

# Opening to the Beauty of Life

Reflections by Melody Kemp  
as told to Nancy Pearson Arcellana

*Melody Kemp is an activist, occupational health expert and author of a book on women's occupational health issues who splits her time between writing and working part-time in public health. She also trains women industrial workers. She does not think twice about waging a battle with anybody who makes the mistake of maltreating women and workers. In 1995, Melody, an Australian, who can be at home anywhere, moved to Bali to write a book. Bali probably provides better nourishment for Melody's spirituality.*

*When Melody spoke to us about her spirituality, her words were like a running brook flowing over rocks and turning with the natural bend of the terrain. You could lose yourself in the flow of her consciousness. Over after-lunch coffee, she spontaneously yet thoughtfully traced some of the turning points in her spiritual development.*



Nancy P. Arcellana/isis photobank

was brought up in a household where if you wanted to do religion, it was up to you. I spent a long time doing “market research” and became a sort of religion gadfly, moving from one to another. I did a couple of rituals, such as confirmation, in the Church of England. I was in that stage where I liked dressing up. I got my hair done—this was in the 50’s when big hair was in. I remember this poor bishop looking for my head. His hands disappeared in this spongy helmet of hair. But none of [these excursions] really gave me anything. Well, yes they did—they gave me a really good place to meet boys, hang out, escape and get away from my mother!

That was what religion was to me—religion, not spirituality. I see religion as dogma, rules, as opposed to a linkage that’s very personal between you and the source, the source of light, the source of enlightenment, the source of love.

I’m really a working-class kid. My father was a shipyard worker, my granddad was a shipyard worker. I think there’s a class basis to a lot of this, in that the working class gets stuck on religion. Other stuff don’t come into your life. I never really had an opportunity to follow my own guide or do any theoretical exploration because I was too busy earning a living. I put myself through high school and university. There wasn’t much time left over to play around with the spirits.

### **A GRADUAL PROGRESSION**

What were the turning points? I find [my spirituality] a gradual progression more than anything else. The time when I first started to look at what was really important to me was when I realized I would just be walking on the street and someone would come up to me and say, “I’ve been told I should get to know you.” I would find people saying such strange things and I just couldn’t work out what they meant.

The people I was meeting and starting to love and care about were people who had some

capacity to deal with the other side. They read tea leaves, talked to dead people, had seances or used astral travel and all this really heavy-duty stuff. I’m not into any of that. I kept thinking, “I haven’t got my pilot’s license for this sort of thing. I stay well and truly in my bed at night and I have to pay outrageous prices to fly anywhere. . . . I asked people what they meant. Why me? And they would say, “We’ve been told you’re special.”

### **MOVING TOWARD BUDDHISM**

I’ve had formal scientific background and Buddhism fits with that. Matter can neither be created or destroyed, which is fundamentally what the Buddhists are saying—that the mind goes on. I really like the belief system which is one of non-attachment, one of love, of encouraging, of taking as many people with you to enlightenment. [It upholds] that you have the resources in yourself to be God, that you are part of God. In Buddhism, there’s no separation between you and the source of love, the source of light. God is not an extraneous thing that you worship. You should be respectful and loving and worshipful of yourself because you are the expression of God. That made sense to me. Also, Buddhism is a non-proselytizing religion, you come to Buddhism, Buddhism

doesn't come to you.

For all of those reasons, Buddhism became really important to me. I started reading some of the texts. I must say, I still find them amazingly confusing.

I'm a visual person and that's a real disaster when you're a Buddhist, which is so conceptual, while I need to have an image in my head.

There are some Buddhist [tenets] I don't agree with, and certainly the position of women on the whole is still low compared with the men. I was reading something the other day by a Tibetan monk who said that all living things are the creatures of the great mother. That's the first time I've seen anything written about Bud-

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dhism that tacitly relates creation to women. Normally, the Deities are neutered.

Another reason that drew me to the belief system is that while there are rules of Dharma to be followed, you really only have to account to yourself whether you do or do not follow them. Buddhism is heavy on self-responsibility in an age where people are eager to [hand over] responsibility for their lives to others.

### DISCOVERING NEW DIMENSIONS

There are basically two lots: the monks who sit in drafty caves meditating to save the whole world and themselves, and the householders who go into the world and are of the world. I would define myself as a householder.

While I am basically lazy on meditative practice, I try and make up for it with compassion. Wow, that's really hard at times—how can you be compassionate to politicians and thieves like the Suharto family, except by hoping that the wheel does come around and will mow them down? Being virtuous in the Buddhist sense

means reducing the hatred in your soul and [continuously striving for] the ability to love, the ability to care for all living things.

I find it hard to meditate. I can never sit down. And I have such guilt, guilt, guilt! A dear friend who's an acupuncturist, Chinese herbalist, mystic and my healer for some time once told me, "Melody, you're a householder. You bring lots of good things." He helped release me from the dogma and headiness of karma and practice. He made me realize the beauty of Buddhism—which is the beauty of what's in your heart, what you hold within you. That was a major turning point because it gave me a whole different dimension.

Another [aspect of] Buddhism I like is the concept of moderation. Other religions talk about abstinence. They always make you guilty for being alive.

Buddhism says, "Look, it's fabulous, meditate on this blessing called life. Go out there and do it, just don't push too hard."

### RECOGNITION OF MORTALITY

One other turning point was when my dad died. My father was probably my closest friend. The book I'm writing (*editor's note*: to be published by Isis International-Manila) is dedicated to him. He was the first feminist I met. I know there's a big debate whether men can be feminists or not, but ever since I was young, my father had always taught me that women can do anything.

He was a great admirer of women and believed they were superior people. He taught me to lay bricks, make mortise and tenon joints, braise and weld. I learned all those masculine skills, not because he wanted a son but because he said, "You can do this, do you want to learn?" The fact that I was a woman never excluded me from my father's life. Consequently, some of the times with him I warmly remember are when we were painting walls or wall-papering. He gave up trying to parent me when I was about 10. He said it was a gross waste of time and decided that being a friend was more valuable.

He got quite sick about six years ago. He had a heart valve problem and [the doctors] wanted to operate on him. Usually these op-

erations are pretty simple but before he went into the hospital for the surgery, he sent me a letter about his legal documents, requesting [me] to make sure he died if he got seriously sick or disabled, instead of leaving him on a life-support system. Because I loved him, I honored that.

He had the operation and it was a disaster. He had a couple of strokes during the operation and he was in a coma for several days. He couldn't breathe on his own. The doctors recommended they take him off the respirator. I remembered his letter and my promise to him, and to myself, that I would release him if that was the case. But it just didn't feel right. I'm

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health-trained. I asked for a neurological work-up. The doctors [accused me of] not understanding that he had brain stem problems and was going to die. The male doctors gave me an especially hard time, implying I was neurotic and I just didn't want to accept that my father was dying. I finally said, "Look, I really want to see a neurologist." I could FEEL the life in him. I tried to use some coma-therapy techniques—talking loudly to him, hitting his joints, pinching, scratching his skin and tuning him to classical music.

It worked out in the end, he came out of the coma. He had a left-side weakness but after six months of self-imposed rehabilitation, he went straight back to his workshop. He was fine, but he had this bubbling, seething wound in the chest that refused to heal. About a year and half later, he was taken back to the hospital.

At that point I knew Dad was on his way out. I was reading the *Tibetan Book of Living*

and *Dying* at the same time. To some degree, I was doing just that, intuitively anyway. I bought Dad a bottle of malt whiskey and we sat in the hospital and drank this together. I told him about how much I loved him, about how all the things I love about myself came from him, about how surrounded by love he was. It was just lovely. We developed a very close relationship. The biggest gift I could give him was to be there when he finally died.

Dad left his body at four in the morning. We told the nurses we would do everything. We laid him out and washed him. We just sat around the body and talked. He was wherever he was, and what was in front of us was just a body.

The nurses were amazed—they'd never had any family do that. We're so separated from death in our society.

#### OPENING TO THE BEAUTY

Being able to help my father die was a consolidation of my own living, a consolidation of the gifts he'd given me, and probably one of the highest forms of expression of love that I could offer anybody. It brought me closer to understanding a little bit of my own mortality. One of the challenges of Buddhism is that you have to meditate on your own death which is something I still find scary. I often wonder about why so. It's the sensual things I would miss—the sunsets, the smell of Frangipani, the feeling of water on my skin, of the sea washing around my legs when I stand on the surf. . . I can't think of an existence without those.

From living in Asia, you get that feeling that everything around you is part of the spiritual world. There is no separation. Spirituality is not something you do on Sundays—like wearing a funny hat, going off and doing religion! Everything has significance. Every day is a wonder. When the lotus blossoms in our garden come out, we see how beautiful these are and think of the blessing.

We celebrate life and death. My spirituality doesn't cease or become a separate part of my life. One of the joys about being spiritually open is that you become open to the world and you become open to beauty. ♪