, the movements that are feasible are usually very limited. Moreover, teaching senior seniors such movements requires a special expertise that I do not have. Fortunately at St. Hilda's bodily-movement meditations such as tai chi and yoga are taught by individuals who know how to bring them to seniors who have very limited mobility.

(b) Inhaling while tensing a bodily part, then exhaling while releasing the tension. Beginning with the feet one simultaneously inhales and tenses the feet, holding the breath and the tension to a count of 10; then one releases both breath and tension, enjoying the relief as one sheds the tension. Then it's the calves, thighs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, jaw and forehead concluding with the whole body.

I tried this once at St. Hilda's. Most of the seniors didn't seem to get into this meditation, partly because it's best done lying down. It's not feasible to help each of the 20 seniors to lie down on a mat and then to get up. Another drawback is that the meditation works best if done

strenuously, and seniors with diverse disabilities are rightly encouraged to be gentle with themselves!

(c) **“Sounding through the chakras”**: This is a meditation that I’ve often used with beginners. The chakras are seven energy-centres in the body. They are located (i) between tail-bone and anus, (ii) above genitals, (iii) navel, (iv) heart, (v) throat, (vi) between eyebrows and (vii) at crown. One focuses the energy of one’s attention on each chakra in turn, each time making a sound. The first sound, for the “base” chakra, is low, and for the rest the sounds go up the scale. Very few of those presented made sounds. There were a variety of reasons for this, which might not apply in a much younger group.

4. Previewing Part II: Meditation&Music for Seniors

Adapting varieties of meditation for a group of senior seniors at St. Hilda’s has been an interesting challenge, a new setting for something I’ve done for three decades. For me, however the most exciting and creative innovation has been **combining meditation and music** in a particular way. I began doing this about three months after introducing varieties of meditation. I had never explored this personally before (except on one occasion). As I explored this personally I was introducing it to others, my fellow seniors.

What was unusual about my way of combining meditation and music arose from two factors: (i) My previous three decades of exploring and teaching many **varieties** of meditation enabled me to identify many different meditative states in terms of their bodily-emotional-spiritual distinctiveness. (ii) My previous seven decades of immersion in classical music enabled me to identify pieces of music that stirred similar bodily-emotional-spiritual states.

Week by week a variety of meditation&music combinations emerged. Often we first did a particular kind of meditation that resonated in our bodies in a particular way, fostering a particular state. Then we listened to some particular excerpts of classical music that resonated similarly in our bodies. Somewhat less frequently, the music came first, then the meditation. Either way, what we experienced were two very different ways of access to roughly the same bodily-emotional-spiritual state!

In Part II of this report I'll be making details of my meditation&music exploration available to two kinds of reader:

(i) Some may find it stimulating and useful in their own personal path. They are likely to be people who, like me, appreciate both meditation and music in a bodily way.

(ii) I also hope that my “map” will be taken up by someone who feels called to lead others, especially seniors, in his/her own version of meditation&music. My report is full of combinations that initiators can use, either as I presented them or radically revised.

To “whet your appetite” I'm here providing three examples in advance:

(i) Human State: Feeling completely “at home” in your body and in the world. Not a restless passion, not a “happiness-high”. Rather feeling contented and serene, with no sense of wanting anything more or wanting anything different.

Meditation: #15 On Loving Oneself (a shortened version)

Music: Several candidates:

Schubert Impromptu in Gflat major, pianist Kempff

Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata, 3rd movement, played by Ma/Ax

Vaughan Williams, “Serenade to Music”

(ii) Human State: Re-experiencing the inner child within you: playful, light-hearted, uninhibited, innocent, spontaneous even to being impish. Meditation: A version of #4 (Breathing&Mantra) specially designed to fit the Mozart music. One imagines/remembers a smile, breathes it in and smiles oneself. One breathes in child-like energy so that eventually one's whole body “smiles”.

Music: Several Candidates:

Mozart, Piano Concerto #22, last movement, pianist Brendel

Mozart, Piano Concerto #27, third movement, pianist Brendel

Mozart, Piano Concerto #23, third movement, pianist Fischer

iii) Human State: Experiencing one's “inner mystery” or “soul”, a place or state that holds together body, emotion, mind, and spirit and that links us to the Mystery or Source of all existence.

Meditation: #12 (a shortened version)

Music: Composed and performed out of a similar state. Many candidates:

Gould/Laredo play 1st movement of Bach's Sonata#4 in C minor for piano and violin

"Sanctus" from Faure's Requiem, Robert Shaw conducting

"Sanctus" from Durufle's Requiem, Shaw conducting

Bach, Prelude #4 in C sharp minor, Grimaud pianist

Mozart, "Ave Verum Corpus" Choir of New College, Oxford

Rachmaninoff's Sonata in G minor third movement, for cello (Ma) and piano (Ax).

5. Tips to Anyone Leading seniors in meditation

If someone draws on my report for inspiration and materials, I do not want the leader to become my "clone"! My advice, instead, is threefold:

(i) Focus on the particular group of seniors whom you are serving as leader.

(ii) Draw on your own distinctive spiritual and artistic gifts.

(iii) Pass along whatever meditations and meditative-music combinations you experience personally as transformative. If it's on my list, ignore it unless it "works" for you experientially.

In my own case, I've been aware that participants pick up a great deal non-verbally from me while I'm meditating or listening to music, so that my own movement into an altered state helps them to move into their own version of something similar. Hence, for example, while a leader might first try out my choice of music to stimulate awareness of Inner Mystery, he or she might eventually decide to use a different piece. The music that best provides access for the leader to a particular emotional-spiritual state is likely to be what he or she should bring to the seniors.

If, on the other hand, you minimally experience a particular meditation, don't teach it to others until you experience some inner change.

Before I move on to present the 18 meditations, I should mention one other matter to potential leaders of meditation & music in a senior's residence. It has to do with meditative chanting.

Meditations within a great religious tradition (including the Aboriginal) are often combined with various kinds of chants. The participants do not listen to music, they make their own music within their tradition. If someone is exploring a spiritual path within, say, a Hindu or Buddhist or Sufi-Muslim framework, such a practice is very important.

Introducing such chanting in a senior's residence, however, involves complications that do not arise in what I am offering. The words of the chant are usually closely linked with the religious world-view of the religion. Participants from another religion or holding a non-religious world-view may or may not feel comfortable about "dipping into" the religion in this way.

A different consideration with the particular group of senior seniors at St. Hilda's was their reluctance, in general, to make music, whether with voices or percussion instruments. Another group of seniors might participate enthusiastically in making music as a way of meditating, whether it be sounding through the chakras (mentioned above) or creating sounds together spontaneously, as if in nature.

A Series of Meditations for Seniors

(a) Basic Meditations

#1 Breathing

Let the energy of your attention be concentrated on your inhalations and exhalations. Let everything else in your consciousness move away to the edges of consciousness.

Be firm but patient with yourself. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breathing. (THIS APPROACH IS IMPORTANT IN ALL THE BASIC MEDITATIONS.)

(Some newcomers to meditation from a Christian background may welcome this suggestion: "When you do this by yourself, you can choose to precede the meditation by saying or singing, 'Breathe on me, breath of God'")

#2 Breathing as a Physical Process.

This is similar to #1, but with a very important difference. #1 will almost never be used; it's simply a learning-step towards #2

Meditation: Let the energy of your attention be concentrated on your inhalations and exhalations as they occur in your body. Notice the changes occurring in your rib-cage and abdomen. Notice also the breath/air moving through your nostrils and/or mouth.

Don't merely observe the physical changes as you might observe them going on in someone else. Realize, "I am these changes, though I'm more than these changes. I am my breathing."

Thoughts, images, sensations and day-dreams are likely to distract you from keeping your attention focused on breathing in and breathing out. When this happens, breathe the distractions out, letting them go.

(For newcomers to meditation from a Christian background, the same suggestion, except for "Breathe in me, breath of God".)

#3 Mantra (sacred/significant word or phrase)

Pick a word or phrase that refers to a spiritual energy, e.g. "love", "light", "peace" "healing" or "healing energies" or "universal energies".

Some Christians may prefer to pick a word or phrase that refers to a spiritual presence such as "Jesus", "Mary", "St. Francis" or "Angel Gabriel". A very ancient Christian mantra is "Maranatha" (Lord Jesus come).

Participants from other traditions might use "Kwan Yin" (Buddhist) or "Krishna" (Hindu) or "Grandfathers & Grandmothers" (Aboriginal).

Meditation: Privately, within your mind, repeat your mantra slowly, focusing the energy of your attention on it (as you did on breathing in #1 and #2). Do not reflect concerning the meaning of the word. You are simply repeating the word so as to become more receptive to the reality that the word refers to.

#4 Combining Breathing and Mantra.

I strongly recommend linking Mantra with #2 Breathing, though many meditators do not link Mantra with any kind of breathing. For me, mantra #3 is merely a learning-step towards breathing & mantra #4. Partly for personal reasons, I have needed meditations that are embodied rather than disembodied. Although I offer many varieties of meditation, I rarely recommend those that encourage and enable us to transcend our bodies – though I acknowledge that some people can benefit from these.

Meditation: Repeat your mantra with each inhalation, focusing your attention equally on both. As you breathe air into your body, you are also breathing, into your body, the reality to which the mantra refers. You are actively inviting this reality into your body to transform you.

Your exhalations can have two different functions:

(i) As you exhale, let the spiritual energy/spiritual presence spread from your chest in all directions within your body, pervading the whole body.

OR

(ii) As you exhale, let go of whatever is distracting you from being transformed by the spiritual energy/spiritual presence that you are welcoming with your inhalations.

#5. Crown energy-centre.

This is a meditation that I rarely offer, for the reasons mentioned in #4. This is how I introduced it to the seniors:

“My own personal path is not focused on preparing for life in heaven, though many spiritual paths within great religions, whether Hindu, Buddhist or Christian, have such an otherworldly emphasis. My path emphasizes embodying the heavenly in this life. At the deepest level my path is incarnational: embodying the Divine Mystery more and more while still on earth.

Recently (summer, 2010) however, I’ve come to realize that I should offer a meditation here that may be helpful to some seniors not only in dealing with pain but also as a kind of preparation for the process of dying, whether that be imminent or a long way of.”

Steps in the Meditation:

(i) Find your crown “chakra” or energy-centre at the top of your head. You can touch it with your fingers at a slight recession or dip in the scalp, at the soft spot on a baby’s head.

(ii) Focus the energy of your attention there and each time you inhale, repeat the mantra “love and light” (Christians can use “Jesus”).

(iii) Nothing may happen, but if something does happen, it will include a very delicate, subtle tingling there in the scalp and hair.

“Eventually when one is actually dying, people who can discern such processes tell us that our spirit moves out of the body through the crown, to be welcomed and guided by angels and by loved ones who have gone before us.”

#6 Breathing (#2) and Counting

This meditation is very different from the previous ones. Some people, perhaps they don’t feel comfortable using religious language, find that it works better for them. It’s worth trying as a tool in calming our anxieties and our physical pains.

With each inhalation count a number, starting with 1, going on to 10, and then repeating 1 to 10. If your mind wanders, no problem. Just start again at 1.

#7 Eyes-Open Exhalations to an Area of Carpet.

Introduction: I first learned this meditation in the mid-1980s. I found that immediately after doing it once it brings two benefits: (i) I see what's before my eyes in a new, fresh, appreciative way, as if for the first time. (ii) I'm less preoccupied by physical pain and/or mental stress. The Tibetan Buddhist claimed that if one did the meditation for 20 minutes twice a day for ten years one might change into a person not preoccupied at all by self. (I've only done it now and then!)

Meditation: Sit in a "regal", upright position, like a king or a queen. If possible, have both feet on the floor. With eyes open, focus your attention very gently on an area of carpet about 6 feet away.

"Follow" your exhaled breath as it dissipates in that area. Give no attention to your inhalations or to any thoughts that arise, even thoughts about the meditation itself! If your mind wanders, gently but firmly bring your attention back to "following" your exhalations.

Some Comments Concerning the Seven Basic Meditations thus far:

All the basic meditations can be used privately with the purpose of being less overwhelmed by physical pain and emotional stress.

Neither the "Counting" meditation nor the "Crown" meditation are later used in combination with another meditation.

The "Eyes-Open Exhaling" meditation, if practiced daily for years, becomes an "Advanced" Meditation. Even if done only occasionally, it does prepare one for an Advanced, eyes-closed "Inner Mystery" meditation, which also synchronizes exhalations and letting-go.

The "Breathing and Mantra" meditation (#4) is itself a step or building-block towards an advanced "Self-Healing" meditation that includes many more ingredients. We will explore this later on. First, however, I'll note two more basic meditations.

8. Experiencing Energies Generated by Rubbing Hands Together

This is more like an experiment than a meditation, though it's not a scientific experiment designed to prove something. Rather it's an exploration of personal experience.

Step (1) With eyes closed, rub your hands together vigorously for at least a minute. Seniors should stop before getting tired, but others should persist, even through some tiredness. Lots of friction is needed.

Then separate your hands a few inches, a foot, two feet, etc., then bring your hands quite close, without touching. Notice what you are aware of. Some say it feels like there's something between the hands, resisting further closeness. Some say it feels like the hands are being drawn together. Some report a tingling in the hands, a bit like "pins and needles"

What is it that has happened? It may be simply static electricity, generated by the friction. What matters is that whatever it is, you are experiencing it directly. Moreover, your sensations are similar to what you'll feel, or already have felt, during meditations that involve no friction whatsoever. The sensations during meditation are somewhat different, but the experiment helps in that you now know what to "look out for" during many meditations.

(Step 2) With eyes open, turn to a partner in a chair beside you. Bring the palms of your hands a few inches away from the palms of your partner, not touching. Then, taking turns, bring your palms near your partner's face and heart and thighs, not touching. Notice what you are aware of.

#9 Becoming a Conduit for Healing to Others

Step (2) of #8 was exploratory. That is, self-preoccupied thoughts such as "Gee Whiz, I can do it!" or "I'm failing in this!" were okay.

The switch into healing-mode involves a conscious attempt to change one's approach in three ways.

(i) IF you sometimes pray for divine help, begin by praying for help in helping this person. (It's also okay, but not necessary, to rub your hands together as part of your preparation.)

(ii) Focus your attention on the other person, bringing at least your good will but perhaps also your love (affection/appreciation/compassion). Be sensitively aware as you enter the other's "space" and as you leave it.

(iii) Invite universal energy (or, for some, Jesus or Spirit) to pass through your hands to the other person, becoming open to any "clues" that arise concerning where your attention (and perhaps your hands) should go.

At the end, when you are withdrawing from the other's "space", use the outer edges of your hands symbolically as if they were sharp knives to "cut the threads of connection" between you and the other person. This

ensures that you and the other person are now quite distinct, not intermingled.

Varying contexts for this meditation:

In groups prior to 2009, this meditation provided an experiential introduction to the rudiments of bringing healing to other. Participants worked in pairs, one person sitting and the other initially standing behind the person seated, then moving around the chair; then they changed places.

At St. Hilda's, almost all the participants have walkers, and they sit beside each other in a circle/oval. This limits their involvement radically, and the meditation did not "work". It did, however, provide a kind of preparation for the first Intermediate Meditation, "Three Ways of Connecting with a Flower", especially in its transference to connecting with another person.

A note concerning meditation and personal transformation

The next meditation is a shift to "Intermediate" level, which means that it combines two or more Basic meditations or adds something further to a Basic meditation.

Both Basic and Intermediate meditations can bring (i) some calming of physical and emotional pain and (ii) some personal changes in the way we generally experience ourselves and the world. Intermediate meditations emphasize (ii) somewhat more. Advanced meditations are potentially even more transformative.

The personal change has several dimensions:

- (i) Shifts in one's pervasive attitudes, e.g. one senior who is becoming blind told me, "Don, I'm beginning to be able to accept what's happening to me".
- (ii) Living more and more in each present moment, rather than regretting the past and fearing the future. One aspect of this is a fresh and wonder-filled appreciation of the inner beauty in flowers or sunsets or paintings or music or persons (including oneself).
- (iii) An expanding and deepening experience of spiritual realities, whether these be spiritual energies or spiritual presences or the Divine Mystery.

(b) Intermediate Meditations

#10. Connecting with a Flower (or a Person)

In the Library at St. Hilda's where I met with the seniors it was convenient to place a large flowering plant in the centre. In other settings the group or individual might focus on something else in nature: a tree or a sunset or a camp-fire or moonlight on water etc. etc.

Three Ways of Connecting with a Flower:

(i) Preceded by an eyes-open meditation (#7):

(a) Sit in a "regal", upright position. Focus your attention gently on an area of carpet about 6 feet away.

(b) "Follow" your exhaled breath as it leaves you and eventually dissipates in that area. Give no attention to your inhalations and let any distracting thoughts go out with your exhalations.

(c) At the end of the meditation, raise your gaze to appreciate the flower, seeing it "as it is", "for itself", "as if for the first time in your life".

(ii) Preceded by an eyes-shut meditation (#4 with modifications):

(a) With your eyes shut, imagine the flower in front of you and as you inhale, breath it into your lungs and into your heart - both your physical heart and your heart as the bodily "place" where you welcome "guests".

(b) With each exhalation, let go of whatever distracts you from receiving your "guest". It might be bodily tension/stress/pain. It might be anxiety or grief or bitterness.

(c) At the end of your meditation, open your eyes to welcome the flower into your heart.

(iii) With eyes open, in all simplicity:

"Receive" as spiritual energy the beauty/energy/presence/uniqueness of the flower as you breathe in.

"Give" as spiritual energy your appreciation/gratitude/wonder as you breathe out.

(This meditation draws on what one has learned in about inhaling/receiving in #7 and about giving and receiving in #9.)

In many other contexts where I led groups, this meditation was followed by a meditation on connecting with another person. Two people sit opposite each other, fairly close, holding hands. One of them connects in all

three ways, then the other does, and then they both do so simultaneously. My intuition was that the senior seniors would resist this because of their strong sense of privacy and propriety. I may have been mistaken in this, however, and another group of seniors might be open to it.

#11 Directing Healing Energy/Presence to an Ailing Bodily Part (Four Steps):

(i) Breathing as a Bodily Process: Let the energy of your attention be concentrated on our inhalations and exhalations as they occur in your ribcage and abdomen. Notice the breath/air moving through your nostrils and or mouth. Whatever else you are aware of, whether it arises from within yourself or comes from outside, let it recede to the “edge” of your consciousness. Don’t observe the breathing as you might observe someone else breathing; identify yourself with the breathing, realizing “This is me, though it’s not all of me”.

(ii) Healing Mantra: With each inhalation repeat a mantra referring to a healing spiritual energy/spiritual presence. Examples: “Healing Energy”/”Jesus Healing”. You are breathing into your body not only air but primarily the spiritual reality to which the mantra refers.

(iii) Exhaling Distractions: As you breath out, let go of whatever is distracting you from being healed by the spiritual energy/spiritual presence that you are welcoming with your inhalations.

(iv) Directing Healing to an Ailing Bodily Part: Focus your attention on a bodily part that is hurting or disabled or diseased. Imagine that your inhaled breath, plus the healing energy/presence, is moving into that part.

Alternatively, imagine that the healing energy/presence is moving into your hands and bring your hand(s) to touch the ailing part. If the part is not accessible, imagine that you are “touching” it with your attention. Bring to your own body the same compassion that you would bring to an ailing child.

Note that steps (i), (ii) and (iii) are revisions of Basic Meditations #2 and #4. Step (iv) is new in its directing of healing.

On Being Healed and Being Transformed:

In general, although you are “doing” something as you meditate, view the process overall not as an attempt to control what happens but as a way of opening yourself up to receive what is beyond your control.

It’s okay to hope for a reduction in pain or disfunction, let your central intention be personal transformation. In this case the

transformation is becoming more compassionate towards yourself. This enables you to become more compassionate towards other people.

12. Emptying Yourself and Sinking Down into Mystery **Reflections After Presenting this Meditation Several Times to the Group**

In this meditation we will let go of whatever we cling to in this life (people, projects, personal importance, power, prestige) as we let ourselves sink down below our everyday awareness towards our own mysterious centre, which we describe in negative terms such as silence, stillness, darkness, emptiness, but which is a place or state that involves strength and confidence and safety and wordless clarity. For some people this inner mystery is their opening into the divine mystery, the loving Source that originates and pervades everyone and everything.

Previously when we have meditated in this way I have noted that this is both a way of preparing for a peaceful death and a way of learning how to be fully present in each moment of our earthly life. When we die, we have to let go of our attachments and to “move on” into what we can not control. And as we go on living, we can only appreciate each present moment if we are not clinging to our past or worrying about our future. The meditation can bring an incomparable sense of inner peace.

Sequence of “Steps” in the Meditation:

(i) **Prayer?** Some of you pray for help from time to time. If you don't, then ignore this point. If you do, it is entirely appropriate, say, for a Christian to begin by praying to God or the Holy Spirit or Jesus for help in this meditation, which can involve being transformed by the indwelling of the Divine Mystery.

(ii) **Breathing.** Begin by focusing the energy of your attention on both your inhalations and your exhalations as physical processes in your body, noticing the changes in your rib-cage and perhaps in your abdomen. After a few minutes I invite you to attend only to your exhalations.

(iii) **Emptying.** With each exhalation breathe out whatever grabs your attention in your consciousness, not clinging to any sensation, image, thought, word, memory or emotion that arises there, whether it's painful or pleasurable, boring or fascinating. Gradually you are beginning to empty your consciousness, letting go of your attachments.

(iv) **Sinking down**. With each exhalation also “sink down” below your ordinary consciousness of this and that, moving towards your own still centre, your hidden core, your own inner mystery, a place or state of silence and wordless clarity.

(v) **Your hidden centre**. As you let go and sink down, set aside any fears that may be arising. What you are becoming aware of may seem unfamiliar, but you have glimpsed something like it before. Trust your own hunch that deep within yourself is a mysterious source of peaceful strength and quiet, expansive love. Be open to whatever arises for you.

(vi) **Ocean of love**. Eventually I offer some words that may convey part of what you are feeling. (If they don’t, simply ignore what I say.) “It’s like being immersed in an ocean of love, though we have no trouble breathing. We realize that within this ocean of love everyone and everything is included. We’re all in this together.”

(vii) **Embodying the non-bodily state**. Remaining in whatever state you are in, whether it be an ocean of love or some other blissful, peaceful, expansive awareness, embody it. Become aware of your bodily breathing and of how this state feels in your body. Some of you will feel a combination of non-embodied bliss and embodied bliss; for others the two will merge.

(viii) **“Out and up”**. After a while, it’s time to come “out and up” from your altered state, returning to your everyday awareness but remembering wordlessly much of what has happened.

Take five deep breaths and let each one out with a sigh. Open your eyes and gradually become more aware of your surroundings. Don’t try to get up and move until you feel you’re back in the everyday world.

Final Note

This meditation is very deep and demanding, but the seniors at St. Hilda’s took to it the very first time “like a duck to water”. Other groups may need to move into it in stages, perhaps even starting with only the “Emptying” part and later adding the “Sinking” part.

Advanced Meditations

#13 Letting Go into Union with Divine Mystery **(#12 plus “surrender”)**

Before I came to St. Hilda's I sometimes led groups or individuals in a further deepening of meditation #12. I have not done so here. It goes beyond what seems appropriate in group sessions here, and for various reasons my work with individuals has been limited. In another context, however, #13 might work out.

Meditation #13 involves adding a dimension of "surrender" so as to become more open to receive intuition or guidance. It can open up significant new possibilities for anyone who is on a spiritual path. Indeed, even during Meditation #12 individuals sometimes spontaneously receive intuition or guidance.

Meditation #13

Continue in #12 to step (v), which ends with the words, "Be open to whatever arises for you". Meditation #14 continues as an expansion on this.

Three further steps in Meditation #13:

(i) We stop deliberately focusing on emptying out and sinking down, becoming more open and alert to whatever "message" arises in our consciousness. When to stop? When our "momentum" seems to be in the "direction" of Inner Mystery and through that into Divine Mystery. The movement initiated by the process of conscious emptying and sinking is continuing to some extent on its own. This "momentum" can become a crucial transformer in a person's spiritual path. This is true even if at the moment we are quite remote from a union of Inner Mystery with Divine Mystery: we're moving and being moved in the direction of living within Divine Love.

Some people may prefer to describe the transformative process in terms of Spirit: as we surrender into Spirit we are energized by Spirit to let go more into Spirit.

(ii) Trusting in the momentum, we try to become alert/receptive to any intuition or guidance that may come to us in relation to our becoming more loving as human beings living within Divine Love. (That's my wording, but others may have different words. The main thing is that participants already realize experientially that we are involved in a process of personal transformation that draws both on our own hidden human resources for loving and on a loving Mystery/Source/Spirit beyond our control.)

So we are to become alert concerning possible intuition or guidance. Perhaps “discernment” is a better word because it implies that the origin could be our own human resources or a mysterious presence or both.

What comes into consciousness might be some words, but it might be an image or a dream-like sequence or a new spiritual state – or even a bodily sensation. It’s important not to assume that whatever comes will have a “Gee Whiz!” attached to it! The message may be subtle and initially unnoticed.

Discernments usually have to do with changes that are taking place or need to take place: changes in what we are aware of or changes in pervasive motivations or emotions or attitudes.

Even when we are choosing between alternative actions in the world, where the discernment may help us choose, the emphasis is likely to be more on our motivation in doing it.

(iii) While still in the altered state of the meditation, consider the discernment in a non-intellectual way. Even if initially it seems obscure, some new association or perspective may come into your mind. Stay with this for a while. Then return to the meditation, focusing on the bodily breathing with which you began.

Later you may or may not want to consult someone else for a relevant interpretation, but what matters most is what rings true to you – not the conclusion of some argument or an interpretation from some authority or book.

A final note: After someone has used something like Meditation #13 regularly for a lengthy period, he or she may find that a much-shortened version of it is possible daily, for one can “surrender” almost immediately into a deep receptivity-to-discernment. Dedication to such a daily practice is then a central expression of one’s dedication to personal transformation.

In my own personal experience, discernments are not infallible! Indeed, I sometimes have had to realize, in retrospect, that I had distorted the discernment by imposing a secret need or “agenda” on it. At the time I didn’t realize this and I was unable to recognize that what I was doing was harmful. Overall, however, the daily practice has been the main context for exposure of my hidden needs and “agendas”. As these are discarded and replaced by a human love more in tune with Divine Love, access to even deeper levels of “shadow-stuff” inside me opens up.

Another note: Discernments frequently come, not during meditation, but when we are challenged by others - both wise friends and seemingly-stupid foes!

#11 Opening to Deep Bodily Self-Healing (plus attitude-shifting)

This meditation includes everything in Intermediate Meditation #11, and goes on with a new section:

(v) Notice your attitude towards the ailing bodily part. Many of us to some extent view the ailing bodily part as if it were a person who previously had been positive in our lives but now is not.

Do you resent the bodily part for letting you down, no longer working as it did?

Do you fear what is happening in the part so it's no longer friend but foe?

Are you rejecting it, treating it as if it didn't belong to you?

Do you judge it harshly, as if it were harming you unfairly?

Do you even hate it for betraying you?

Are you distancing yourself from it, refusing to connect emotionally with it? This distancing attitude may be the easiest one for some people to admit to themselves, for it can seem to be "rational". All the others treat in the ailing bodily part as if it were another person, another agent, and are obviously irrational – hence hard to admit. Distancing can seem to be an "objective", "scientific" stance.

Some wise Buddhist healers, however, encourage us to challenge all these attitudes, including distancing. They urge us to try to become compassionate towards ourselves, as we would towards an ailing child, or even an ailing animal. And they ask us to try to replace each of the constricting attitudes, including distancing, by a positive one.

Replace resentment by forgiveness.

fear by friendliness

rejection by acceptance

harsh judgment by mercy

hatred by affection

distancing by companionship or being-with.

This Buddhist practice, though very important, is very difficult. First we have to acknowledge whatever negative attitude is within us and

then we have to shift into its opposite! Becoming effectively compassionate towards oneself when one is suffering is an arduous process.

If you ever pray to Spirit for help, this is one crucial time to do so!

(vi) A message to the ailing part: Each time you breathe in, directing healing energy/presence to the ailing part (continuing from #11, section (iv)) say to the ailing part, “I forgive you” or “I befriend you” or “I accept you” or “I am merciful to you” or “I am affectionate to you” or “I’m with you” – whichever message fits what you need to shift.

(vii) Exhaling negative attitudes: Each time you breathe out, let go of whatever attitude needs to go, whether it be resentment or fear or rejection, etc.

(viii) Continue in the meditation on your own. If your mind wanders, firmly but gently bring it back to the essence of the meditation in #11:
(a) focus on your breathing as a physical process,
(b) with each inhalation welcome into your body the spiritual energy/presence named by your mantra.

#15 Loving Oneself: Compassion and Appreciation

Preface:

My report on #15 is very long. I have never included every detail in a meditation session. On different occasions I emphasize different parts of it. When drawing on it as a preparation for listening to music, I shorten it greatly. The full report is here as a resource, not a required format.

The report consists of three sections:

- (1) Reflections concerning what true self-love is and why it matters.**
- (2) Meditation #14: Opening to Deep Bodily Self-Healing**
- (3) Meditation: “Love the Skin You’re In”**

(1) Reflections concerning Loving Oneself

We’ve all heard the Golden Rule: Love your neighbour in the same way that you love yourself. The negative version of this Rule is clear in its meaning and obviously appropriate as a way of limiting human destructiveness: “Don’t do to others what you would not want them to do to you.” But the positive version is less clear in meaning, for what way of

loving oneself is appropriate as a model for loving others? When people speak of loving oneself it's usually not anything positive. It's being preoccupied with one's own status and power as compared with others. It's being selfish in protecting what one sees as one's own interests at the expense of others.

There is, however, a way of loving oneself that is similar to a way of truly loving others. Loving others can be seen as involving two elements: compassion and appreciation.

Compassion is a feeling and a practical concern to reduce a person's physical pain and emotional pain. It goes beyond refraining from hurting the person to healing the hurt. It's not the same as pity, which usually involves a sense of being superior in status to the person who is hurting. Compassion involves a sense of being a fellow human being alongside the other. .

Appreciation is recognizing and celebrating whatever qualities the person has that are valuable in themselves rather than in comparison with other people. One appreciates the person in his or her uniqueness. In contrast with the slogan, "Love is blind", "Lack of love is blind", for love enables us to discern possibilities that are really there, and to discern beauty in what is conventionally ugly. At it's most profound, love enables us to discern a person's soul.

Loving oneself involves compassion and appreciation, as I've described these two. So it also enables us to welcome love from other people, for we no longer can believe that we are fundamentally unlovable or that we haven't made ourselves sufficiently worthy to receive love.

I mentioned that compassion is not pity. One reason why some people find it hard to be compassionate towards themselves is that they confuse it with self-pity. We abhor self-pity, but this is because, unlike self-compassion, it involves a whining appeal to others. Sometimes the complaining call is voiced directly, but often it is kept hidden, or slyly hinted. If the attention demanded is not forthcoming, there is resentment. And if attention does come, there is a self-absorbed clinging to the one who pities.

Self-compassion, however, involves no appeal to another, except perhaps for help in becoming more compassionate towards oneself. And,

like compassion for someone else, it is direct, respectful, active, discerning and heart-present.

(2) Meditation #14.

At the end of the Reflections on Loving Oneself, I move directly into the words of Meditation #14, which, of course begin at the beginning of Meditation #11.

If there are time constraints, move more quickly through Meditation #11 rather than neglecting the emphasis in Meditation #14 on learning how to become more compassionate by shifting attitudes.

(3) “Love the Skin You’re In”

Some Reflections Before we Meditate

(i) Title:

I chose this advertising slogan for a skin cream as the title for the meditation because of the contrast:

The slogan implies that we can only love the skin we’re in if it continues to have the smooth, soft texture of a twenty-year-old. It asks us to buy the skin-cream so we can prolong this conventional beauty for as long as possible. But how can we love when our skin become unloveable!

The meditation invites us to love ourselves, by bringing affectionate touch to our skin, whether or not we could now get a job doing a TV commercial for Dove!

(ii) Origin:

I gradually created the meditation to learn how to love myself and then passed it along to others. Sources included Reiki and several Buddhist teachers. It is best done without clothes and hence almost always by oneself. But fully clothed is the usual way for a group to learn the rudiments.

(iii)Relation to Meditation 14:

At first I did the two meditations in succession, and I’ve found that this is the best way to teach it: first healing of ailing parts and then sensual celebration of all parts

Fairly soon for me, however, they merged into one meditation, flowing back and forth, bringing affectionate, welcoming touch spontaneously to many bodily parts, or imagining one’s hands doing this. Indeed, parts that are not ailing are not necessarily thriving and usually need affectionate touch to become vibrantly alive.

(iv) What is Sensual Celebration? Imagine that someone you love has been away and is now at your front door. It might be your sexual lover but it could be your friend or your parent or your child or even your dog. Depending on one's culture, you might greet the person by only clasp of his/her hand or you might give and receive a hug or you might affectionately caress the person's face. Some people, however, are more demonstrative to their dog!

It's a celebration because one feels happy and thankful to be close again rather than apart.

You might protest, concerning celebrating yourself, "But I'm the only person I'm never apart from!" That's true physically, but most of us are rarely joyfully and thankfully heart-present to ourselves.

May West once said something like, "What I appreciate is not the men in my life but the life in my men!" Her joke is about sex, but we can also learn to appreciate the vibrant, radiant life in others and in myself. When I bring affectionate touch to myself, I both stimulate and celebrate the distinctive life within my body. Some spiritual writers say that there is light hidden in the heart of matter for us to uncover and celebrate. If I "love the skin I'm in" I love not only my surface but also the radiance below it, inside my body.

(v) The Pleasure of Affectionate Touch and Our Defences Against It:

All of us as human beings crave the pleasure of receiving affectionate touch. This vital need begins in infancy.

Many of us, however, also fear being touched. Longings and painful memories associated with touch during infancy still secretly affect us. For some, affectionate, pleasurable touch was experienced in infancy, but then it suddenly stopped; for some it never started; for some the only experience of touch was abusive. So the meditation, "Love the Skin You're In" can be a way to re-parent one's inner child.

Since affectionate touch is easily confused with sexual foreplay, the meditation is easily confused with masturbation, concerning which some feel guilty. (Sometimes masturbation can be a very healthy way of loving oneself, but that's a different issue.)

(vi) Respecting Our Defences Against Touching Ourselves Affectionately

If I feel affection for someone, I enjoy being close to him or her, both emotionally and physically. Even if only a minimal physical touch such as a warm hand-clasp is involved, much can be expressed. When touching ourselves, a similar feeling of warm delight and cherishing is important, even if I touch only one part of my body such as my face or my heart.

The more parts, the better, of course, but we need to respect our defences. For some, even by oneself and not in a group, the imagined touch of consciousness may be all that's possible initially.

Alternatively, the focus can be less on experiencing pleasure than on consciously giving thanks for each bodily part in turn. For example, a senior might give thanks for eyes or knees that are currently deteriorating: "You served me well for many decades".

(vii) Three Reflections Concerning Loving Oneself through Affectionate Touch

(a) Loving others involves trust, commitment, respect, open-heartedness and affection. Loving oneself involves all these aspects of love. Meditation #15 focuses on expressing affection through touch, whether it brings healing or sensual celebration.

(b) We can not be receptive to love from others if we refuse to love ourselves. Their love, if unconditional, may "crash through" in spite of our resistance, but it is unsuccessful if it does not enable us to begin to love ourselves for ourselves.

(c) Our egoistic self-proccupations are a bogus form of "self-love", arising from an absence of real self-love. In so far as my body is being filled with loving life-energy, I no longer need to be anxiously concerned about my status in comparison with others for, as Alexander Lowen has said, I already am a "somebody"! As this embodied person I know I'm not a "nobody"!

The Meditation Itself

(i) Breathing as a Bodily Process: (same as in #11) Let the energy of your attention be concentrated on our inhalations and exhalations as they occur in your rib-cage and abdomen. Notice the breath/air moving through your nostrils and or mouth. Whatever else you are aware of, whether it arises from within yourself or comes from outside, let it recede to the "edge" of your consciousness. Don't observe the breathing as you might observe someone else breathing; identify yourself with the breathing, realizing "This is me, though it's not all of me".

(ii) Love-Mantra: With each inhalation repeat a mantra referring to a loving spiritual energy/spiritual presence. Examples: "Loving Energy"/"Jesus as Affectionate Love". You are breathing into your body not only air but also the spiritual reality to which the mantra refers.

Some people may prefer to replace mantra by prayer. Instead of receiving air and spiritual presence together with each inhalation, you can

pray once to the spiritual presence: “Please help me to love myself through touch”. It may seem strange to some up-tight Christians to ask Jesus for such help, but Jesus is not only (as in the hymn) “lover of my soul”, he is also lover of my body.

(iii) Exhaling Impediments to Loving: As you breath out, let go of whatever is impeding you from loving yourself through touch. This might be one’s mind becoming cluttered with distracting thoughts, but often, behind that, there are fears that can be released to some extent even before we’re aware of them as such.

(iv) Sensually Celebrating a Bodily Part. Imagine that the breath you are inhaling, plus the loving energy/presence, is moving into that part.

Alternatively, imagine that the healing energy/presence is moving into your hands and bring your hand(s) to touch the part. If the part is not accessible, imagine that you are “touching” it with your attentive consciousness. Bring to your own body the grateful appreciation with which you would greet a close friend.

As you do this, however, respect your defences and the fear associated with them. Don’t push yourself beyond what feels okay today. You may find that you can venture further to-morrow.

#16 Being the Cosmic Tree of Life

(1) Introduction: The meditation is the best one for beginners to learn how to resonate spiritually within one’s own body with the energies of all creatures in the cosmos: above them in the heavens, below them in the earth, and horizontally in all four directions around the earth.

Versions of this meditation originated within aboriginal oral traditions. Since all of us as human beings have inherited much from our evolutionary origins, not only our animal origins but also our pre-historical human origins, this meditation is a way of recovering forgotten ways of connecting with our fellow creatures. And we can integrate these ancient ways into our current spirituality. For example, some Christians find that it enables them to resonate bodily with divine energies that pervade nature and also to resonate bodily with the spiritual presence of the risen Christ.

(2) Preparation: The meditation is best done standing, so that the knees can be bending. It takes about 20 minutes, however, and this is too long for most seniors. So we'll do it sitting down. Be sure that your feet are firmly connected with the floor and that some of your weight is on them.

(i) Begin by focusing on your breathing as a physical process, noting changes in your rib-cage and our abdomen.

(ii) As you continue to focus on your breathing, exhale and put more weight on your left foot;

(iii) then inhale as your body rises a little from the chair, with less weight on both feet;

(iv) then exhale, putting more weight on your right foot. Continue this alternation five times;

(v) then exhale to both feet and inhale as your body rises. Repeat five times.

(3) Resonating with the Earth

(i) Imagine roots going down from both feet deep into the earth, and with each exhalation descend in your consciousness further down the roots.

(ii) With each inhalation rise up within the roots, against gravity; then with an exhalation drop down the roots still further. (Some meditators bend their knees as they drop.)

(iii) This is no ordinary tree, for its roots reach the earth's centre. After a while you become aware of primitive volcanic energies, powerful and primal, which somehow do not consume the roots with their flames.

(iv) You can begin to suck these energies up with each inhalation, for the roots become like straws. (Some meditators can also "cup" their hands, lower them alongside their ankles, and bring the energies upwards as they straighten their legs.) At first the drawing upward is difficult, against gravity, but then the energies begin to rise spontaneously towards the bottom of your feet.

(v) For some first-time meditators it only reaches there, but for others the energy-vibrations rise into the feet and ankles and even higher. As the volcanic energies enter our human bodies we resonate with them in our human way, so we feel not only grounded but enlivened.

(4) Resonating with the Heavens;

(i) The meditation changes direction abruptly, shifting from earth to heaven: both the literal, material heaven (sun, moon, stars) and the imagined abode for unembodied angels and disembodied human teachers. Imagine your torso is the beginning of the imagined cosmic tree-trunk.

(ii) Focus your attention on your heart energy-centre in the middle of your chest and with your inhalation let your consciousness soar through your crown up through the tree-trunk.

(iii) Not endlessly, for soon with your exhalation you draw down through your crown into your body, whatever you have contacted in the heavenly realm, whether this be the energies of the moon or the spiritual presence of St. Francis, or what you experience as a generalized heavenly peace. (The meditation can be accompanied by arm-movements up and down: stretched hands as you soar and cupped hands as you bring down. Only one or two of the seniors did this, however.)

(5) Resonating from the Heart-Centre in all Six Directions

(i) The next phase in the meditation is to focus your attention directly on your heart-centre, while maintaining some awareness of the heavens through your crown and renewing awareness of the earth through your feet. You are beginning to resonate whole-bodily with energies from heaven and from earth, and these energies converge in the heart-centre.

(ii) Now raise your arms horizontally with your fingers extended, and imagine two other horizontal “branches” extending frontward and backward from your heart centre. (Because of space constraints, I asked the seniors to imagine raising their arms.) This is your way of connecting in all four directions with everyone and everything on the surface of the earth. Through your hands you are both giving and receiving energies, blessing and being blessed.

(iii) Reflections:

Expansive: It is amazing to realize that as a human being I can connect positively with angels and with oceans, with stars and with earth’s core, with all of humankind and with all of nature. An awesome expansiveness that is possible for every human being.

Filled Up: It is amazing to experience oneself so filled up with spiritual life-energy, resonating in all six directions.

(6) Offering one’s Expanded, Filled Self to the Source of Everything

Some of you have experienced a “glimpse” of the Source out of which everyone and everything continually originates. Or you may simply feel thankful for what you now are aware of. In either case, it may be appropriate to offer up your whole self in awe and gratitude to the Mystery that is within you and transcends you.

(7) Returning Gradually to Everyday Awareness

(i) First I encourage everyone to remain in whatever state they find themselves for a while, not trying to find words for it, but simply adjusting to it, taking it in, enjoying it. After a few minutes I'll ask whether anyone needs a little more time and if they do they can raise a hand. If a hand is raised, we'll continue for a short while.

(ii) Then I say, "Much of what has happened will remain with you and in you, in the background, but it's time to return gradually to your everyday awareness of yourself and your surroundings. Focus on your physical breathing and with each exhalation let go of some of the external life-energies that you have connected with, emptying out towards your usual sense of self.

(iii) Now remember that you are in the Library with the others near you and that soon you'll be moving on to somewhere else. Focus on your inhalations as a physical process going on in your body. Feel your weight on the chair. Open your eyes gradually and wait before you try to move.

A Final Note Concerning Seniors and the Tree Meditation

Overall, I've used this "major" meditation less with the seniors than the other ones. One reason is that it is less effective than the Inner Mystery meditation or the Deep Bodily Healing meditation in helping them be less overwhelmed by physical pain.

I've already noted another reason: various physical constraints on introducing this meditation to seniors. It works best standing, not sitting. Movements help considerably: (i) bending one's knees and straightening them while "moving" down and up the roots (ii) "soaring" with upstretched hands into the heavens (iii) using cupped hands to "scoop" up earth energies or "bring down" heavenly energies (iv) extending one's arms sideways as horizontal branches. For various reasons, little of this worked with the seniors in my group.

Another reason may be that some seniors become more "contained" and "interior" in their energies as they withdraw from involvements in the outside world.

Nevertheless, the Tree Meditation is appropriate even for senior seniors.

Three Central Meditations

Before I go on to present the final two meditations I want to point out that for a long time I have regarded three meditations as, for me, central.

And I strongly recommend to anyone who is on a spiritual path that is bodily and substantially transformational that they include something like these three, perhaps emphasizing one more than the others:

#12 “Inner Mystery” (emptying),

#16 “The Tree”(filling up)

#15 “Loving Oneself (healing and sensual celebration)

I’ve also noted that for me a daily use of #14 (rather than #12) is central as a practical daily way of being lived more and more by divine love. Each of us, however, has our own unique flaws/frailties, resources/gifts and spiritual goals, so I’m not prescribing a path for everyone.

For further explorations of my three central meditations I invite you to consult my “Transformative Meditations for Spiritual Healers” in my website: <http://individual.utoronto.ca/devans>.

#17 Two Meditations in Honour of a Resident

(1) Preface:

This final item in “Varieties of Meditation” is a reminder that the orderly sequence in which I have presented the meditations in this report is not true to what actually happened, for I was often moved by my intuitions concerning the needs of the group in designing the next session.

In the fall of 2009 a resident died. I’ll call her “Mary”. We had happened to have lunch together earlier in the year and I had heard much of her life-story. She had sometimes felt she was very much on her own, especially in hospital. Ten days before she died she spoke to me about how she was facing her imminent death, hoping that it would not involve further severe pain. She was remarkably cheerful and grateful about both her life and her process of dying.

The authenticity and simplicity of her spirituality inspired me deeply. What a privilege to have met such a human being! Yet there was nothing obviously striking about her, let alone saintly. When I heard that she had died I felt moved to honour her for who she was. I also felt moved to offer to the meditation group (of which she was not a part) two meditations that might open us up to something like her profound cheerfulness and gratitude.

The two meditations are very different, but because of their common origin I’ll be labelling them #17(a) and #17(b). In a flyer that I put under the door of meditation regulars the evening before each session I put this invitation:

**SOMETIMES AN INSPIRING FELLOW-RESIDENT EVOKES IN US
TWO CHALLENGING QUESTIONS:**

**(a) HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO GO ON BEING GRATEFUL FOR
EXISTING EVEN WHEN GOING ON LIVING
FEELS INTOLERABLE?**

**(b) HOW IS IT POSSIBLE NOT TO FEEL ALONE EVEN WHEN ONE
HAS MINIMAL CARING CONTACT WITH OTHER HUMAN
BEINGS?**

**THERE IS NO INTELLECTUAL ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS
BUT TWO EXPERIENTIAL MEDITATIONS MAY PROVIDE THE
BEGINNINGS OF TWO NON-VERBAL “ANSWERS”.**

(2) Opening Remarks to the Meditation Group

After one meditation in the summer of 2009, someone asked me, “Don, what can be my purpose in life now, when so little of what I used to do is possible?” I responded by quoting a patient at Bridgepoint hospital, a professional woman debilitated more and more each day by MS, who said to me, “All that remains for me to do is to learn how to give and receive love”.

Another possible answer is, “All that remains for me is to learn how to be deeply cheerful and grateful, no matter what happens”. That’s what I learned from Mary. Some of you knew her better than I, on a daily basis. What inspired me was the way in which she raised my hopes concerning what is possible for a human being: her cheerfulness and gratitude came from her core. It was not, as for some people, a sensible policy concerning how to behave; it arose spontaneously from deep within her.

A policy of presenting a happy face is better than dragging others down by forcing them to listen to our endless complaints. It’s better for ourselves and better for others – though sharing our personal concerns with a friend is an important part of living. For Jean, however, being cheerful and grateful was being Jean.

She was an evangelical Christian, and it was clear that she didn't merely believe that Jesus rose from the dead but experienced him daily as a real and loving presence. Even at times when there was little caring contact with other human beings, she did not feel alone. Yet however precious this was for her, she didn't insist that others must have the same comforter.

Her gratitude also seemed to be linked with a sense of wonder and thanksgiving in receiving, from moment to moment, the gift of being here in this life, existing rather than not existing.

As I thought about Jean, and continued in meditation, I realized that I've known many human beings who had a reassuring sense of being accompanied by a loving spiritual presence. The presence varies greatly. For some Christians, as for Jean, it's Jesus. For other Christians it's also, or even mainly, Mother Mary or a particular Christian saint.

For some Christians, and for people of other faiths or of no particular faith, it's what they call "my guardian angel". This presence may indeed be an angel. It may turn out, however, that the presence is not an angel. Rather, it is a deceased human being who is still around and is dedicating him/herself to caring for the person. The person who offers ongoing companionship and friendship might turn out to be a distinguished spiritual teacher; but it may be someone one knew as a child, an "ordinary" grandparent who has passed on but still loves you.

My memories of people becoming aware of being accompanied by their guardian angel continued. Suddenly I realized that many of them had been meditating with me, either in a group or on their own, when something very unexpected had happened. Some of them had become more clearly and steadily aware of a caring spiritual presence whom they had previously sensed, though and in a vague and fleeting way. Others had suddenly become aware of a caring spiritual presence for the very first time. Why not lead in a meditation designed to help participants to become more open to this as a possibility? I could offer no promises concerning what would happen during that particular meditation, but some participants might become more inwardly receptive, and this might eventually lead to such an experience.

In such matters, as in meeting one's "soul-mate", timing is everything: both parties need to be ready.

Concerning a second meditation, I realized what to offer. Each of us could experience some of the sheer wonder that I exist, in contrast with my not-existing at all. Sometimes we experience amazement concerning the existence of someone else – as when a couple welcomes their newborn into the world. But in this meditation the focus would be on one’s own existence.

Such a meditation involves a kind of “falling” into an unknown abyss and then realizing that one is “caught” by a Mystery and continuously sustained in existence by this Mystery. I thought of a line in a psalm, “Underneath are the everlasting arms”. This provides an emotionally-relevant image, though in the meditation one realizes that the Mystery or ongoing Source of my existence is beyond images.

The question, “Why is there anything rather than nothing at all?” has no scientific answer or any other answer in words. But the question can give rise to a meditation in which I become aware of my own existence as pure gift. The meditation would begin with amazement that I exist at all, and move towards an experience of being sustained in existence as I am right now.

I should make it clear that although Mary inspired me personally and moved me to present the two meditations (opening to a loving spiritual presence and becoming grateful for existing) I’m not implying that her “secret” was that she practiced these meditations. The meditations may help some of us to uncover our own “secret”, that is, our own unique path towards deepening inner cheerfulness.

(P.S. I don’t know whether either meditation “worked” for anyone. Residents are very private about such things. But I’m sure the meditations were worth doing.)

#17(a) Becoming Aware of my “Guardian Angel”

(i) This meditation is not an offer of “complete-success-or-your-money-back”! It’s merely a way of trying to become more open to a possible experience. There is no guarantee that anything new will happen, but if something does, it could be life-changing.

(ii) We begin this meditation in a familiar way, focusing on breathing: inhaling and exhaling and being aware of changes in our bodies as we do so.

(iii) Then we focus mainly on exhaling as a way of letting go of whatever is grabbing our attention, gradually emptying our mind of whatever

memories or anxieties or preoccupations clutter our awareness and prevent anything new from entering.

(iv) Then we focus mainly on inhaling as a way of receiving and welcoming loving spiritual energies. and then, after a few minutes, a loving spiritual presence. We don't name this presence, but we are hoping to meet our guardian angel.

This is like standing at the doorway of my house. I've already welcomed and received loving spiritual energies into my house. Now I'm ready and willing to be the gracious host of a loving presence who arrives, seeking entry. The guest may turn out to be a spiritual presence whom I've experienced before, but in an unclear way; I realize that he or she wants to deepen our friendship. On the other hand, the spiritual visitor may be a stranger who has secretly cared for me and wants me to know this.

(v) If you do become vaguely aware of a spiritual presence, be polite but not pushy! Ask for information, "What is your name?" or "How can I get to know you better?" or "How can I call on you in the future?"

If you have no such awareness, don't dwell on your disappointment. Rather, be grateful for what the loving energies have brought to you: some experience of peace or acceptance or reassurance. Your openness to the possibility of experiencing a loving spiritual presence may prepare you to experience this later on.

We'll continue on with eyes closed as we move into the next meditation.

#17(b) Gratitude and Awe for one's Existence

(i) Begin as usual by focusing the energy of your attention on your breathing, noticing the physical changes that are occurring in your rib-cage and perhaps your abdomen as you breathe in and out.

(ii) Experience how it feels to be you in this moment: your body with its pains and pleasures, your many emotions, your spiritual insights and longings and our minds, so full of images and memories and thoughts. How utterly amazing that you exist at all in this moment, right now, this unique human being!

(iii) Then focus most of your attention on breathing out. With each exhalation let go of whatever is grabbing your attention. With each exhalation sink down into the chair, releasing any tension in your buttocks that occurs because you are subtly holding yourself up.

Consider ways in which you feel that you have to be in control. Let go of your attachment to being in charge of your existence.

Consider ways in which you are clinging to whatever is known and familiar. Let go of your attachment so that you can “fall” into the unknown.

(iv) Imagine now that you are by yourself in a descending elevator. When it stops you know that you are to step out into emptiness, trusting that as you fall you’ll eventually realize, “I’ve stopped falling and I’m being held in existence”.

Dare to step out into the unknown, the abyss, remembering the words of the psalm, “Underneath are the everlasting arms”.

(v) There will be a time of silence, several minutes, at the end of which I will ask anyone who’d like a little more time to raise their hand.

Nobody did, so I invited everyone to take three deep breaths, letting each one out with a sigh, and then to open their eyes, stretch if their bodies wanted to do so, and become aware of the room and other people in the room.

A few might have to leave right away, but others were encouraged to remain in their chairs for a little while, taking in what had happened for them – adjusting to it, but not trying to understand it in words right away. Also, they could appreciate the new peace and connection pervading the room.

Final Note: This meditation is similar in some ways to Meditation#12, “Emptying Yourself and Sinking Down into Mystery”. The possible “culmination” of #12, however, is a state of union: human soul with Divine Mystery. The possible “culmination” of #17(b) is not such a human-divine union. It is very much a human state of gratitude and wonder in relation to Divine Mystery as ongoing Creative Source of existence.

Transition to Part II:

We now move from Part I, “Varieties of Meditation for Seniors”, which began in June, 2009 to Part II “Meditation&Music for Seniors”, which began in September, 2009. From then on, sessions of both kinds were included each month.

