

Ageing positively with spiritual capital: The essence of meditative journey Nilanjana Sanyal* and Manisha Dasgupta**

Abstract

Myths associated with ageing often revolve around stereotypes related to decline in terms of functionality. It is of prime importance to deconstruct such myths and, instead, understand the process of ageing as an ongoing development. The concept of positive ageing comes at the foreground to help conceive it from a global perspective. The article deals with enriching the process with spiritual resources to result in self-growth of the senior being. Meditation through myriad avenues may be inculcated into the self-system to engage in this positivistic development to feel the vibes of Divinity in the self. The significance of meditation, especially in terms of breath, *mantra* like the *Gayatri mantra*, mindfulness practice and *AUM* chanting have been discussed. The intricate relationship of the chanting with the seven different *chakras* of the body has also been elaborated. The spiritual journey of the elderly 'sage' has finally been highlighted in terms of gero-transcendence.

Key words: positive ageing, spirituality, meditation, divinity

Life is a thrilling mystery. It is vast and limitless. But we get limited by our concepts, ideas, and beliefs. This is our 'Avidya,' the ignorance regarding true meaning of life and its existence. We have not learnt to observe our life, hence we are lost in our limitations. Sensorium-tinted 'glass of life' results in hedonistic attainment and materialistic attachments. The thriving contents of life are our breathing process, our sense organs and mental processes to prompt our experientiality. The whole life is basically the summation of experiences. Experiences are pleasant or unpleasant, making us happy or unhappy. The count of happiness and its myriad elements are within the periphery of Psychology. Psychology as a subject is a lens to look at life subjectively in individualistic frame, to assess its folds. The need is felt to use psychological concepts and principles to help understand senior individuals so as to have sound quality of life and engage in positive ageing. It may be noted that spectacular medical and scientific advancement has increased the number of individuals residing in the top of the age pyramid. This miraculous fact is indeed an important reason for human beings to be proud of their achievements. However, the added years of one's life appear to be less cheerful if it is accompanied and burdened with prolonged illness and existential suffering. Even, the prevailing pandemic situation across the globe in terms of the novel coronavirus, has pinpointed different valuable lessons that humanity was unmindful of earlier regarding the unpredictability and frailty of life. Ageing thus appears to pose as a major population problem across the globe. The challenges posed by ageing at different levels is being felt palpably by countries throughout the world. The elderly population is projected to become 21 per cent of the total population in the Indian nation in the following 50 years (Dutta, 2004). Hence is the urgent need to focus on this issue so that the elderly can age gracefully by gliding through life's sufferance and accepting the challenges unconditionally. The necessity is felt at this juncture to look deep within oneself to move ahead along one's 'inner journey' so as to 'feel and sense' the fragrance of existential bliss

and to embrace ageing along the positive wing (Sanyal and Dasgupta, 2021).

Meditation appears to be an essential yogic fulcrum to facilitate the inner voyage of the self toward realization and thereby transcendence by harping on one's spiritual capital. The present discourse attempts to shed light on to these avenues so as to nurture and nourish one's spiritual resources. In fact, increase in spirituality in the elderly can be best understood from a life-span perspective which is fostered by such practices.

Meditation: The inner flame of the Divine Self

Meditation may be regarded as a technique of purification of the individual at the psychic level (Fontana, 2004). The process involves using and polishing the powers of concentration and awareness to engage the mind in gradual relaxation. It enables the mind to gradually acknowledge and realize the divinity in one's own self. Spring-cleaning of the mind occurs spontaneously as a result. A person may use different exercises during meditative practices to connect with the breath or *prana*. Further, there may be other practices, that make the individual to work with subtle sensations arising in the body along with feelings and emotions. One may be trained to engage as an 'onlooker' of the trail of thoughts, emotions and feelings from a non-judgemental perspective. This may make the individual to inculcate a forgiving stance and develop compassion in general for fellow beings (Kornfield, 2005). Different techniques are often in vogue during the practice of meditation. Some important ones include breath meditation, using and repeating a *mantra*, practicing silence and being mindful of the trail of one's thoughts that continue spontaneously in a person. Such techniques automatically result in improving awareness of the individual and provide greater clarity to the self (Kristeller and Johnson, 2005). Its goal is to focus on a particular stimulus as much as possible. There are other characteristics of being non-striving, accepting, having patience, trust, letting go, being gentle, generous, empathic, and having a sense of gratitude and loving-kindness associated with it (Shapiro and Schwartz, 2000). Mindfulness practice involves

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being mindful of the body, feelings, mind and mind-objects (McCown et al., 2010). Thus, during meditation, the individual is gradually tuned to suspend himself/ herself from analysing the object(s) of awareness (Trungpa, 1976). This is expected to bring about transient changes at the neuronal level as well. Such changes, if reinforced and sustained through regular meditative practice sessions, may lead to permanent changes in the central nervous system.

Mindfulness meditation is a specific type of meditative practice, which encourages the individual to engage in greater flexibility as far as the object of awareness is concerned. Analytic or self-judgmental thought patterns are absent here. The breath is often used in *Vipassana* practice, which is a specific sub-type of mindfulness meditation, to re-engage the attention of the individual so that the mind is at least temporarily held in check from analytic thinking. The person embraces whatever arises in the arena of awareness without being judgemental in any form. Yet another meditation is *focused* or *directed meditation*, where the participant engages in any particular aspect of the self in a mindful manner. The elderly gradually realizes the impermanence of life through mindfulness practice and learns to become

Further, the symbolic *mandala* may be used during chanting in meditative practices from the traditional perspective. In fact, the *Sri Yantra Mandala* is regarded as one of the purest forms of sacred geometry, which symbolizes the self in its entirety (Huet, 2002). Both the masculine and feminine principles, qualities and *Shakti* are depicted in an aesthetic manner. It is traditionally used in *yoga* meditation exercises, being a Tantric ritual drawing (Rao, 1914; Zimmer, 1984). It may be noted at this juncture that a *mandala* has its origin in the Jungian perspective of understanding the self and includes both the anima and animus aspects (Jung, 1960). A *mantra* or *japam* may also be chanted during such exercises. For instance, Vedic mantras like the *Gayatri Mantra* may be chanted regularly to bring direct result on one's level of concentration and fearlessness. Further, the *Mahamrityunjay mantra* is another mantra, which, if chanted with faith and right pronunciation, is believed to heal oneself of any diseases and even purify the air around the person who is chanting the mantra. There are numerous other *mantras* that may be used in similar exercises. It is through the practice of 'silencing' the mind that one can go beyond the noisy chatter and bring in calmness and inner tranquillity. It then starts

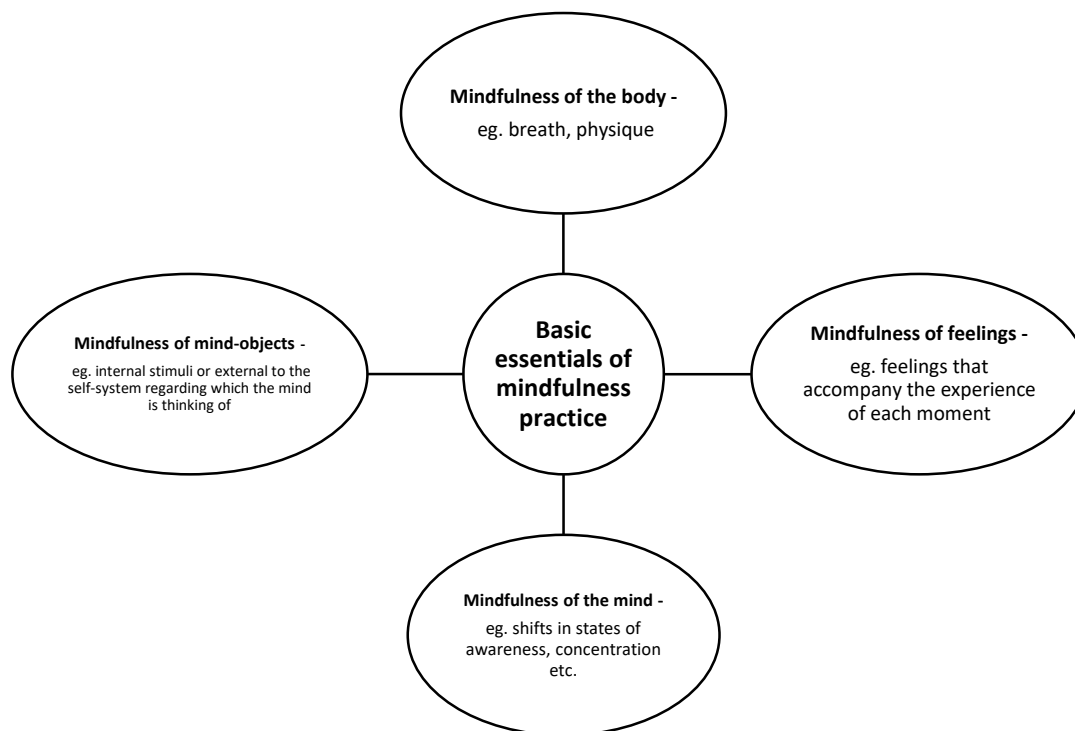


Fig. 1: Basic essentials of mindfulness practice (Source: authors)

non-attached to different stimuli (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Grabovac et al., 2011). He starts learning to enjoy each and every experiential moment of life and moves forward gracefully in the life-journey. Detachment from materialistic endeavours, also known as *vairagya*, becomes the signature mark of the integrated elderly.

permeating in other areas of life. When one is in silence, the individual is in a state of surrender. The person is essentially in the present, in awareness of his own *Atman*. This is the metaphysical self, because of his past *karma* (Bhawuk, 2011). The entire life then appears to the individual as a *miracle*. The person is at peace, is eternal *loveper se*, and merges

with the Divine Self for the moment. However, it is to be noted that the Buddhists deny the existence of the *Atman* and refer to the self as *anAtta* (Bhawuk, 2011). The *Atman* is non-perishable and eternal in nature. When *Atman* meets with the Supreme Being, *brahman*, through meditation, it is said to become a part of *Itself*. Hence, the Indianized concept of the self tries to expand infinitely to get united with the true self (Bhawuk, 2008).

divinity in the self. This is expected to claim superiority of human beings in the evolutionary ladder (Kuraber and Patil, 1978; Sanyal, 2017). In fact, silence is unnatural to man. We feel good if someone is talking to us or we are talking to somebody. We keep our senses busy with all distraction only to feel good temporarily - not knowing that this habit is the very source of all our miseries. In fact, we are afraid to face the ‘stillness’

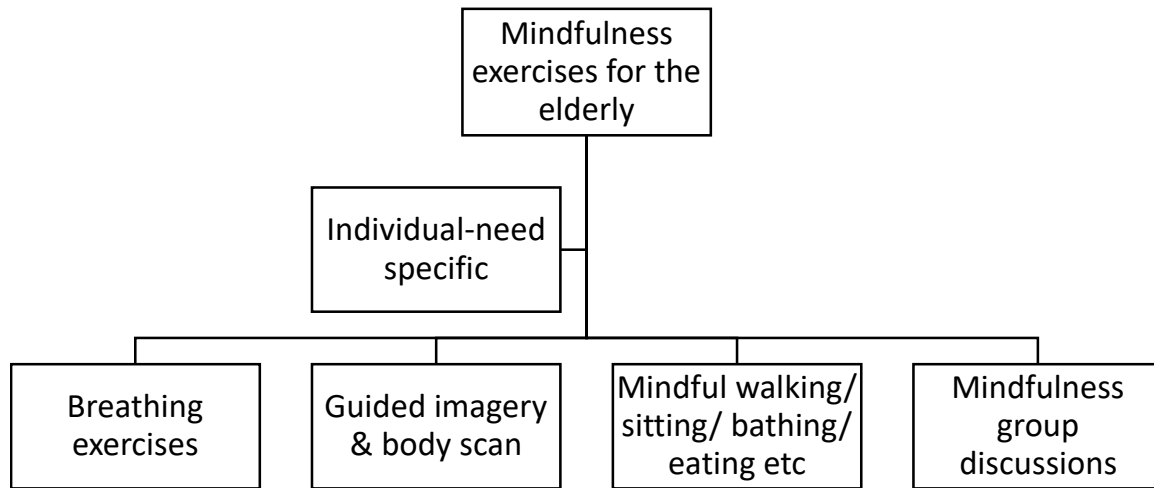


Fig. 2: Mindfulness exercises tailored for the elderly (Source: authors)

Moving from the active mind to non-active one is *transcendence* – the practicum of silence. To be peaceful, to be calm and quiet, to keep at bay the sharp splashes of materialism, to reach to the fringes of fulfilment and well-being, silence needs to be practiced. The inner world of *pure consciousness* may be attained through making the mind quiet. Anything that stops thought for a while, like watching a beautiful painting or listening to beautiful music gives us the glimpses of quiet inner world. In this relaxed state, left without demanding thoughts and senses, the mind dives deeper in silence to touch the ultimate bliss in consciousness (Sanyal, 2017). A silent mind engages in the practice of “inner silence” and is a means of connecting the self with the Divine. This is nothing but the ultimate reality or one’s own true self, and hence is one’s own divine nature (Palmquist, 2006). There is abundance of sense of gratitude experienced by the self (Emmons and Mishra, 2012; Wood et al., 2010). It is also to be noted that absence of any ‘noise,’ restlessness or being desirous of anything relates to silence. Such silent spaces are ‘crafted’ by practitioners of mystical path in meditative practices to yield peace, harmony and perfection. Silence seems to provide the conditions most conducive to psychic and spiritual activity. Observance and practice of silence advances one in spiritual endeavours. True silence heals, harmonizes and refreshes the self and offers positive vibes to others nearby, being the platform for manifestation of

and defensively occupy our chores with ‘distractors’ of varied kinds. We are creating *karma* only to suffer. In other words, we are victim of our past actions, which is referred to as *prarabdha*, or destiny, the sum total of one’s past thoughts, desires and actions. It is irrevocable and cannot change. Instead, one needs to sit quiet, be still, let the distractive energies return to its source, let the inner Eye open, let the inner Ear open, let the lotus of one’s heart blossom, let the light burst with splendour of million moons and engulf one into silence and ecstasy dispelling all darkness of eons and set him free once and for good. The person then becomes a selfless ‘giver’ in the truest sense. His warmth has authenticity and genuine concern for others in the society. The person engages in harmonious relationship with others and feels ‘connected’. This is because each and every moment has the wonderful ‘gift’ of *purushartha*, i.e., self-effort, which is independent of destiny and completely under one’s control (Speaking Tree, 13.03.2021). The being is free to choose every thought and action. The need is felt to understand the essence of mindfulness practices meant for elderly individuals to help craft their *purushartha*.

Mindfulness practices for the elderly

Some practices of mindfulness may be essentially tailored for senior individuals and their caregivers to help them attain positive ageing in a smooth manner (Sanyal and Dasgupta, 2021):

- One needs to take into consideration individual requirements of the elderly;
- Many senior individuals are less emotionally expressive and their needs also need to be kept in mind while engaging them in groups or on an individual basis;
- Simple directives may be useful for some elderly who have difficulty in comprehension;
- The ambience of mindfulness practices needs to be non-threatening and non-challenging in nature such that elderly individual(s) do not feel

one’s attitude becomes more proactive, life becomes affirming. The elderly may also pause for a while to retrospect the earlier days in a non-judgemental manner and reap a sense of gratitude for events to have chipped in the way they have been. This has been found to be associated with a sense of contentment, decreased death-anxiety and a feeling of abandonment for the individual (Kunz and Soltys, 2007; Franklin, 2005).

In addition, research and clinical studies have indicated that non-cultic forms of meditation may be

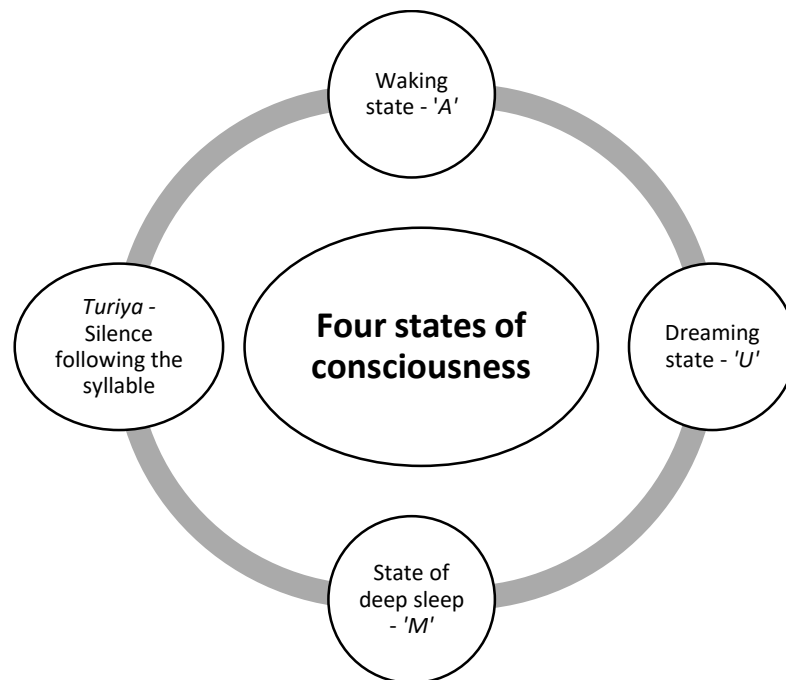


Fig. 3: Different states of consciousness (Source: authors)

restrained anyhow. The setting needs to be comfortable and accepting of their different limitation(s).

- Elderly individuals may be encouraged to participate in psycho-meditative and psycho-educative practices at regular intervals, if possible (Hooyman and Kiyak, 1988; Toseland, 1995). Support groups may be formed likewise resulting in small cohorts.

Furthermore, elderly individuals may be further engaged in mindful walking, mindful eating, mindful bathing and guided imagery exercises along with gently yoga, if possible. Group discussions may also be led at certain instances. Such practices have been found to be of much benefit for both caregivers as well as the elderly (McBee, 2008; Smith, 2006; McBee, Westreich, & Likourezos, 2004).

It may be noted that to *bring pause between two acts and thoughts* is anart of *mindfulness*. One can attain to great power of mind once he slows down and stops the randomness of thoughts. What one needs is clarity of thoughts. Once clarity is attained, the individual calms down, is kind and loving and life becomes so much different. Attentive power gets sharpened,

used to offer therapeutic health benefits (Canter, 2003). It is during meditation that individuals stay in a state of heightened awareness, yet at the same time, it is a relaxing condition since the person lets go of all expectations and desires. As such, an intricate balance is maintained by the individual during the state of meditation to both remain alert and yet at the same time, be detached from all distractions as far as practicable. The process is gradual, requires patience, tolerance and openness on the part of the individual. It is through meditation and yoga that the individual learns to live in the present moment and gives up living in the past, and daydreaming about the imaginary future. He learns to gracefully accept whatever comes his way. A life-philosophy gets inculcated within the individual consequently. The weeds of negative and ruminative thoughts get plucked away automatically. This is expected to provide a bountiful and pervading harvest of peace, tranquillity and happiness in the self. The elderly self has realizations of true meaning in life and cherishes the ripe moments in the one’s life.

The *A-U-M mantra* also appears to be pertinent in helping the senior individual to enrich his spiritual

capital. The following section attempts to highlight its significance in the present context.

Meditation on the A-U-M

The phoneme *A-U-M* has commonly been used as a tool for meditation and *yogic* practice. Its significance and depth may be related to the *Mandukya Upanishads* according to which, time is the *summum bonum* of all that is divine, imperishable and potent. It relates to the *Pranava*, which means *shakti* and control. It implies the entirety of existence. The Upanishads also state that waking state, dreaming state, state of deep sleep and that of *turiya* are four different states of consciousness (Sanyal, 2017). The first three states are denoted by the sounds ‘a’, ‘u,’ and ‘m,’ which when conjoined form the syllable *AUM*. The fourth state relates to the silence that follows the syllable and is known as *turiya*.

The fourth state is referred to in the *Mandukya Upanishads* as the *Atman*. The *Atman* continually witnesses the other three states of consciousness, which are independently unaware of each other. In other words, the *Atman* serves as a ‘*sakshi*’, witness, the one which is ever-present in all the three states. It engages in self-observation. It is the *Brahmn*, the

floodgates of inner blissfulness and help getting rid of the false sense of ‘doer-ship’ to pure Witness of all happenings. This helps the elderly to explore the journey within to the Witness. It is state of awareness, awareness of all that ego does, but never judges. This practice lifts the person up to a state where he is no longer at the mercy of external forces; he is the Witness, remaining unscathed to whatever happens. Daily practice of *Sakshibhav* meditation gives the elderly the mastery over one’s uncontrolled behaviour. The individual is no longer consumed by old habits. The practice of awareness keeps one rooted to the present and not imprisoned in the past. The individual gradually grows out of the need for anger and frustrations. This meditation can be practiced by means of few simple exercises as follows:

- ❖ Feel being in the present in the freshness of ‘Now.’ A few seconds of thoughtless ‘Now’ can give one genuine experience of who one is in essence. Pure mind is silent but having the vast expansion of timeless bliss. That is ‘You’ in essence.
- ❖ Listen to soulful music, and find time to surround

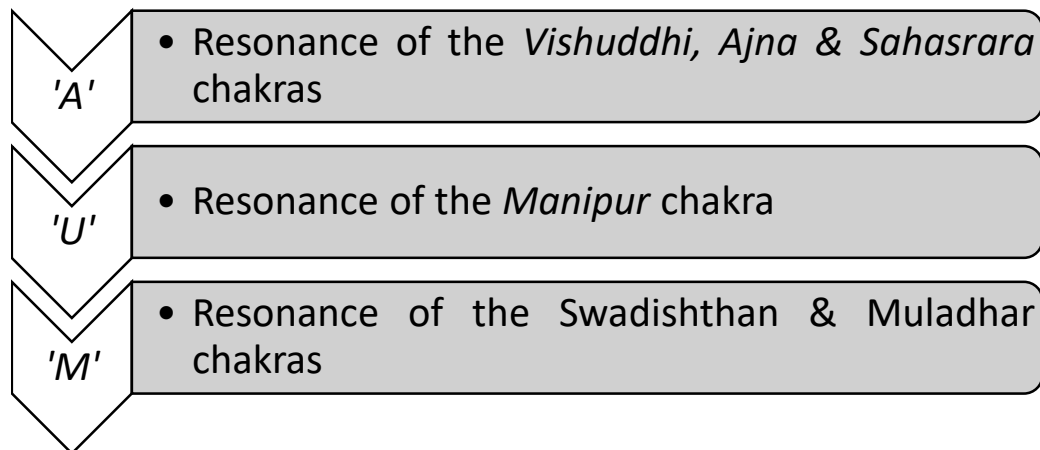


Fig. 4: ‘Aum’ meditation in relation to the seven different chakras (Source: authors)

truth, the one that is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. In fact, *Sakshibhav* meditation banks on this concept to help arrive at a calm state of mind. It enables one to gradually learn to observe the platter of life in oneself in a non-judgemental manner. As one wakes up to one’s *Witnessing Consciousness*, he/ she tends to be in spontaneous love with Mother Earth. This is the moment when he/ she is in sync with earth energy. The air, water, fire, earth and space all that make one’s body-mind breathe, will celebrate the symphony of life. *Sakshibhav Meditation* is just to create a few minutes or moments of quiet awareness of our natural incoming and outgoing breaths, awareness of sensations of our body, awareness of the insanity of mind as it is. Such moments of awareness, not getting engaged with thoughts or emotions, pains and pleasures, being only the witness (*sakshi*), which is non-judgemental awareness, will gradually open

yourself with incenses of sacred aroma, just chant that you are light, you are calm, you are a happy soul. As such you have to enter into your own self-room and reprogram it with sacred sounds, smells, and all that which cleanses it so that the intuitive supra-conscious domains open for you to be your natural self again. You can view yourself as the child of eternal light and see how this feels. You become an embodiment of peace as a consequence.

Now the *Being* is in the state of ‘flow’ and inner harmony is attained (Csikszentmihalyi, 1980).

Thus, the chanting of or contemplation on *A-U-M* aids an individual to relate to the four different states of consciousness and takes him/ her to the Truth. The chanting of ‘a’ makes the individual conscious of one’s waking state and results in vibrations of the *Vishuddhi, Ajna* and *Sahasrara* chakras. Furthermore,

the *Manipur* chakra is activated by the chanting of 'u' and the chanting of 'm' acts on the *Swadishthan* and *Muladhar* chakras. The chanting of *Aum* activates and balances all chakras, thus leading to optimization of the autonomic and limbic systems of the nerves.

The likely consequence is engaging the individual in a realm of quintessential tranquillity, which is auspicious and non-dual by nature. Silence prevails the moment. However, it is unseeable, ungraspable, uncharacteristic, unthinkable and indescribable. It is then that individuals can find divinity in the stillness of their being – in the stillness of the body and the stillness of one's mind. The '*Cloud of Unknowing*' gradually dissolves to help the individual to find the True Self (Bhawuk, 2011). One can thereby engage in the journey to the Divine Self by focusing within. He can soar to higher levels of consciousness, to the world that offers relative victory over the material world, where one finds perfect equilibrium in every set of circumstances. The self engages in transcendental connection with the divine and becomes integrated, resulting in clarity of thinking and problem-solving (Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Picard, 1948). Hence, the concept of gero-transcendence appears to be pertinent at this juncture as follows:

Gero-transcendence: An ingredient of positive ageing

Tornstam (1994, 1997, 1999a, 1999b) introduced the concept of gero-transcendence and referred it as intricately related to the essence of positive ageing. Gero-transcendence is regarded to lead an individual to a new perspective in life. A shift in meta-perspective is usually observed from a materialistic and rational view of the world on the part of the elderly to a more cosmic and transcendental one because of gero-transcendence. This is often accompanied by a significant increase in satisfaction with life as a whole, generative perspective and wisdom. Experiential changes among senior individuals are bound to be associated with gero-transcendence. The individual experiences a redefinition of self and its relationships with others owing to the process of the development of gero-transcendence. Consequently, a new understanding of fundamental existential issues develops over time (Wadensten, 2005; Gambial (2001).

The marks of gero-transcendence are conceived as alterations at the ontological level, namely, *the cosmic level, the level of self, and the level of social and personal relations*. The cosmic level may be comprehended in terms of time and space, connection to earlier generations, meaning of life and death, understanding the mystery of life and experiencing the macro-cosmos in micro-cosmos contexts. Further, the self may be related to self-confrontation, decrease in egoism, development of body and self-transcendence, understanding of the child self within, and ego-integrity. Finally, the level of social and individual relations hint at alterations in meaning of

life, emancipated innocence, understanding the importance of interpersonal relationships as well as others' roles, modern asceticism and everyday wisdom, which gets manifested in myriad interpersonal relationships (Tornstam, 1997). Tornstam's perspective on gero-transcendence may be related to Jung's (1960) conception of the collective unconscious implying that it has a bearing on the *apriori* of the organism. All these perspectives can be conceived to have a common thread.

It is meditative practice in different forms, that helps the elderly individual to engage in transcendental progression along their spiritual bon-voyages. Gero-transcendence culminates both as a product as well as a process. The senior being then has an integrated and flexible self, and adopts a generative outlook towards life as such. He/ she is revered for his/ her wisdom, rich experiences and for the distant 'life-road' traversed.

Conclusive comments

Life is a journey with multi-dimensional resources like genetic, physical, intellectual and emotional as well as summated realizational ability from encountered life experiences. The more we advance in life, that is, in age, the more obvious becomes the knowledge that the supreme power is there in 'Cosmos' and not in our humane superiority. Life seems embedded in materialistic context to call for appropriate '*karma*' to pay back our '*Prarabdha*,' but realization of the inner calmness in sync with cosmos in the frame of blissful '*Atman*' should be the goal/mission of life. During youth, the speed to look after our earthly need is prominent; at an older age, the tune of detachment from worldly context automatically slows down this speed. Elders need to be aware of this transformation and should wilfully imbibe the strategies to touch the fringes of transcendence through meditative practices. The true brightness of human life and existence is expected to get wrapped up by flow experience...there would be fearless 'death-step,' sense of highest fulfilment and a graceful look towards illumined boundary beyond life in transcendence.

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