



Aging in Enlightened Society

A Series of Discussions on Aging in a Salon Format

Session Three

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness

Facilitator Guide



Session Overview

“ Human happiness is based not just upon individual gratification; the happiness of humans is directly associated with the ability to share.... The reason we enjoy sharing and exchanging is their intimate connection to kindness and friendship.... Enlightened society is like a communal heart than pulsates with kindness in order to keep us all connected.

The Shambhala Principle, pages 67–68

“ CARE LIKE A DANCE

Good care is like a dance in a giant ballroom. Picture the ones needing help, nicely dressed, standing around the edge of the circle (ballroom). The violins are tuning up. The sheen on the floor is bright, shimmering with shadow and shine. First, the family and helpers approach the one to be helped and bow—deeply. “Will you allow me the honor of a dance with you?” they ask. This is the best foot forward stage of care. They move onto the floor and pause to listen and feel. Then the music draws them into the dance. Bodies move. Hearts beat faster. Sadness flutters and enters the mix.

The back and forth stage of care and relationship and communication dawns. First the old one leads the way and then the son or daughter or helper. After a while the doctor or the therapist jumps in to take the lead. We work with our irritation if things don’t go our way.

Or situations speak for themselves and we listen. Until finally in the third stage of care we are all whirling together. Up and down and all around. If one of us steps on the other’s toe or stumbles, the pain is

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



only one point in the glitter of silk, the chandelier's sway, the haunting flute, and the rhythm of life. In the whirling madness, the frail one might get a little dizzy and faint or just slip away.

ANN CASON

Personal Letter to a client

No one should have the burden of care alone. We should share the opportunities and possibilities and work together for a light and spacious way of being true. Rejoicing is a state of appreciation and of great dignity in the midst of how it turned out.

In this five-week session, we will examine taking care or letting others care for us. Suggested readings will come from Sakyong Mipham's *The Shambhala Principle* and *Circles of Care* by Ann Cason. The session 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.

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:

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



- 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.

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: *Circles of Care*

Suggested Readings

The Shambhala Principle: Pages 20–22 in Chapter 2, “The Shambhala Principle”

Opening Meditation 15 minutes

Introductory Remarks *Establishing the view*

Before giving an overview, first create a circle, ask participants to introduce themselves and share personal experiences of caring for themselves or another with the whole group. Allow at least half an hour. This is the most important part of this salon.

Then give a short talk on basic goodness. Your remarks can be brief. You could share this story from Ann Cason:

When my son was 6, he had to leave Vidya Elementary School in Boulder in the middle of the school year and move to another state and school. After a few weeks, he told me, “Now I know the difference between Vidya and other schools.”

“What is it?” I asked with real interest. “Kindness,” he told me. And my heart almost stopped with guilt, concern, tenderness. I asked myself if my little son was being treated badly at his new school. But it wasn’t that. The teachers were kind in the way that you are kind to first graders. However, the atmosphere of kindness, of seeing and appreciating his qualities or seeing the basic goodness of human beings that connects us all, was lacking.

I noticed, through the years of his growth, how constricted is the education that doesn’t allow young people to know what they think and

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



how they feel about their experiences. Without feeling, we develop habitual patterns of response to whatever we meet.

By the time we are old we may end up in a limited world of repetition, regret, blame, or platitude. How much we want kindness! How we doubt our goodness.

With a loss of energy it is easy to get isolated from our awake mind. We forget our basic goodness and fall into isolation. As friends die and physical strength and memories weaken, the views of an ageist society creep in; worthlessness may develop. Confusion, the disease of isolation, appears. Somehow we can't quite feel ourselves or our world. We can think what we want, but our true preferences, perceived through our senses, dim.

The warriorship of giving and receiving care is a way of cultivating and appreciating ourselves without blanking out, or duking it out. We raise the jeweled banner of victory in this way. If we don't feel our preferences because of deep-seated old patterns of conditioning, which often are quite hidden, we may have to go deeper with our practice.

At the same time we may not get what we want. This is especially true if we are attached to comfort. After all, we may not be out of samsara, in which we tend to feel that we get too little of what we want and too much of what we don't.

A sense of humor is important. So we need, as much as possible, to encourage a warm, supportive environment full of people who care about who we are, who care about habitual patterns as propellers into discipline and cheer.

But our energy often feels stuck.

If it's stuck, how can we connect and relax? Did you ever feel closed into a small room with a baby screaming and a dog barking? You feel disconnected and alone. When you go to the beach with the same baby and dog, you relax and dissolve into the sand, the surf, the wind, and big sky.

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



Expansion helps us to relax. If our energy is stuck, how can we expand our mind within a small room instead of a beach? It isn't always what we think. We might be able to learn to relax and breathe out in our home, or within an illness, or a relationship. It might be a practice that helps us work with anger or resistance, or a beautiful song that lifts our spirits and relaxes our mind.

Group Exercise

Creating a circle of care means listening to our world. Go over these four phases of listening briefly.

1. Excited: you already know what that's about.
2. You want to interrupt and say your own thing.
3. Finally you can relax and sit with the person and listen to them; be fully present to them.
4. You listen people into their wisdom.

Then divide into two groups, or three if the class is large. Discuss these two questions.

- What is your true nature—fearful and aggressive, or gentle and fearless?
- Can peace be found under anxiety and stress?
- What are the personal challenges in maintaining the view of kindness while working with others?

Summation

The view to look for is how the challenges that people discussed have been mixed with a larger mind, just by sharing with the group. Perhaps you notice an attitude of appreciation and kindness because of the sharing.

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



Closing Meditation

5 minutes

Suggested Homework

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 7, “Kindness is the Universal Expression” (pages 65–71)

Circles of Care: “Foreword” through Chapter Two, “Getting Help” (pages xi–25)



Salon Two: *Entering the Elder's World*

Suggested Readings

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 7, “Kindness is the Universal Expression” (pages 65–71)

Circles of Care: “Foreword” through Chapter Two, “Getting Help” (pages xi–25)

Opening Meditation 15 minutes

Introductory Remarks *Establishing the view*

From a Buddhist perspective, clinging or not letting go prolongs suffering. But if we talk about our challenge as disconnection/connection, even if we are disconnected, we can connect, which is awakening. Aging can intensify the tendency to disconnect from society: poor eyesight and hearing, low energy, collapsing or pushing against it. How can we create for ourselves an environment that is rich and connecting?

Circles of Care describes three ways of looking; three ways to enter:

1. What calls us to care or be cared for? Person, house, illness? Are we helper or helped?
2. What relationships does the person needing care have? Or what relationships do I have?
3. What is the state of mind: settled, confused? What supports would bring peace? What is needed to settle confusion?

Group Exercise

Divide the group into two or three small groups and discuss these questions:

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



- What do we mean by finding the strength of a situation?
- What do we mean by auspicious coincidence? How do we create the conditions for receiving auspiciousness as related to caregiving?
- How do we care when we don't feel it? How can we learn to feel?

Summation

Keep in mind that we are learning how to do something radical that will take patience: how to create our own environment of kindness and invite others in.

Closing Meditation 5 minutes

Suggested Homework

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 9, “Just You and Me” (pages 85–95)

Circles of Care: “Part Two: The Subtleties” (pages 69–90)



Salon Three: *Embracing the Elder’s World – Enriching and Letting Go*

Suggested Readings

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 9, “Just You and Me” (pages 85–95)

Circles of Care: “Part Two: The Subtleties” (pages 69–90)

Opening Meditation 15 minutes

Introductory Remarks *Establishing the view*

There are two topics for this salon:

1. Working with the details of the elder’s sensory, physical, and mental environment to create an engaging and related atmosphere.
2. Hospice revolution—changing the paradigm: “Hospice is an organization that provides care for the dying by strengthening the supportive environment.” (*Circles of Care*, page 143)

These topics could be brought out by discussing the material in *Circles of Care*. Or you could read and discuss Chapter 9, “Just You and Me,” in *The Shambhala Principle*.

What we want to do is learn about our environment or the elder’s environment. How can we recognize the strengths in ourselves or others?

Confusion is a disease of isolation. Even if we are not suffering from an illness, it can be difficult to connect and expand our minds. As mentioned in *Circles of Care* (page 69), a friend once mentioned to Ann that her frail mother was like a plant that blossomed when her spirit was watered and drooped when it wasn’t. What a wonderful image of being cared for and of taking care.

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



Despite the suffering of human existence, it is possible, in unexpected ways, for the mind to relax and discover the simple, ordinary enjoyment of the moment.

In Salon Four of Session Two ("The Warriorship of Aging"), we studied slogans as a way to bring our minds back to loving kindness and awaken our hearts. Now, we want to use another method: simply connecting. In this way we get in touch with our windhorse, the energy of the spirit, the energy of our intuitive awareness, what we feel in our heart. We listen, look; we appreciate. We pay attention to what we feel and what we like. And we expand out and notice the colors of the other, too. It is the very basic goodness of our human beingness. And we can do it. The more challenge presented, the more our windhorse wants to relax and expand. Beyond that loving kindness, there are flashes of delight: steaming tea, pet's soft fur, light on dust bunnies stirred in the air.

In his book, *The Shambhala Principle*, Sakyong Mipham talks about learning to feel, to be and to touch. There is a meditation called "Shambhala Meditation" that helps the practitioner learn this way into basic goodness. It is so helpful for people who are aging or for those who want to care for the aging. If you can find a way to learn this simple practice, it is a way to realize that we are not separate from our environments.

Studying this material and engaging in the following exercises will help us all learn very quickly how to care or be cared for. There is a book, *Younger Next Year* by Chris Crowley and Henry L. Lodge, MD, where they talk about finding happiness from development of the limbic brain. It is material worth reading along with the books mentioned above.

Group Exercises

Exercise One: Divide into pairs. Sit looking at each other, one talking and the other listening; use the listening guidelines practiced throughout the



salons (see the Facilitator Guide Introduction). After the first person finishes the exercise, switch roles.

Ask the first person to describe her or his living room:

- The favorite chair: What do I see when I sit there? What do I hear, touch, feel?
- Do I look at empty white walls or pictures, paintings, or objects of interest?
- What is the tone of the atmosphere: happy or sad, calm or agitated?
- Do I feel claustrophobic, stuck, or flowing?
- What is impoverished and what is strong? What needs enrichment?

Exercise Two: When creating a circle of care for another, we want to create a situation that helps us expand our usual way of looking at a person who needs care. And we want an environment in which both helper and helped can experience basic goodness or awakened heart.

- a) To help, there is an exercise called “Telling the Elder’s Story” described on pages 7 and 8 of *Circles of Care*. Think of your mother or a close friend or a person who needs care. Start with a specific description of the person, the house, the neighborhood. What are her relationships? Is she isolated or connected? Who are her family, friends, church? Then look at her mind. Is it settled or confused. Is she rigid in thinking or open?

The class could have a person share a description of her mother or a close friend. You could ask questions such as:

- What was her suffering? Could she be with it?
- What was the intelligence that opened her to a bigger view? Or what was the obstacle that kept her stuck?
- What kind of communication and appreciation did she have herself, with your father, in other relationships?

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



- How did she learn to appreciate her world? Was it a sun beam or a cry or a cat's soft fur?
 - Finally, what was her truth—"This is how it is"? And what was the humor?
- b) Alternatively, this exercise can help to expand the thinking and feeling of the class. Divide the class into pairs sitting or standing back to back.
1. Stand back to back and feel into the person. Do this for a few minutes.
 2. Turn around, stand face to face, and look closely for a few minutes.
 3. Relax and share experiences within the pair.

Summation

This material is a further exploration of creating a caring culture of kindness by discovering who we are and enriching and expanding upon that. Use the summation to review what the group has discovered and shared through the exercises about how we can do this.

Closing Meditation

5 minutes

Suggested Homework

Circles of Care: Chapter 8, "Working with Difficult Behaviors"
(pages 93–131)



Salon Four: *Working with Difficult Behaviors*

Suggested Readings

Circles of Care: Chapter 8, “Working with Difficult Behaviors”
(pages 93–131)

Opening Meditation 15 minutes

Introductory Remarks *Establishing the view*

“ The general approach is to look at the difficult behavior, then create a circle of support that enfolds conflict—effectively reinforcing the elder’s strength while learning to work with your own negative responses to his or her neurotic behavior.

Circles of Care, page 94

Aging may lay bare our most basic needs as we transition from one stage of life to another. Often we are overwhelmed by situations that we could have handled easily when we were younger. When energy is low, we may gradually start feeling victimized by illness.

We may act out the stages of our sickness until we don’t feel human, feeling like a diagnosis instead of a human being. Letting ourselves feel this state, grieving for our old selves, feeling worthless when not helping the world, yet not knowing how to be. Going through this is not wallowing or indulging. Instead, it is the teachers or the universe beckoning for us to expand, to grow. Growing older is a time for dignity, for rejoicing and appreciating how it is turning out.

This is not just a solitary rejoicing. For the caregiver or family it is hard to keep a clear mind when someone is acting out or being difficult. Sometimes we find ourselves overwhelmed, being difficult, and unable to

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



stop. We can't slow down. Perhaps our difficulty could be solved by a shift or even subtle change in the environment.

You might want to approach this salon through the subject of burnout, using “Giving Yourself a Break” (pages 114–116) from *Circles of Care*. An outside speaker could lead a discussion. Hospice workers, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and volunteers are good places to look, or the Alzheimer's Society.

Make sure to stress reading the care studies in *Circles of Care*. Elizabeth's story (pages 120–124) tells of conflict and well being, of losing her ground. Everything she had done in life is gone. Consider conflicts in our lives with no solution. Examine the progression of care from Elizabeth's story: how Ann started it, entered in, enriched and expanded it, and how it enlightened.

Group Exercise

Divide into groups with notetakers to contemplate and discuss these questions:

- Do I need some help? Does my parent need some outside help?
- Do I need to bring more formality or stronger boundaries and more discipline into my life? What is it that I need to accept or to reject.
- Do I need to adapt my practice schedule for age-related issues?
- What are these age-related issues? Can I resolve them? Can I live with the fact that there may be no resolution?
- If I accept it can't be fixed, how can I make it as good as it can be?

Summation

Difficult situations both within ourselves or within the loved ones we care for create many opportunities for practice and for reaching out into our

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



communities. Ask the notetakers to share key points from their group discussions, emphasizing such opportunities when relevant.

Closing Meditation 5 minutes

Suggested Homework

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 12, “Shifting Global Values,” and Chapter 13, “Keep It Simple” (pages 115–128)

Circles of Care: “Learning to Be Present with Death” (pages 156–159)



Salon Five: *Caring for the Caregiver's World*

Suggested Readings

The Shambhala Principle: Chapter 12, “Shifting Global Values,” and Chapter 13, “Keep It Simple” (pages 115–128)

Circles of Care: “Learning to Be Present with Death” (pages 156–159)

Opening Meditation 15 minutes

Introductory Remarks *Establishing the view*

As we age with more time for contemplating, we may find that things are different than we thought. In the last salon, we talked about the traps of victimization, ageism, and ignoring. If we can be open and curious about our world, we can not only lay down our path as we walk it; we also can develop a kind of fearlessness that comes with seeing more. All of the exercises are ways to help us become more familiar with the way things are rather than how we hope or fear they will be.

For one thing, when we are younger, we learn to squander our energy rather than protect it. So much of this has to do with having been born in the west where the cultural value is on individualism. Here, we are learning to trust ourselves, to be strong and confident. If we have learned windhorse practice, we can use this to meet the challenge. We can also pay attention to our activities, practicing the mindfulness of taking care of ourselves so that we can be confident when it is time to die. One place that we can work on developing this confidence is in working with others who are frail or dying.

Our loved ones and friends, and in particular members of our aging groups, can care for each other. In Portland a group has talked about forming to sit with the dying. First of all it is hard to sit with dying people, as their needs are great. So there is a lot of work to do: shopping, personal



care, laundry, meals, etc. But sometimes there is nothing to do but sit. Some days when you are working with dying, you will want to be anywhere other than where you are. Working with dying is working with feelings, your own, or those of the dying or the family. The situation is raw and tender and you want to resist or run away. But opening to the feeling is a road to freedom.

In caregiving, the work itself becomes the application of our meditation. Care becomes our meditation cushion, a practice in itself.

Opening to feeling is a path. And then you learn to be *with*. If you pull back, the person in your care will feel it. The dying are usually very sensitive to atmosphere. If you go away in your mind the dying person will feel rejected or left out. Learning to be *with*, to be fully present, is the ground of learning to be touched. We become familiar with an ordinary state of mind. We can become receptive human beings. We listen, we are ready.

In this state we might have more experience of auspicious coincidence where we or the ones in our care will get what they need.

Group Exercises

Exercise One: Try the exercise described on pages 156 and 157 in *Circles of Care*. Ask participants to use their imaginations to feel the presence of someone for whom they are caring.

Sit in an upright posture close to the person for whom you are caring, but don't draw attention to yourself. Notice the person and the environment. Is it happy or sad? Heavy or light? Then notice your breath. Follow your breath for a while, and when you notice your thoughts going away, come back and feel your presence in the chair. Return to the breath. Practicing with the elder will help you stay more in touch with whatever is happening. You also can practice receiving and sending, breathing in suffering and breathing out peacefulness.



Exercise Two: Break into groups or dyads to discuss the following questions. Use the good listening guidance practiced throughout the salons (see the Facilitator Guide Introduction). Since this is the third session of the Aging in Enlightened Society series, participants might bring more breadth of learning into the discussions. There might be more simplicity. There might be more familiarity with ordinary rhythms of life, more practicality.

1. How do we enter into others' worlds? How do we let others into ours?
2. What does it mean to connect? How can we expand and enrich this? Cultivating relationships can be the foundation of what we do. What are we connecting to?—space and feeling spaciousness around relationships. What is spaciousness?—beyond ideas of what a situation is, opening up to what is actually happening; countering contracted space via breathing, looking out a window, etc.
3. Aging brings a tendency to contract. The closer some of us get to dying, the greater the tendency is to grab onto something or someone. How do we work with contracting? An old person (or ourselves) can be contracted. Closer to death, the elder can grab onto something. The practice for us, whether helper or helped, is to notice the tendency to contract and then to breath out.
4. Discuss our desire to live a disciplined life and the beauty of that, compared to being stuck in a rut. How does it relate to space? So much effort goes into our routines; we get caught up in them. We get scared of the gaps between things to do. Or we can't think of a word. Waiting for each other (as we try to retrieve a word) is spaciousness.
5. How might we relieve an irritation trigger so the old person isn't using precious energy on the irritation? How can we take care of some of these when caregiving? If we have expectations, people get in our way when they don't do it right. Dust in the corner, cobwebs,

Creating a Caring Culture of Kindness



weeds, a faucet dripping – these may impinge on self worth and one may start to feel unworthy.

6. What is the culture of kindness?

Summation

The point of this salon is to take practice beyond the cushion so that giving or receiving care becomes the practice itself. Bring everyone together and ask the notetakers to share key points from their group discussions, emphasizing how the exercises relate to the concept of practice.

Closing Meditation

5 minutes

Session Conclusion

Some people will have been together for 15 meetings spread out over many months. Let the energy of your time together, the resources available to you, and the desires of the participants guide you in closing this salon, session, and the series, and for planning any next steps. You could simply have a small reception. In Portland, for example, the salons turned into a self-organized aging discussion group planned and led by different members of the group.