

Radiant Seniors: The Graying of the Self-Realization Movement

by Herbert P. Weiss and Barbralu Cohen

For the last 20 years, Sylvia Cook has been in and out of a wheelchair, debilitated by painful arthritis. "I couldn't walk," she says now. And her arms and hands were so bad she sometimes could not operate her chair.

"So it was kind of funny," she says. "One day my caseworker came and said that if I couldn't work the chair by myself, I had to go to a nursing home. So I said, 'The hell with it. I'll get up.' And a year and a half ago, she did. She's been walking, with the help of a walker, ever since."

A member of Unity Church since she came to Boulder in the early 1970s, Cook, now 77, says she regularly meditates, even though she no longer can go to church regularly. "I depend on the higher power," she says. "If I didn't, I'd have been dead a long time ago. It's just having faith. That's all there is."

Like Cook, a growing number of seniors nationwide is walking down spiritual paths to reach self-realization.

Researchers estimate that New Agers represent 11 percent of the total United States population. Some believe that seniors represent about half of this group.

Ray Whitman, Ph.D., 57, an economist teaching at a University in Washington, D.C., says a mid-life crisis forced him to reevaluate his personal life including his ties to the Episcopal Church.

"My personal crisis created an interest to explore New Age beliefs and activities," he says. During his search, he learned how to cast astrology and numerology charts, attended metaphysical church services, practiced yoga, became a Life Spring graduate and sought advice of psychics and the counsel of gurus.

Today, Whitman is a devotee of Guru Mayi Chidvilasananda, the current head of the Siddha lineage of gurus. "I have a much clearer vision of the truth through the teachings of Siddha yoga than I received through the theology of the Episcopal Church," he says. "I don't need to search any more because I found my guru."

For other seniors too, seeking personal spiritual experiences becomes even more important than belonging to a particular religion or church. Just like Whitman, they are attracted to a wide array of spiritual disciplines and

youth. These people were raised in conventional roles. There's an outrageous feeling to it."

Certainly, Sylvia Cook has that outrageousness in her when she describes visiting a sports bar to watch the Broncos on TV, or at the end of an

older and wiser gives them a certain freedom to go exploring."

A search for spiritual meaning may begin for old agers when they are confronted with a health crisis or go through a life change such as a divorce or death of a partner, says Jonathan Adolph, senior editor of *New Age Journal*. "Any of these life events that cause reflection can be a trigger for examining New Age beliefs and many of these life changes occur in later life," Adolph notes.

More than 50 percent of age 50-plus adults are still entrenched in traditional religious practices, estimates John Garrett, director of marketing at SRI International's Value and Lifestyle Program. He puts these individuals, median age 55, into a marketing segment called Believers.

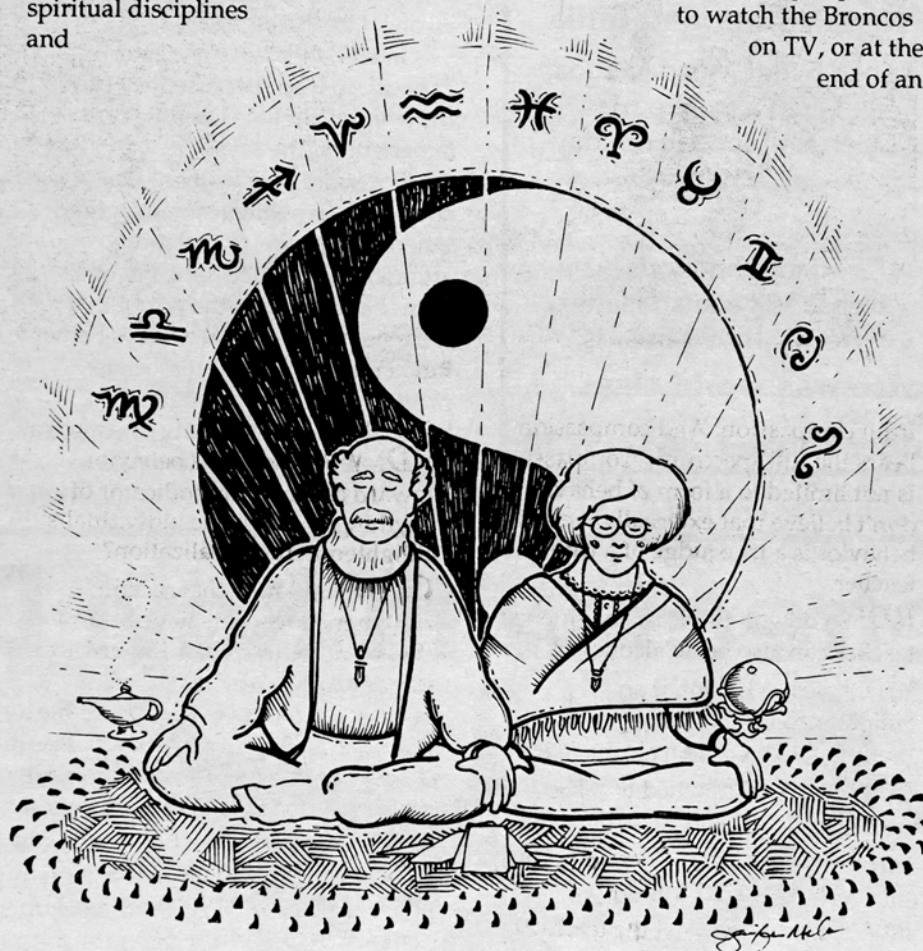
But Garrett notes that 25 percent of older adults fall into another marketing segment called Fulfilleds — these individuals, median age 48, are more likely to be open to nontraditional ways of doing things, he says.

Fulfilleds are more holistic and open to the ideas of Eastern religion than Believers and are more likely to take a look at why we are here as people and ask questions about life after death, Garrett says.

These individuals are also information-oriented, and intellectual religions are going to appeal to them much more than traditional religions, Garrett notes. "They need lots of information to fuel their belief systems," he says. "Any form of information is appealing to them. They are avid readers of books and magazines, and collectors of catalogues."

Even if Fulfilleds are not actively involved in New Age practices and philosophies, it is very important for them to be aware of and familiar with them, Garrett says. But if you compare Believers with Fulfilleds, the Believers may not even consider looking at any other traditional or alternative religions beside their own, he says.

As millions of baby boomers age, it



philosophies.

The phenomenon of seniors turning to alternative spiritualities is "more widespread than we know," says Victoria Howard, a founder and managing director of the gerontology program at Naropa Institute. "The nature of old age is contemplative," she explains. "But that's not supported in this society. We don't give it space. Old people also need to pass on whatever 70 or 80 years has brought them. And that's inherently a spiritual process."

Howard says it feels different for seniors to turn to alternative spiritualities than when younger people do. "It feels like a leap, rather than the logical progression it was for us. We shopped around for teachers, read books in our

interview when she says, "Thanks for the great rap!"

"While a minority of seniors become sticks in the mud, becoming older frees many from conventionality," says Dr. Gordon Melton. "They don't have anything to prove to anybody any more. If you attend the metaphysical churches, you will end up seeing a lot of white hair," observes Melton, of the Santa Barbara, California-based American Religion.

This should not be surprising, because alternative religions have been around since the 1880s, Melton says. "You have a lot of people who have grown up around alternative formats for most of their lives," he notes.

Seniors want to make their final days count, Melton says. "Becoming


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is likely that they will expand the numbers of the New Age movement, Garrett predicts.

Age should be no barrier to a senior wanting to learn the art of meditation, says Dr. Jim Green, Ph.D., a 77-year-old retired sociologist and anthropologist and former State Department staffer who teaches meditation classes and practices psychotherapy in Falls Church, VA. In his 14 years of teaching meditation, Green's classes are always attended by retirees seeking to learn the techniques. His oldest meditator was age 82, he notes.

While many older people question whether they can learn to meditate and have doubts about their capacity to properly practice it, they always find out their limiting beliefs were wrong, Green observes.

"In fact, they have a greater capacity to learn because they can draw upon a whole life time of experiences," he says.

"For some people, there is a contemplative dimension to aging where one begins to pay more attention and notice things in one's own interior and in the world that were not noticed before," says Father Ray Studzinski, Ph.D., associate professor of the Washington, D.C.-based Catholic University of America. As a result, "There is a oneness to

mystery, he says. "All of this can find a good fit in certain spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga."

"Sometimes meditation techniques can even bring about a sense of real integration or real harmony within one's self as well as offer ways to deal with some of life's hurts," Studzinski says.

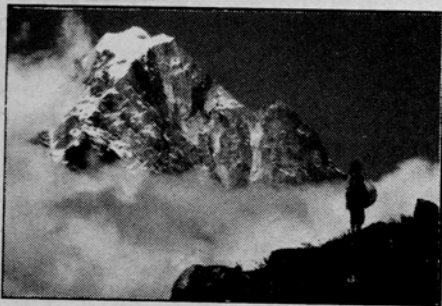
"All our lives are terminal," says Lucien Wulsin, co-founder of Naropa's gerontology program. "Old age and death are an inherent part of living. Once you acknowledge that, you are much more at peace."

"In my case, I feel as I get older, I become conscious of the fact that we aren't going to live forever. Your sense of yourself begins to merge with some different sense of the world, and that sense becomes more acute, even as your other five senses are becoming less acute. You become much more understanding of who you are and where you are in the world, as you prepare to let go."

Adds Naropa's Howard, "The work of old age is making a relationship with reality, with what we don't know and all its implications." It's the opportunity to encounter their own immortality, to come to terms with it, to make peace with it — and to talk about it — that enriches the lives of seniors — and the rest of us.

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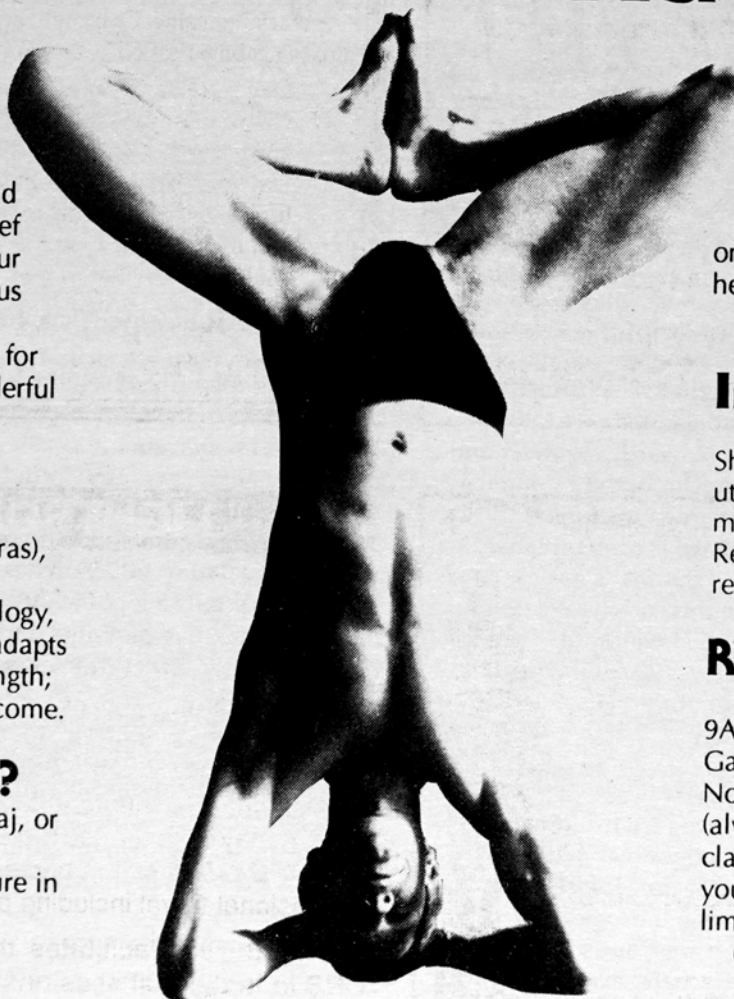
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Who is Ravi Dykema?

Ravi Dykema was granted the title Yogiraj, or "yoga adept" by his teacher, Swami Gitananda, during Dykema's 4-year tenure in the early 70's as a student and faculty member at Gitananda's Yoga Vedanta



University of South India, in Pondicherry, India. Gitananda is the Mahant (head) of the ancient Brighu yoga Order. Dykema has been teaching yoga classes and has had a private practice in yoga therapy for 19 years. He is on the adjunct faculty at Naropa Institute and he publishes and edits Nexus magazine.

Info, cost, schedule

Each retreat runs Fri. 6PM to Sun. 3PM. At Shoshoni Yoga Spa near Nederland, 40 minutes from Boulder, 80 minutes from Denver. All meals (vegetarian, non-dairy) included. \$198. Registration requires a \$50 deposit, non-refundable one week before event.

Ravi's ongoing classes

Mon. & Wed. 5:30-7PM; Tue. & Thur. 7:30-9AM, at 1800 30th St., #208 (Crossroads Gardens), Boulder. (East side of 30th, 1st turn North of Jiffylube.) Costing \$9 each for drop-in (always welcome), \$8 each if you pay for 5 classes in advance (i.e., \$40), and \$7 each if you pay for 8 classes with a five-week time limit (i.e., \$56).

(303) 442-6662, or 499-3078.

What's Happening

The famous NIH alternative medicine office awards 30

The Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has announced its first round of grants—30 totaling \$30,000—to mainstream research institutions to examine treatment outcomes of a variety of alternative medical practices, including imagery, prayer, T'ai Chi, homeopathy, hypnosis, massage and macrobiotics. With the grants already allocated, researchers are expected to give their findings to OAM staff next year.

OAM was created when Congress authorized the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) to spend \$2 million in 1992 to organize the office, with a goal of providing research grants to examine the medical potential of nonconventional medical practices. The Congressional mandate came amid studies published by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which reported that about 10 percent of Americans, roughly 25 million people—sought the help of alternative medical practitioners in 1990.

While OAM received more than 800 letters of intent requesting grant submission information, 452 formal

grant applications were submitted ultimately, says John Spencer, Ph.D., OAM senior policy analyst. About 200 applications were not considered by NIH technical panels of scientists, doctors and alternative practitioners who reviewed the submitted materials, he says. "There was not enough scientific information included in these applications to show that a study could be done."

The office's funding of outcomes research on alternative therapies in eight general fields will have a major influence on other funding sources who might have once shied away from giving grants to nontraditional researchers, predicts Lawrence H. Kushi, Sc.D., an assistant professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota and a grant recipient who will study the effect of macrobiotic diets on cancer patients. "Hopefully any of the studies will show some promise in providing objective information to support the need for substantial funding of more vigorous studies on alternative therapies."

Grants were awarded from coast to

coast on topics that include postsurgical outcomes of massage therapy, dance movement used for cystic fibrosis, t'ai chi used for balance disorders and yoga for heroin addiction. In Colorado, Dr. Kedarn Prasad of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center will study antioxidants and cancer, and Dr. Richard A. Shepman at Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center will study biofeedback and pain.

So far many view OAM's efforts positively. "To see research studies funded to validate massage and therapeutic touch is exciting," says Dr. Bernie Siegel, a OAM member. Today massage is not even considered a health profession in two-thirds of the states, he notes. "But if studies show results, massage and touch will move into a new area and become a science and a health profession instead of

always being associated with massage parlors."

While many consider the first round of OAM grants to be diverse and daring, others don't believe they go far enough. "While OAM has gotten off to a good start, it is not a bold list," charges C. Scott Jones, president of the Human Potential Foundation, a watchdog group that is monitoring OAM activities. "Only one winner, intercessory prayer investigation, has the potential of directly challenging the metaphysical underpinnings of current medical and scientific thinking," Jones says. "What was not funded is more instructive about the direction the office must go. They cannot do better than they have without coming up with procedures which free them from the dead hand of NIH's traditional biases."

by Herbert P. Weiss

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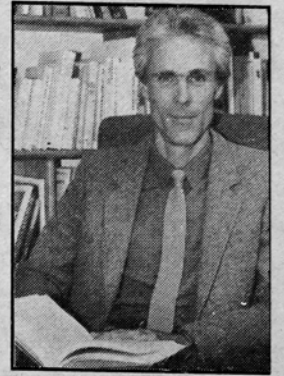
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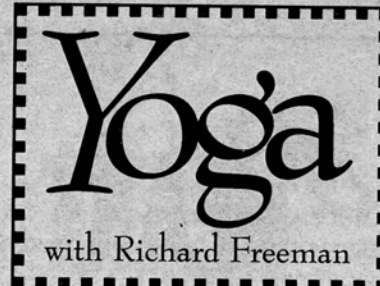
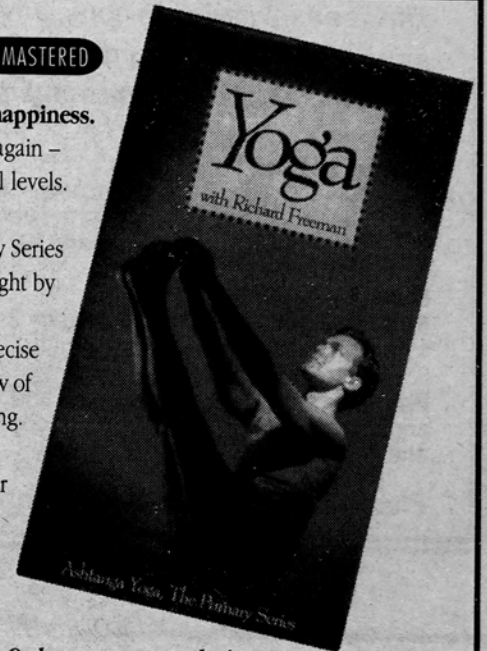


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