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## 5 Spiritual Practices for Aging Well

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I often teach that Buddhism is about how to be truly happy, so I have been studying the new research field of "happiness studies," which focuses on the objective measures and causes of happiness. Researchers have found three factors that reliably increase happiness as we grow older -- gratitude, generosity and reframing (seeing your situation from a more positive perspective). Not surprisingly, the Buddhist tradition offers these same three factors as spiritual practices for cultivating happiness. I would add two more -- curiosity and flexibility.

**Gratitude.** When I ask audiences what they like about being older, people often answer "Gratitude," and then say what they are grateful for: grandchildren, good health, free time, wearing what they want, the chance to travel, giving back to the community. One person included the ham sandwich she had just had for lunch. I have an exercise I call the "thank you" prayer. People repeat the words "thank you" silently to themselves and watch what comes up. It's amazing how many and how readily images of gratitude come to mind.

**Generosity.** One happiness study reported that if giving weren't free, drug companies could market a great new drug called "give back" instead of Prozac. It's scientifically proven: giving back and helping others makes us feel happier and more content. Giving is a universal spiritual value taught by every religion, and the desire to give back naturally increases as we age. It is part of our emerging role as community elders --

something we can do into our sixties, seventies, eighties and beyond. Giving is truly a spiritual practice, and it naturally lifts our spirits. My new book [\*Aging As A Spiritual Practice: a Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser\*](#) offers many tangible methods to cultivate a generous spirit. Among these is a contemplative exercise from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that allows us inwardly picture recipients of our generosity and direct compassionate feeling toward them.

**Reframing.** Aging includes its share of reverses, losses and sorrows. What makes the difference is our attitude about them. If a bad knee means we can't jog anymore, we needn't despair; we can take up swimming. If we lost money in the recession, we can cherish what we still have. If we become ill, we rejoice when we recover. I have developed a meditation called "Vertical Time" that focuses on the positive aspects of the present, rather than regrets of the past and worries about the future. We tend to think of time as linear and horizontal, but it is also vertical -- one breath at a time. Vertical Time is really breath-based reframing.

**Curiosity.** Curiosity is an important attitude to cultivate as we age. There's a tendency to hunker down in our old familiar routines. It's good to resist that temptation. Physical exercise grows new muscle, mental activity grows new brain cells, emotional engagement lifts the spirit. Curiosity keeps us young; we need to cherish it. If you see an interesting ad for a wildlife class, consider taking it. If you go into a bookstore, try browsing in sections you don't usually visit. If you haven't seen a friend in too many years, reach out. Children are naturally curious, and we can be too.

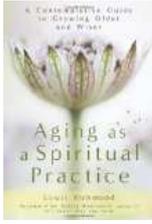
**Flexibility.** Things change as we age, and some of those changes are irrevocable. Our youthful stamina is gone forever; a dying friend will never return. In the face of these changes, it's important that we not become rigid and stuck in our ways. With every reversal comes new opportunity. No matter what the issue, no matter how big the problem, there is always something constructive that you can do. Never give up, never let aging get the better of you. This is how the "extraordinary elderly" do it -- the ones who have beaten the odds to enjoy their old age to the very end.

**The Spiritual Life.** A spiritual perspective on aging is not just for personal transformation; it is a medicine for longevity and health. Research shows that people with an active involvement in church or spiritual community live on average seven years longer than those who don't.

These five practices for aging well really work; science says so, common sense says so, and every religion says so. [\*Aging As A Spiritual Practice\*](#) builds on these truths to treat the process of aging as an opportunity for inner transformation. We deserve to enjoy our aging; it is our reward in the continuing adventure of living a whole and fulsome life.

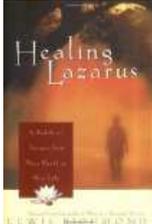
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**[Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser](#)**

**[by Lewis Richmond](#)**



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