



Learning How to Embrace Life in the Face of Death

IT'S A COOL MORNING IN LATE SPRING, clouds just starting to melt into soft blue sky. Retired physician Ron Naito comes to the door with a warm smile. Stopping briefly to pet his three cherished cats, he settles in to talk about mindfulness. It's a topic he has explored for many years but it has even deeper meaning for him now.

Ron has recently completed his tenth month of aggressive chemotherapy for advanced pancreatic cancer – many more months of treatment than he was ever predicted to survive. While he has responded beyond all expectation to this grueling regimen, it has taken a visible toll. He is noticeably frail and, with his customary medical precision, he notes that he is managing 10 different post-treatment symptoms.



But his physical well-being is not the focus of his attention.

A revered mentor and teacher to countless medical professionals, a physician greatly beloved by his patients, and a profoundly effective teacher to medical students about the importance of presence in medical practice, Ron's focus now is very personal.

A teacher still, he wants to help people better understand how mindfulness has helped him find peace within the unyielding reality that, despite the early success of his treatments, he has a fatal illness. He will die from pancreatic cancer.

WHEN RON RECEIVED HIS GRIM DIAGNOSIS ALMOST A YEAR AGO, he decided immediately to explore ways to find more ease with the dire situation so suddenly thrust upon him. He had had a “sporadic” mindfulness practice for decades, and had often recommended the practice to his patients. But now he wanted to immerse himself deeply in the mindfulness practice of Conscious Dying.

The challenge for anyone with terminal illness, he explains, is that you know you are dying but how do you live, truly live, in the face of dying?

Difficult emotions that naturally arise are often a huge barrier to living fully in the shadow of death. Fear about how the illness will unfold, fear of a vast unknown that seems beyond human comprehension, and profound sadness about leaving so much behind.

“When you have a fatal illness, you're inevitably going to experience sadness and fear,” Ron says quietly. “These are real emotions, and they are fully justified. But what my meditation practice helps me see is that

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it’s just emotion. Once you embrace the emotion, it will pass. The only thing that exists is the present moment. And being fully in the present brings me more calm, a greater sense of peace.”

With a calmer mind he has found more acceptance of his situation. “Pancreatic cancer is not a scary monster to me anymore. It is what it is, but it’s not a scary monster.”

Mindfulness has also given Ron a vital key to understanding that, after so many years of busy-ness and doing, his life now is about being. “When you start to practice meditation you realize that much of your life you’ve been asleep, doing doing doing and thinking thinking thinking in order to be successful. But you haven’t really been awake yet. Your final months may actually be the richest, most fulfilling portion of your whole life because approaching death is a chance to be much more awakened.”

This awakening for Ron has brought precious gifts. Most importantly, he feels more deeply connected to himself and others. Mindfulness has helped him find forgiveness, to bring loving closure to difficult relationships. “It takes some courage,” he says, “but when you’re meeting that person at a deep level it seems like the most natural thing in the world.”

And his heart has opened in new ways. “I’ve discovered that each of us is perfectly fine as we are; we don’t have to change a thing. And most fulfilling of all is to experience all the love that’s everywhere — so much more than I’ve comprehended.”

Part of Ron’s Conscious Dying practice is to have a death prayer. His is very simple: “Surrounded by love, I’m going home.”

MINDFULNESS IS NOT A RACE OR A COMPETITION, BUT A PRACTICE. Some days Ron is restless or doesn’t meditate at all. Sometimes it’s only for five minutes, and others for hours at a time. He considers himself to be a beginner and that it will always be thus. But his desire to deepen his practice continues, so much so that he has signed up for a 13-day silent retreat next month.

As he shares these thoughts about how mindfulness has helped him navigate the difficulties of his illness, Ron exudes a sense of deep tranquility. Sometimes tears flow, there are smiles and laughter, as his emotions come and go with ease. He does indeed seem fully present, fully awake and alive – even as his body continues to shut down.

When the conversation ends he takes a moment to stand outside, drinking in the clear skies and sunlight of the morning. “It’s going to be a beautiful day,” he says with a broad smile.

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