



The Universality of Spiritual Pursuits

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The spiritual narrative

- How it is related to aging
- How it is universal
- How it is personal
- Why this discourse is important

Research shows increase in spiritual pursuits in later life


- Search for meaning And purpose (Lao Tzu, Frankl, Jung, Reker and Wong)
- Will to meaning (Frankl)
- Existential questions
- Urgency of death (Mehta)
- Fascination with afterlife
- Gero transcendence (Lars Tornstam)

Disciplines	Asian	Non-Asian
Theology	Culture-context	Christian scripture
Gerontology	Academic	Academic
Thanatology	Religion-focussed	Science-focussed

Spirituality and its pursuit

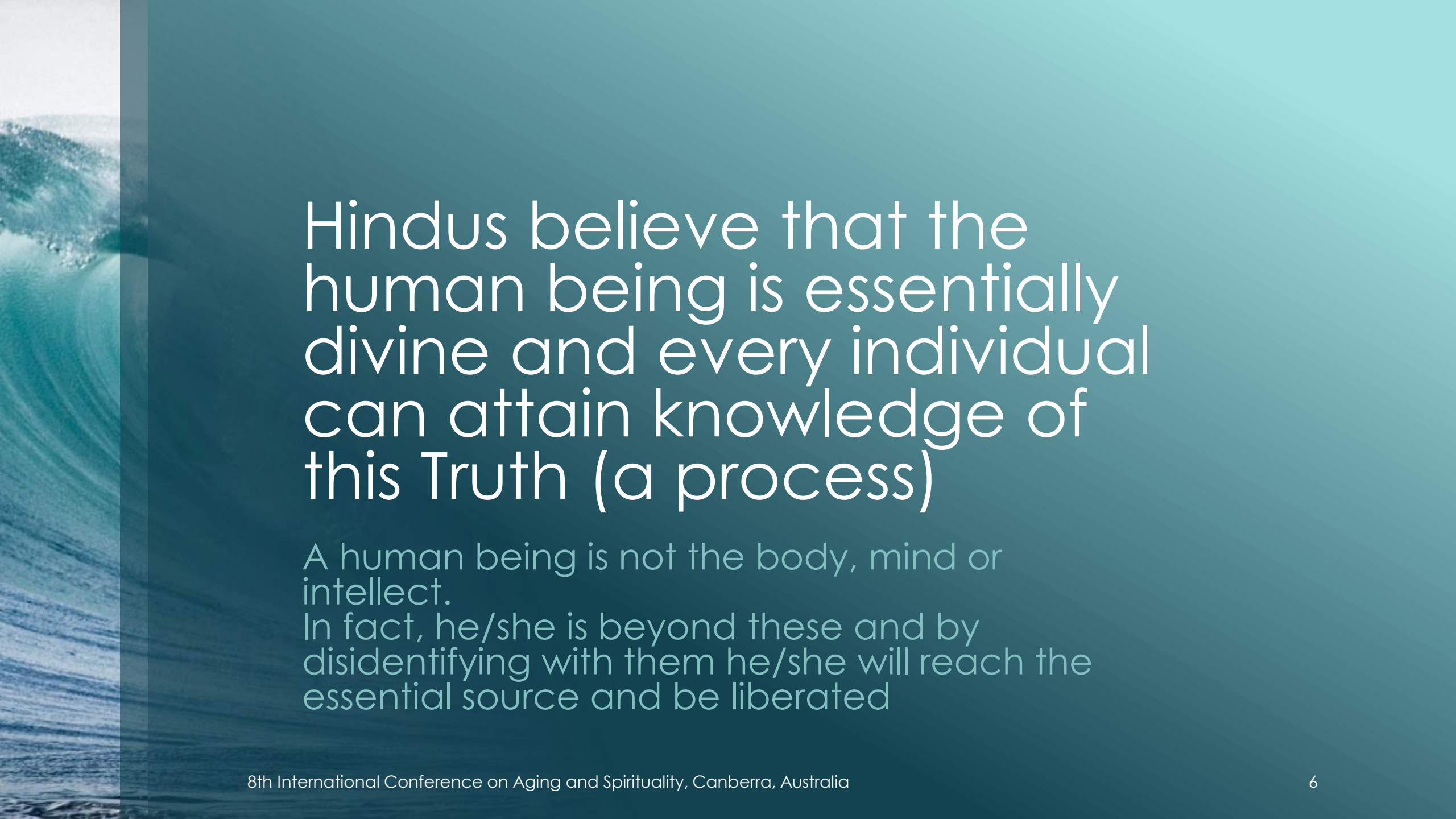
- Hinduism – Dharma and Advaita concepts reflect spiritual dimensions
- Buddhism – Sati tradition, mindfulness meditation have spiritual roots
- Going beyond religion (Spira, R.)





Marrone, R. (1999) stated that it is perhaps the process rather than the specific religious belief that matters

Spiritual Reminiscence, spiritual care for the dying, faith development in the adult life course, spiritual development across the human lifespan – they all point towards self discovery and entry into the divine sphere



Hindus believe that the human being is essentially divine and every individual can attain knowledge of this Truth (a process)

A human being is not the body, mind or intellect.

In fact, he/she is beyond these and by disidentifying with them he/she will reach the essential source and be liberated

Defining the concepts

Hindu concepts

- Dharma at individual level is the law of right living and its observance fulfils 2 objectives: happiness in life and liberation from all bondage
- Advaita is non-duality
All human experience is a merging of “I-other” into **one** and it is an illusion that the perceiver and the perceived object are separate

Buddhist concepts

- Mindfulness can be traced to the *Sati* tradition in Buddhism (Xu, 2017) and it is especially effective for older people to gain:
 - acceptance of impermanence
 - accept emotional experiences positively in a non-judgemental way thus integrating painful and positive experiences



Upanishads are the first books in the Vedic tradition, and they reveal the truths about existence!

The Rishis did not wish to leave their authorship as the truths belong to the whole universe hence there is no author

Each person is a JivAtman and the purpose of each JivAtman is to return back to the Source when complete

Understanding Advaita and oneness

- “Pura ho Gaya” (at death, the soul is perceived by survivors as having returned to the source)
- The divine purpose of a being existence is to return to the “whole” but even while it is away from the whole it is still part of the whole because it was never separate i.e. non-duality. Suffering begins when we view ourselves as separate from the cosmos and from others. When this realization occurs humans feel ‘free’ and experience inner happiness

Empirical research on aging and spiritual pursuits

Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG)

- Study of intergenerational transmission of religious tradition across ethnic groups in Los Angeles, USA
- Enduring effect of childhood socialization
- Predictor: closeness of parent-child relations
- Studied 350 families (3G,4G) using mixed method research design

Integrative Body-Mind-Spirit Model of Social Work (Mo et.al.)

- Philosophical underpinnings in Buddhism and Daoism
- The Eastern perspective of the Mind is applied to relieve the stress (cancer patients) and stimulate spiritual growth and transformation
- New coping skills taught
- Intervention successful with female trauma survivors, cancer patients

Research on Aging and Spirituality

- Religious involvement and religiosity have been used synonymously with spiritual activities and spirituality in much of the literature
- In the last 2-3 decades there has been a conscious effort to distinguish between the two
- Religion is seen as a more organized and institutionalized system while spirituality is more individualistic, existentialist and internalized
- Spiritual activities could include meditation, intense interaction with nature, a sense of connection with a higher being.

Research on aging and coping

Much literature has been published on the moderating effect of religious beliefs or spiritual activity in increasing people's ability to cope with bereavement, mental stress and health crises (Ellor, Journal of Aging Life Care, Spring 2018)

- **Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, '18)**
(16 item scale) Examples:
 - How often do you experience the following?
Never (1) Once in a while (2) Some days (3) Most days (4) Every day (5) Many times a day (6)
 - 1. I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.
 - 2. I feel God's presence. (I sense the presence of the divine or holy.)
 - 3. I experience a connection to all of life.
 - 4. How close do you feel to God (or the divine in other words)? Not close (1), somewhat close (3), very close (5), as close as possible (6)
 - 5. I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine.
 - 6. I feel God's love (or divine love) for me directly.

Scholarly insights into aging and adjustment

- Taiwanese randomized controlled trial of a six-week spiritual reminiscence intervention on hope, life satisfaction, and spiritual well-being in elderly with mild and moderate dementia (Wu & Koo (2016) *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 16, 121-127)
- The function of JAPPA (Hindu word for chanting)
- Post-operation recovery and prayer
- Cultural issues and differences in family context (the gap between ideal and real, between internal and external circumstances)

Search for meaning in life

- **Life review** –(Butler)- conscious or unconscious process of re-evaluating one's past and trying to come to terms with it
- **Ikigai**- Japanese term for 'one's meaning/purpose in life'
- **Completion**- Hindu term for merging with the Source
- **Consciousness** - the art of knowing oneself (I am That)

GERONTOLOGY PERSPECTIVE



Bio

Social

Spiritual

Psycho

Inspire

Wisdom

Is Gero Transcendence universal?

- Moving into the realm of cosmic dimensions, it is intuitive to consider that as we mature our search for meaning will take us to discovering deeper aspects of our inner self
- As death draws nearer so does the urgency to understand the purpose of our individual lives, and the connection with the rest of the universe
- However, the journey can start at any point and not just in later life. It is a continuous process of self-realization
- However, our spiritual growth has different baselines and our progress depends on our commitment and effort

Negative adjustment to old age

- If we look at Erik Erikson's theory of Integrity VS Despair, we may conclude that those who are in despair would be frustrated, unhappy, full of regrets and therefore unable to achieve gerotranscendence
- However there are 3 different dimensions to Gerotranscendence i.e.
 - a) Cosmic dimension
 - b) Self- dimension
 - c) Social and Personal Relationships dimensionAn individual may achieve the second and third but not the first aspect if he/she is a very pragmatic personality

Illustration of two case studies

- Case A

- divorced
- cynical and lonely
- financially stable
- has a limp due to an accident
- drinks and smokes
- likes to complain to neighbours
- few friends

- Case B

- has 4 chronic illnesses
- is financially strapped
- is a cheerful person
- has been struggling all his life to make ends meet
- never married
- mobile
- is on government aid
- liked by his friends and relatives



Who is more likely to have
a better experience of
Gerotranscendence?
Case A or Case B

If Gerotranscendence is universal would
both of them walk the path of spirituality?

Wherein lies the explanation?

Spiritual Growth

- Upon reflection, it seems that whatever our baseline all human beings have the capacity to grow spiritually
- The desire to self-realise may be latent but given certain circumstances it may sprout suddenly
- OR, given the presence of a mentor, Guru or teacher it may find its path to grow
- To me, it is not a race but rather a journey we all have to travel spiritually at our own pace, in our own unique pattern

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THANK YOU!

Please feel free to write your thoughts to me at
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