

Snow Lion Lecture Series: Death and Dying
VICTORY OF ILLNESS



Talk by **MATYA KOTLIER** (1956 - 2006)

Presented October 4, 2005 at Snow Lion Meditation Store, Toronto

I want to welcome everyone to the Snow Lion Meditation Store here in Toronto. I am absolutely delighted to see you all. Some of you I know quite well and some of you I've never met before. But I'm delighted to be here and to be able to share with you a bit of my experiences over the past three years. I say three years because it was just slightly over three years ago that I was diagnosed with advanced metastatic breast cancer. And that diagnosis became a big marker in my life. At that time, I was told the breast cancer had already advanced from my breasts into my lymphatic system, and from my lymphatic system into my bones and skeleton. It really brought my life to a dramatic halt.

Three years ago, I was working full time as a paralegal in a legal clinic at the refugee office. (I'm delighted to see some of my former co-workers here to share the evening with me.) I loved my work and was very happy with my family - my husband Ricardo and our two little girls who at the time were, I believe, 6 and 9). I had quite a busy life. I was also involved a bit with some community work with the children's day-care. When I was faced with this diagnosis, I really did not know what to do.

I was overcome and overwhelmed, really, with fear; fear about the future and in particular about the concern that I might not have as much future to live as I had anticipated. I asked my oncologist for a prognosis, even though I didn't really want to hear it. I don't put too much importance on that prognosis, because, after all, a prognosis is a statistic and I consider anyone to be much more than a statistic. The prognosis I was given at that time (August 2002) was 24 to 36 months. I think that was about 37 months ago or 38. So, I faced this diagnosis. I was overcome by fear. I was overcome by sadness. Sadness, particularly because our daughters were so young and I worried about their future, their future possibly without their mom. Together this fear and this sadness really immobilized me. But, I thought "Well, okay, what choice do

I have but to do the best I can to face the situation head on.” And I really had no idea at the time what that meant. What I did recognize was that my life up until that point, my beliefs, or my lack of beliefs, possibly, my value system, who I thought I was, had completely left me unprepared to cope with such a diagnosis. So I thought well, I’ll try to rise to the occasion, but of course, I had no idea what that meant.

Shortly thereafter, I decided to leave my job because the stress of my diagnosis was far too much for me to try to focus on my work, which was quite demanding, as much as I loved it. And also the stress of my health situation was far too much for me to really properly do my work. So, shortly after the diagnosis, I made the decision to walk away from my job, which was a very hard thing for me to do, because I loved my work and because I identified so much with it.

So what to do? Essentially, I began a search. I began to look around and try to figure out what I was going to do with myself to try to cope with this diagnosis. I began to talk to people and I began to go to places that were very helpful for me. Very early on I was told about Wellspring in Toronto and I went there and spoke to someone wonderful by the name of Mary Vachon. Nice to see her tonight. I heard her story about her illness and how that changed her life. I learned soon after that about The Healing Journey Program at Princess Margaret Hospital and I became involved quite quickly with Alistair Cunningham’s program, The Healing Journey.

I also went to a conference about health and spirituality at the University of Toronto and again, I heard someone’s story first hand of what had occurred in her life, which I won’t go into in detail. But hearing all these experiences of people really began to open my mind. And the reason I say that is because I began to hear first hand from people who were genuine beyond a doubt, about their own experiences, about their own diagnosis of “terminal illnesses” and how for each of them, in very different ways, their illnesses became a catalyst for spiritual openings in their life. They told me a bit about their different experiences. In each of these cases they had seemingly transcended their illnesses, or their illnesses had gone into remission. They were in good health and along the way they had gone through spiritual transformations. I have to tell you that up until this point I was someone who was not at all spiritually

oriented. I had no spiritual orientation towards life, no spiritual practice, no religious beliefs whatsoever. And I didn't really feel that there was anything that was missing from my life.

But after my diagnosis, I realized very clearly that I did not have the strength, that I did not have the faith it was going to take for me to cope successfully with the cancer. So I wanted to have some sort of thing, some spiritual belief, but I had no personal experience whatsoever on which I could base such a belief.

So I did a couple of things. I met with a very spiritually orientated psychiatrist, who I had been referred to. This psychiatrist believed very strongly in prayer and I had never prayed in my life, nor had I ever opened the Bible to read even a page of it. So I remember for the very first time in my life, I prayed and I honestly didn't know if I was praying inwardly, or outwardly or to whom or to what I was praying. But interestingly enough, what my first prayer was about, and this amazes me when I look back on it. My first prayer was not to heal from my cancer. My first prayer was to know whether there is a spiritual dimension to life, because I so very much wanted to have some sort of spiritual connection. It was completely absent in my life. And so I felt that I had to know this truth. So I made this prayer - a very genuine and heart-felt prayer.

Shortly after that I began to see a psychotherapist, a very spiritually oriented psychotherapist, whose psychotherapy methodology was based almost solely on the idea that if we get in touch with our intuition, if we get in touch with our inner voice and our inner wisdom, (which is just another way of describing our intuition), that we can successfully use our intuition as the principle guide in our life. And I began to learn a very simple technique that my psychotherapist taught me. I won't go into detail about it, but it was how to develop a type of dialogue with myself, with my inner voice.

For example, I remember, this was just the second time that I was meeting with my therapist, and I was walking to his home office. It was snowing. Just about a block from his office not far from here, I stopped in the snow and I thought to myself, "O, my God, Matya, I didn't ask myself the greatest hope question. "What's The Greatest Hope

Question?” This is this technique that Larry is teaching me. So I stopped in my tracks and I said to myself: “Matya, what is my greatest hope for my session with Larry today?” And I took a couple of deep breaths and I waited to see if an answer arose in my consciousness. And an answer came to me as clear as a bell in the form of a thought. And that answer was that my greatest hope for my session with Larry that day was to know whether or not there is a spiritual dimension to life.

So I proceeded onto Larry’s office and I went in and I said hello to him, and he asked me if I had asked myself The Greatest Hope Question?

And I said, “Yes, Larry.”

And he said “What’s the answer?”

And I said, “Well Larry, the answer is, my greatest hope is to know whether there is a spiritual dimension to life.”

And as I uttered those words, as they came out of my mouth, I entered spontaneously into a radically altered state of consciousness. And in this radically altered state of consciousness, the room in which I was filled with this intense glowing, glistening golden light. Everything within my field of vision no longer looked solid and material as everything does now. But it looked like illuminated, translucent, glowing energy. And believe me, there were no drugs involved. (laughter) Well, come to think of it there was, I hadn’t quite dropped coffee from my diet. I have to admit, I had a cup of coffee that morning, but no hypnosis. Larry wasn’t expecting this. I certainly wasn’t expecting it. I had never heard or read about any experience even remotely similar to this even though I admit I’m a Trekkie. But I’ve never seen it on a Star Trek show that was anything like this and I was absolutely amazed. Larry said something to me and I said to Larry “I have no idea Larry, what you just said to me, but I’m having this extraordinary experience and I just want to go with it and I’ll tell you about it later.”

And so about 45 minutes later, by Larry’s watch, I explained to him what I had been experiencing. And besides the translucent light, which in itself was pretty amazing,

what I experienced was this extraordinary state of being. It felt as if time did not exist. It felt as if I was in a realm beyond time. Absolute stillness. And I felt as if I was in complete utter harmony with everything in existence. I don't mean just people but all of life. Everything in existence, and I was no longer just little Matya, but I was part of an infinite totality of life - and not only a part of it, an integral part and in complete harmony with the rest of existence.

And I felt a tremendous sense of love, as if I was being loved myself and that I myself in my inner most core, my inner most being, consisted of love itself. And I sensed an extraordinary sense of peace, absolute peace. I had nothing left to desire or want or need and there was an absolute lack of vulnerability to anything. - and - a sense of bliss. I say bliss even though that word was not part of my working vocabulary at the time, but I didn't know what else to call it - an utter sense of bliss. And then beyond that as if that weren't enough, I felt that my desire to overcome, to transcend the cancer, was not just a desire on my part, but it was actually a possibility. Not that it would necessarily happen, but that it was something that was possible. And this state continued and only diminished when Larry engaged me in conversation. As soon as I quieted and stopped talking to him, I would enter again into this state of being.

I began to experience this state of light time and time again, over and over again; initially, only in my therapist's office (with the exception of the second session where nothing out of the ordinary happened) and later in my own home, in the kitchen, or wherever throughout the house. I had not even yet learned to meditate. So this, as you can imagine, began to... I shouldn't say began, but... even that first experience, it transformed me from the inside out. All of a sudden my sense of who I was and my sense of life, expanded tremendously. I began to acknowledge that life no longer seemed to be exactly as it had appeared to be. Still, I wasn't sure what life was all about, but I knew it was very, very different from what I had understood before. And I continued to have a series of very unusual experiences. I don't have time tonight to go into all of them, but I will mention a couple.

One day I was walking westward on Bloor Street near Christie. I noticed that when people who were walking toward me, got maybe fifteen feet in front of me, they no

longer looked to be regular people. They appeared to be only black silhouettes. Behind them I could see only a glowing orange and golden sort of aura of light. I couldn't tell how old they were, how beautiful they were, or whether they had good taste in clothing or not. I couldn't tell anything about them. All I could see was a silhouette. I was wearing sunglasses at the time so I took them off to see whether it was some kind of optical illusion but it had nothing to do with my sunglasses. And only as people got a couple feet before me did they again transform back into their ordinary appearance. As I was watching this and astounded by it, I was filled with a kind of an intuitive sense of knowing. And what this intuitive understanding was that we are all at our core the same, and that judging people by either their outward appearance or their outward characteristics was really a waste of energy and a misguided energy. And what I had to understand is that we are all connected in our core and we are all very much the same.

It was a very intense lesson about judgement and misguidance, about this error in passing judgement on other people. Always having a skeptical side, I still thought maybe there was some kind of optical illusion involved, but just a couple weeks after that, I was walking northward on Yonge Street, and I had the very same experience. But much to my delight, since I was walking toward the northern direction, there was no setting sun there. And so of course, I knew it had nothing to do with the sun. That was quite reassuring.

The last experience I will go into was maybe the most moving for me. One day, and just as spontaneously as the previous experience, I entered into a radically altered state of consciousness. This time it was one of unconditional love. I will explain what that means. It means that everyone that I came in contact with, I felt as if they were my soul mate and I had this deep, deep sense of love for them. During this time, which was not a matter of minutes, it was not a matter of hours, and it was not a matter of days, it was a matter of weeks. During this time, I didn't experience any negative emotions. That means I didn't experience any impatience, I didn't experience any irritation or any anger or even any judgement of anyone else. I did experience judgement of myself, interestingly enough, but not of anyone else. And so, even with our young children at home, and any of you who have kids know that it is pretty hard

to go for even a few minutes without having any judgement or any irritation, or impatience with your children. For these days, for these weeks, I was just in utter harmony with everyone. And it didn't matter who it was; it could be the teller at the bank, it could be people waiting at the vet's office, it could be the clerk at Rona's Hardware, I had no negative emotions, no judgement, for anyone, nothing. I remember driving on the way to my kid's day-care and someone made some sort of jerky, negative, nasty maneuver in traffic and rather than being irritated by him, I felt this deep sense of utter love for this person. I had no idea who he was. I could only see his silhouette, because the sun was (the sun always seemed to be there), the sun was in the background. It was unbelievable for me.

During this time I remember having to go for a hospital visit to get results for some diagnostic tests. And any of you who have had to face this, you know that it brings up a lot of anxiety. Not only wasn't I feeling any anxiety during this hospital visit, but I realized that I had lost all sense of fear about my illness. And this was pretty amazing because just weeks before that I had been utterly filled with fear and with sadness about my illness. And yet in this state, I realized that I had lost completely all sense of fear about my illness. I was no longer fearful about what was going to happen in the future. And on the contrary, I felt at utter peace, and completely in harmony with everyone and everything. And I was flooded with a sense of gratitude, gratitude for everyone and everything that in an infinite amount of ways supports me in my life from moment to moment and from day to day.

So all of these things coming together transformed me from the inside out and I feel that although I might look like the same person I was, I am a completely different. I view everything differently, including myself and everyone else, the world around me and life itself differently.

And I realized along the way when I went to study meditation (I was fortunate enough to take a meditation class from Philip Starkman, a teacher at Spring Rain Sangha who holds classes at Wellspring) that meditation was going to be a tremendously powerful tool in my life. I realized this even though meditation initially was a difficult thing for me to do. It was difficult for me to sit still on the cushion. It was difficult for me to stop

fidgiting. It was difficult for me to make time to meditate, but I realized from the very beginning that meditation was going to help me cut through all of the obstacles, all of the gook, all of the illusions and things that normally prevent me from being that authentic self that I had experienced spontaneously during those times of altered consciousness.

So what I realized along the way is that these experiences were not so much spiritual gifts. Well they were spiritual gifts, but they were not coming from something outside of me, at least in my interpretation, but these experiences peeled away, quite dramatically, layers of beliefs, of habits, perceptions, various things, and they enabled my inner self, my authentic self to be able to shine through without being obscured.

And I was so moved by these experiences - having tasted these little tastes of complete peace and harmony and love, I realized that this was the most important thing for me in my life. In other words, I would try to do whatever I needed to do to continue this process of peeling away things. I've also realized along the way that we are all the same. I've heard people say, that they've been meditating for years and they have never had experiences like these. But you see it doesn't matter because in our core, our authentic self, we are all the same. We are all peaceful, loving, harmonious beings. We all are. Regardless of our self-image, regardless of what we have done in this lifetime, or other lifetimes, for that matter. We are all the same.

And I've lost my train of thought. I just want to comment on about why I lost my train of thought. It is because when I came tonight I was in an altered state of consciousness and it wasn't one of these wonderful things, extraordinary states that I have been talking about. I've been in an altered state of consciousness because, unfortunately these last several weeks I've experienced a tremendous amount of back pain from these nasty little tumors that run up and down my vertebrae from top to bottom. From time to time they cause me a lot of pain. I try to do without pain medication, but lately just haven't been able to do that, so I've been taking a lot of codeine. Anyone who's been on codeine knows that it changes how you feel and it makes me quite groggy. It muddles my mind and I've never tried to talk publicly on

codeine before. I was wondering what that was going to be like. So sorry about that - you'll have to bear with me.

So having had a taste of these things I realize that for me it's so important in my life. I've come to understand that life is not a quantitative thing. It doesn't matter so much, how long you live, but it's how you live. And we all have the same potential. We all have the same potential. I was just fortunate enough that this illness scared me so much that it kind of gave me a jump-start on these things. I've been very fortunate to have these experiences, which give me dramatic tastes of what's possible in a very reduced amount of time.

So, what I was saying is that it doesn't matter whether or not you have these kinds of experiences, cause it's not the experience that's important. It's not the experience so much that stayed with me. What stayed with me and what's of true value are the insights, intuitive insights that I experienced as a result of those experiences.

I guess I just want to say that I think there's one thing that has become very clear to me over the past three years and that is that we do have one thing that we all have in common. And that is that we all want to be happy. I used to think that happiness was a little bit outside of myself. I thought happiness was being able to juggle various things and keep them all in the air at the same time. Satisfied with work, satisfaction with your family, your friends, right relationship, good health. You know, all these various things. And if you could get all of those things, then you would be happy. But by that measure, I should be the most miserable person in the world. Because I left my work which I loved and my health could be a whole lot better and I should be miserable, yet I am so filled with joy and this inner peace within me. It's just unshakeable. And even though I have moments where I get discouraged and even though I have moments when I could be fearful or worried, still there has been enough of my inner self that has been uncovered that I know it will never be covered up again.

And so I walk around with this sense of just absolute joy and delight to be alive. Gratitude for every breath I take. For every leaf on every tree that I see. There is just a sense of joy and peace and happiness. It doesn't matter what's going on in my life but

it's always there. It's always a part of me. And so, I'd like to thank you so much for coming out tonight. It's really a delight in sharing my journey with you. And I do encourage you, if any of you are associated with any kind of group, it doesn't matter what kind, anyone who would be interested in hearing my story, I welcome invitations to speak. And thank you.

Questions and Answers

Question:

Do I attribute my remission to my spiritual work or to ????

Matya: First I want to clarify that I am not in remission at all. My illness, the cancer, was by in large kind of stable for a couple years. And then began to grow and move. I am going to get some MRI results next week. But I am in no way in remission. So it has been active, and it has been causing me difficulty. I am getting around as well as I am right now because of the codeine I'm on. So, in the morning for a couple of hours before I am actually able to take the pain medication, I have a whole protocol of remedies that I take and then I eat. I won't go into all that in detail, but it's very difficult for me to get around, movement is difficult. I am moving very slowly. I have quite a bit of discomfort and pain. So, I would like to say that I am in remission, but I'm not.

Question:

With physical chronic pain how am I able to maintain my focus and not become negative and crusty and what not?

Matya: Well a couple of things. One, I just want to mention a remarkable experience that I've had in terms of pain and meditation, and then I'll answer your question, because it's really not an answer to your question. But, in studying meditation with Philip, I remember him talking about if one can use your pain as the focus during meditation - as the anchor, rather than you know, pulling back or I should say, pushing away the pain, if one can sort of open up to it and relax with it, the pain can transform

into something else that does not cause you suffering. And I thought well that sounds good but I can't quite imagine that happening. But I actually did experience it and it was on retreat. And so I did exactly what he suggested and that is I was focusing very, very single-mindedly on the pain and letting go of what I would normally do which is kind of want to push it away. The pain for a while really did transform. It began to feel not so much like pain, that was causing me suffering. But it felt like some kind of moving energy and it really didn't hurt. It wasn't causing me discomfort. So, what that taught me is that suffering is in a lot of instances, or maybe in all instances, is a state of mind. It's not something out there. Everything it seems to me is a mental state. And so it's how we perceive things. And so I was able to use meditation as a tool to change the way in which I was perceiving the pain and therefore it transformed. Now, I'm not able to do that very often and I'm certainly not able to do that when I'm not meditating. So how I deal with chronic pain, first of all, in the past three years, there have been long periods of time in which I have not had severe pain. I've had discomfort or low grade pain, which I just bear with.

How I'm able to keep my positive state of mind. I think it's because I've uncovered to a large enough degree this inner sense of joy and peace and happiness that is always with me, it's part of me, it always shines out. And so it's hard for me. I mean there are moments. You could talk to my husband and he'd be very clear that there are moments I get upset. There are moments I feel sad. There are moments where I feel some despair. But by and large considering my condition, considering my prognosis, most of the time I'm really quite content and it's because I've uncovered this core joy and peace within myself. So no matter what happens, it's there. It's shining out. Does that answer your question?

Question: How long did it take you to learn to meditate?

Matya: Well, I took a ten week course at Wellspring with Philip Starkman, who's sitting here on the floor next to me. And so I would say in that ten week course which is once a week I think for a couple of hours. That really gave me sort of the foundation, the basic technique. After that, it's up to you, it's all up to your determination, and it's all up to practice. It's all a matter of doing it on a regular basis. And doing it consistently.

The technique itself, couldn't be simpler. It just amazes me that focusing on your breath and watching the rise and fall of the abdomen can be such an extraordinarily powerful thing. You couldn't come up with anything more simple. It's really a matter of just doing it consistently and doing it with intention and genuine interest. It's easy to learn. The difficulty is doing it on a regular basis. That's the challenge.

Matya: The **question** is:

Have I made any other lifestyle changes for example, naturopathy, diet, etc., etc.?

I have. I started out on a conventional treatment, a hormone treatment and I was on that for quite a long, long time and quite early on I changed my diet rather radically. I went on an organic diet and stopped eating all processed foods. Stopped drinking caffeine, no alcohol and what not. And I do see a naturopath and I do use homeopathic remedies. For me, I think it's a very individual thing. The thing about cancer is, no one really knows what works and I don't think anyone can say with any kind of authority what is best to do, because if anyone knew that, we'd all be doing the same thing, right? So, it's really a matter of finding what's the right fit for you. And trying it out and seeing what feels right. And I would say go with your gut feeling, with your intuition. Because you could find a million people out there that would tell you that what they offer is the best thing to do and you have to decide.

Question: What have you been reading?

Matya: I've been doing so much reading and I always have a few books on the go at once. Gosh, so many things. And the codeine here is not helping. But, I'll just name a few of them. And then maybe I'll remember a few others. I remember one of the first books that I read just after my diagnosis that I found very inspirational was *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle. That was a wonderful book. And then as I became more interested in Buddhism, I'll let Philip mention some of those titles. Help me here Philip.

"The Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying" by Sogyal Rinpoche..

Stephen Levine's books are wonderful for example, "A Year to Live".

Yes, Live Your Life as if it's your last Year to live.

"The Zen of Living and Dying" by Philip Chapel.

"Graceful Exits: How Great Beings Die", edited by Sushila Blackman

"Final Passages" by...

There are so many more books. Snow Lion carries a very large selection. You can get them here in Toronto at the store or order them online at *snowlioncanada.com*.

I do invite you to come to our Web site, *springrainsangha.com* because I've been coordinating meditation retreats for our Sangha. In fact, maybe this is a good opportunity to mention that we have two upcoming retreats. One is a mindfulness, one day retreat. It's here in town in Scarborough. And we have another retreat coming up that's about an hour north of here. There'll be rides organized for that retreat and the second retreat, Philip will be teaching three different meditation practices and they are all healing practices: *metta* (loving kindness), *tonglin* (giving and taking), and *Powa* (transfer of consciousness). So if you go to our Web site, *springrainsangha.com*, we have a calendar, and there is also suggested readings on our Web site. So that might be helpful to some of you. And we have regular weekly meditation classes that Philip teaches on Tuesday nights from 7 to 9 p.m. Yes, and all of these, the class as well as the retreats are appropriate for the absolute beginner or seasoned meditators. So it gives you really quite a selection of things to try.

Question: Is the sense of joy and bliss that I uncovered, does it change my concept of death?

That's a great question.

I have experienced that my fear of death has crept up again. So, it's not as though I have no fear of death. I think is the reason that I sometimes get sad or sometimes fearful. But it absolutely has changed it and I think it's because in, for example, that first experience that I had - that state of light that I described that lasted about 45 minutes - One detail that I didn't give about that experience is that the therapist with whom I was sitting, his body and face transformed, utterly transformed, into about 12 or 13 different people, unknown people to me, from different historical time periods. And they looked just as real as he did. And at the time that I experienced this, I didn't have any particular thought or opinion about reincarnation whatsoever. I didn't believe it or disbelief it. I wasn't particularly interested in the issue. But after experiencing that and just from readings that I've done since then, but particularly from that intuitive insight that I brought away from that experience I do believe that this is just one life of many and so it's taken a lot of fear away from me about death, because I no longer feel that, well, this is it, when I die, I die; and that's it. I feel like this life is kind of a page or a chapter in a book that's going to go on for an infinite amount of time. And I do believe that things, you know, do not happen, I think things happen for a reason and that from my perspective I cannot see the reason, but I feel that my life is going, has some purpose because of the way it's going.

So, it gives me a much more expansive bird's-eye view about life. You know one of my personal goals is that whenever death comes, whenever that may be, I would really like to be able to, not just face it but really kind of welcome it with open eyes and an open heart. Because death is something that we all have to face. I am doing everything I possibly can do to stay alive and to stretch out my life as long as I can. But whenever death comes I just see it as a transition to another stage of life.

Question: I've talked a little bit about daily meditation and reading books and the question is have retreats benefited me.

I would say that that is an understatement. Daily meditation practice is really the foundation that we need to build, but the retreat practice is really the key opportunity that we have to intensify our practice and our experiences and take a leap forward. And so they really work together. So you need the daily practice. Without it you can't

expect to move forward on a retreat as you might like to, but if you don't have an opportunity to go on retreat, then you are really missing a wonderful opportunity. So, meditate every day and go on retreat as often as you can.

One last question. Yes?

(question is inaudible)

Oh, gosh. That doesn't qualify as a short question. I think I'm still trying to figure out what I believe. I would say that I guess I consider myself to be a student of Buddhism. I really feel that I am in diapers and I am still beginning to learn. So, I would say that I believe that everything is impermanent, that everything changes and that really the key to life is getting comfortable with that impermanence. And through meditation we can learn how to develop equanimity. So that when difficult things come up in our life we can confront them or accept them with equanimity. And it doesn't throw us off our track. Thank you.