



# *Aging in Enlightened Society*

A Series of Discussions on Aging in a Salon Format

**Session One**

**The Landscape of Aging**

**Facilitator Guide**



## Session Overview

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Using *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande as the starting point for the discussions, we will look at the landscape of aging in our present time and share our thoughts and emotions about who we are in a time of many personal, family, and social changes.

Session One consists of five salons of one and a half hours each. Each salon is organized around the following structure:

- Opening meditation
- Introductory remarks (setting the view)
- Discussion and group exercises
- Summation
- Closing meditation

This structure is flexible to meet the needs of each salon, its participants, and the resources available. Starting each salon with an overview of the topic to guide the discussion, including a reading or poem as appropriate, is helpful. As in all the sessions, we also will use *The Shambhala Principle* by Sakyong Mipham as a guiding text.

At the beginning of the session, review best practices for listening, with reminders in each salon where relevant. Consider the following recommended guidance:

Please keep in mind the following agreements for thoughtful and inclusive discussion:

- Practice respectful listening without interrupting.
- Allow for space between speakers.
- If you've already spoken, be mindful of leaving an opening for others to speak.

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We wish to support participants in opening up and sharing their personal experiences. To create a space in which everyone can feel comfortable participating, please refrain from offering advice or taking on the role of a teacher.

If possible, communicate with registered participants prior to the first meeting to remind them of the recommended books and share suggested reading for the first salon, including any tips about where to find the books. Some communities may have copies in lending libraries.



## Salon One: *Introduction and The Independent Self*

### Suggested Readings

*The Shambhala Principle*: “Prologue” (pages ix–xiv)

*Being Mortal*: “Introduction” and Chapter 1, “The Independent Self” (pages 1–24)

**Opening Meditation**                      15 minutes

**Introductory Remarks**                *Establishing the View*

Ask participants to introduce themselves, then give an overview of the entire session:

Old age is not a sickness but rather a time of life full of the possibility of waking up and especially of knowing the full breadth of a human life. The whole process of aging can be one of discovering the goodness of our basic nature. And according to the author Atul Gawande, not understanding the view has led to serious consequences.

“ Lacking a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end, we have allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperatives of medicine, technology, and strangers.

*Being Mortal*, page 9

Discussion

Sit in a circle, if possible, and spend ample time with the question, “What do you want from your aging?”

Salon One: The Independent Self

This salon addresses the questions:

# The Landscape of Aging



- How do we identify as an older person?
- How do we relate to ourselves as old people?
- Are we our illness?
- How attached are we to our identities? How much has fallen away?

Review the introduction to *Being Mortal*. Since we don't have a view of how to age, we experience the struggle between security and freedom. Our fear has led to over-medicalization of the aging process. We feel more secure when we have a diagnosis.

## Group Exercise

Form small groups if the class is large enough, each with a notetaker who will be the group's spokesperson during the summation. Choose from two to four contemplations for participants to discuss in their groups.

- Is independence valuable to me? What are its challenges?
- Is autonomy different from aloneness?
- Is being able to contribute important?
- What are the benefits of aging?

## Summation

If the class was divided into groups, ask the group notetakers to report back to the whole group about key points of the smaller group discussions.

**Closing Meditation**                      5 minutes

## Suggested Homework

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 6, "Being Brave" (pages 53–62)  
*Being Mortal*: Chapter 2, "Things Fall Apart," and Chapter 3, "Dependence" (pages 25–78)



## Salon Two: *Things Fall Apart and Dependence*

### Suggested Readings

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 6, “Being Brave” (pages 53–62)

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 2, “Things Fall Apart,” and Chapter 3, “Dependence” (pages 25–78)

**Opening Meditation**                      15 minutes

**Introductory Remarks**                *Establishing the View*

This salon touches on issues of frailty, physiological changes, patterns of decline, and geriatric medicine and its virtues. It includes teachings in Chapter 6 of *The Shambhala Principle*.

As the 20th century progressed, the social values changed from veneration of family interdependence to veneration of the independent self. People valued being able to do what they wanted: being independent. They did not face the the reality of death, because death makes a mockery of independence.

One way we hide the reality of death is the way modern medicine has turned once fatal illnesses into chronic illnesses. People live so long that they are too feeble to know they are dying and too unwell to say goodbye. The machine just runs out with a beep.

Our emphasis on independence over interdependence has led to viewing older people, who are more dependent, with arrogance and contempt. It has led to their being objects of marketing for materialistic ways of living. Counter to this attitude, geriatric medicine helps people live with autonomy: liberty, independence, self-determination, right to decide, and community. We need teachings on how to be well even if dependent.



Aging is an excellent time to learn how to be more brave instead of struggling so much to be independent. The “Being Brave” teachings in *The Shambhala Principle* are useful here:

- **Meditate a little each day**, which creates an environment of gentleness for the mind where we can become more confident of our basic goodness.
- **Uplift our behavior** by knowing what to choose and what to discard. We all have habits. We can choose ones that lead to feeling present.
- **Develop equanimity**. Try to go beyond good days or bad days by contemplating that the ground of both is basic goodness. Then when we relax, we learn to trust who we are. Even if it seems bad, relax and say: I am good, I am kind, I am wise. And let the rest fall away.

## Group Exercise

This exercise might take up to 45 minutes. Choose two to five questions and contemplations from the list below to offer to participants. Have each person select two. Ring a bell, then contemplate one of these for three minutes. Ring the bell again to start the second three-minute contemplation, and once again to close the contemplations.

- Contemplation: Old age is not a diagnosis.
- Contemplation: The autonomous self versus being in community.
- Question: What am I bringing to my aging?
- Question: What portends dependence? How can I respond to these changes?
- Question: How am I responding to my personal sense of “the long slow fade?”

# The Landscape of Aging



After the contemplations, form smaller groups if the class is large enough, each with a notetaker who will be the group's spokesperson during the summation. Have each group form a circle and discuss their experiences.

The person leading the discussion should let each participant speak before the group responds. Each person can share their wisdom with a sense that there is no right or wrong answer. Help each member of the group feel meditative, feel uplifted, feel their equanimity. When everyone is finished, take turns letting people respond and discuss.

## Summation

If the class was divided into groups, ask the group notetakers to report back to the whole group about key points of the smaller group discussions.

**Closing Meditation**                      5 minutes

## Suggested Homework

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 4, "Assistance," and Chapter 5, "A Better Life"  
(pages 79–147)



## Salon Three: Assistance and A Better Life

### Suggested Readings

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 4, “Assistance,” and Chapter 5, “A Better Life”  
(pages 79–147)

**Opening Meditation**      15 minutes

**Introductory Remarks**      *Establishing the View*

This is a quote from *The Shambhala Principle*. It is very appropriate that we as aging people should hold this wisdom and perpetuate it.

“ While an unenlightened society is always possible, rather than being depressed or overwhelmed by it, we can use periods of deep social degradation as reminders of our good fortune in being alive and in a situation where we can uplift ourselves and others. We can use that setting-sun edge as a constant reminder to keep our inspiration to nurture the positive. That is how humans move forward, and it is natural for us. In fact, like birds, we cannot move backward. This is not blind faith, but genuine resilience and healthiness.

*The Shambhala Principle*, page 35

### Group Exercises

Have an open discussion with the whole group, considering the following questions:

- Gawande is hard on the industry. Is he accurate? What is your view of the assisted living industry? What is your experience?

After the discussion, form small groups if the class is large enough, each with a notetaker who will be the group’s spokesperson during the summation. From the following list, choose from two to five questions for



the participants to contemplate. Allow time for individual contemplation and for sharing in the group.

- When we are not able to take care of ourselves, what are our options?
- How do we feel about putting the burden of care on our families?
- How could the process of aging have meaning in an enlightened society?
- What kind of meaning do you want for yourself as an older person knowing you are going to die?
- What do you want in your world as you are facing death?

In these discussions, it is so important to let the sharing be very personal. Let the communication revolve on personal wants and hopes, and how to be brave in the middle of constant change or the fear that things are not turning out as we had hoped.

## Summation

If the class was divided into groups, ask the group notetakers to report back to everyone about key points of the smaller group discussions.

**Closing Meditation**                      5 minutes

## Suggested Homework

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 3, “Creation Vs. Destruction” (pages 33–44)

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 6, “Letting Go,” and Chapter 7, “Hard Conversations” (pages 149–230)



## Salon Four: *Letting Go* and *Hard Conversations*

### Suggested Readings

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 3, “Creation Vs. Destruction” (pages 33–44)

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 6, “Letting Go,” and Chapter 7, “Hard Conversations” (pages 149–230)

**Opening Meditation**                      15 minutes

**Introductory Remarks**                *Establishing the View*

The attempt to develop care models that help—such as nursing homes, adult foster care, and assisted living—have had mixed results. There are also movements that support aging with dignity, for example: villages, hospice, and palliative care.

Medicine and technology have taken centuries to accumulate experiential knowledge on how to age, how to care for the aged, and how to die. We can be sustained long beyond coherence. A new challenge for humankind is to develop a view or vision of how to die.

### Group Exercise

As in the previous salons, choose from two to four questions from the list below to contemplate. Size permitting, divide the class into smaller groups, each with a notetaker.

- Can we find a contemplative approach to aging whereby we will have finished up what needs to be finished up?
- How do we resolve regret?
- How do we resolve our need for control versus being okay with whatever happens?



- How do we feel about the term “a good death”?

There is great deal of material here. Some groups will lean more to discussion of nursing homes and concerns about institutional care. Some will lean more to the idea of good death. We want to create the space for openness, for letting go no matter what comes up in the discussion.

Some people will gravitate toward movements for improvement, to fighting ageism, to more psychological approaches of working with grief and regret or spiritual ideas of a good death and afterlife. The task for the facilitator is to embrace the different ways without too much attachment. The Village Movement might be one way to bring all elements into the discussion—this is a time to let all ideas come to the surface and not get stuck. Let them be.

## Summation

If the class was divided into groups, ask the group notetakers to report back to everyone about key points of the smaller group discussions. Use the guidance from the exercise to help inform this sharing.

**Closing Meditation**                      5 minutes

## Suggested Homework

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 6, “Being Brave” (pages 53–62)

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 8, “Courage” (pages 231–258)



## Salon Five: *Courage*

### Suggested Readings

*The Shambhala Principle*: Chapter 6, “Being Brave” (pages 53 – 62)

*Being Mortal*: Chapter 8, “Courage” (pages 231–258)

**Opening Meditation**            15 minutes

**Introductory Remarks**        *Establishing the View*

We may come to the conclusion that we can’t control life’s circumstances, but we want some control or some say in how the time left is spent. This takes courage to realize. Professionals are being trained to have what is called the “hard conversation,” including getting to know the priorities of the patient and conducting conversations about facing difficult choices.

Dr. Gawande offers an example of how he gives guidance leading to shared decision-making. He starts by saying “I am worried.” Then he explores further:

1. “What is your understanding of what is happening to you?”
2. “What are your fears if this should happen?”
3. “What are your goals if your condition should worsen?”
4. “What tradeoffs are you willing to make to try to stop what is happening to you?”

“ At least two kinds of courage are required in aging and sickness. The first is the courage to confront the reality of mortality... and the second is the courage to act on the truth we find.

*Being Mortal*, page 232



For Dr. Gawande, courage is strength in the face of knowing what is to be feared or hoped. It is doctors and patients confronting the reality of mortality and acting together on decisions about medical care, such as having another surgery, going into hospice, or wishing to die at home.

“ Our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer; that the chance to shape our stories is essential to sustaining meaning in life; that we have the opportunity to refashion our institutions, our culture, and our conversations in ways to transform the possibilities of the last chapters of our lives.

*Being Mortal*, page 245

## Group Exercise and Summation

Since this is the last salon of the session, ask everyone to sit in one big circle. As a way to sum up the discussions of the previous four weeks, pose the following questions to the group:

- What are your wishes for the last years of life?
- What have you learned from the class?
- Have your attitudes changed?
- What do you appreciate about the “dying role?”
- Do you have any new ideas about how to shape the last years of our lives?

Share memories, pass on wisdom, and talk about what their wishes are.

## Overview of Session Two: The Warriorship of Aging

In Session Two: The Warriorship of Aging, we will contemplate our inner world in order to feel our own worthiness as aged people in a society in which we often feel marginalized, or as they say, “old and out of the way.”

# The Landscape of Aging



Like Session One, Session Two consists of five salons of one and a half hours each.

In addition to *The Shambhala Principle*, we suggest the book *Let Evening Come* by Mary Morrison as a good example, showing the process of looking inward on aging: reflecting, observing, appreciating, slowing down, and seeing with new, inquisitive eyes. She was a Quaker who spoke with a voice of vulnerability and spirit.

Bette Davis once said, “Old age is not for sissies.” But it is possible to be a sissy and then relax. Above all else, the warriorship of aging has to do with being brave, not being afraid of who we are. When we practice the warriorship of aging, we learn to go through our society’s thinly disguised negativity and come out the other side. It is as if we raise the jewelled banner of victory. It flutters in the wind, uncovering our innate cheerfulness.

Note: If your Center has already scheduled Session Two, share the dates and times with the participants and direct them to where they can find more information and register. If possible, let them know where they can obtain copies of Mary Morrison’s book. Some communities may have copies in lending libraries.

## Closing Meditation

5 minutes