

Buddhism & Ageing: In Praise of Ageing

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The Lord Buddha defined dukkha or suffering as birth, old age, sickness and death. Since - if we do not die young - we are all going to experience old age and death, this is a topic that concerns everyone.

In our contemporary society there is the cult of youth and a denial of the natural course of life towards decay and death. Most people hope to keep looking young and beautiful – indeed beauty is usually associated with youthfulness. So there are endless books and articles on how to keep old age at a distance and stay young forever. But however many facelifts we undergo or exercise and diet regimes we submit to, eventually the body will deteriorate and the likelihood of sickness will increase. This is the nature of all conditioned things. In fact Buddhism faces up to the unpalatable facts of life and death – and even uses those facts as the path itself to transcend birth and death.

In more traditional societies the advent of ageing is seen as natural and not regarded as something to be avoided and denied for as long as possible. Rather, there is an appreciation that having lived for so long there should likewise be a growth of knowledge and understanding. So old age is often equated with wisdom and experience. The older members of the family are accorded respect and often assume the roles of councilors and guides. They have an important role to play within their society.

Even in the West there is the archetypal character of the wise old woman (as well as the witch) and most storybook wizards are elderly. Indeed old wrinkled faces with eyes shining with love and intelligence often display the real beauty.

Unfortunately - even though nowadays women over the age of 50 make up the majority of the population - in our modern social order the elderly are increasingly shunted aside, isolated among their senior contemporaries and ignored by the world around them. It is considered that their useful days are finished and they have no further contribution

to make to society. As a result old age is something to be dreaded and evaded for as long as possible.

So the question remains, how do we deal with our inevitable ageing in a way that makes sense of our life? In traditional Buddhist countries it is the custom that as our children grow up and leave home; as our professional lives wind down; and as our outgoing activities become more inwardly directed, that we give more attention to the Dharma and to setting our lives in order so as to be ready for death and future rebirths.

In traditional Buddhist societies many older people take the 8 precepts and pass their time in meditation or other meritorious activities such as circumambulation of holy objects, prostrations, chanting and visiting temples etc. The focus of their life is directed towards the Dharma and their devotion is cultivated. Thus their lives remain meaningful and important even as the axis of focus shifts.

For women in particular it often happens that our youth is taken up with acting out the roles that society has determined for us: firstly as physical objects of desire who must strive to be as attractive and alluring as possible to fulfill male fantasies. Then the wife and mother, devoted to nurturing her family and home. Nowadays most women also have full time careers in which they must work hard to keep ahead. It is a stress-filled lifestyle designed to meet the expectations of others.

However even in the modern world we are seeing an interesting phenomenon occur where many people – especially women – having fulfilled their life's tasks as wives, mothers and in their professional careers, are now ready to give their attention to more introvert callings such as the arts, the alternative healing professions, psychology and the study and practice of spiritual paths. Since these women are usually highly educated and motivated they are able to acquire new skills and extend a positive outreach into the society around them. Rather than spending their declining years merely playing golf or watching TV, their inner spiritual world is now given greater prominence.

A while back I met a group of women living in an affluent small town

in Florida, who were devoting their later years to sincere spiritual practices and to philanthropic activities benefitting not only their own neighbourhood but also reaching out to other cultures and lands. They felt happy and fulfilled to be using their time for the benefit of others as well as themselves.

Many people I know have remarked that the latter part of their lives has become even more satisfying and meaningful than their earlier years. Now they can discover their own genuine interests rather than merely conforming to societal expectations. They feel that they have finally found the reason for their lives – although they also accept that the previous years were necessary for what has developed later. Like a tree that grows slowly and only in time can reveal its true characteristics. It seems that the foremost regret expressed by those who are dying is: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

Of course most of us would prefer a 25 year old body but few would choose to return to our 25 year old mind! So instead of dreading the approach of old age – despite its accompanying loss of physical and mental flexibility – we can welcome this new stage of life and explore its potential. We have the choice whether to view our ageing as the gradual fading of all our dreams or to regard retirement as the start of a new and exciting era.

As we grow older we see our contemporaries - our friends and family members - succumbing to illnesses and death - so we are forced to recognize these states as natural and inevitable. As Buddhist women, we have an important part to play in demonstrating an alternative lifestyle which is not so dependent on our usual societal roles and can show the way forward to greater freedom and a more meaningful way of living. Even if our old knees ache too much for sitting cross-legged and our health issues keep us physically less active, our minds can still be bright and clear. Our meditation can deepen and mature.

Now that we have more time for ourselves we can select a life- style that is meaningful and engaging – exploring spiritual pathways and

reaching out in social engagement, thus benefitting ourselves and likewise benefitting others. This is a great opportunity to garner the skills acquired over our lifetime and put them to good use. We are reborn to a new life without yet having to discard the old one!

So it is that many people chose to travel or learn new skills, sports or crafts once their 'official' work and responsibilities are at an end. The question we can ask ourselves as Buddhists is "Now that my worldly responsibilities are fulfilled, how can I use this life most practically to be of help to myself and others? What needs to be done to make some more advances on the Dharma path?" This may not necessarily include long retreats or total immersion in Buddhist community work. There are many ways to develop ourselves and tame our mind. Usually as we grow older, the storms of emotional upheavals have quieted, we have some basic self-knowledge and perhaps our formal practice has also deepened over the years. Now we have the time and space to nurture these Bodhi saplings of our practice towards fruition and to encourage this Bodhi tree to realize its full potential.

For many ageing Buddhists there is also the issue of where to live as our faculties decline. As the family nucleus shrinks and is unable to offer home facilities, many older people, especially in the West but also increasingly in Asian countries, must face the probability of living their later years in a Nursing Home. To end up continually surrounded by people and care-givers who have no interest in spiritual matters, can be a very gloomy prospect. Therefore there is sometimes talk of starting some sort of Retirement Homes for Senior Buddhists – usually regardless of any particular tradition. Probably the main problem is financial since acquiring suitable land and buildings plus the subsequent upkeep would require considerable investment. However it would be a very worthwhile endeavor and surely requires more thought and attention.

So it is important to make good use of our later years - while our faculties are still functioning even if our physical vigour is declining. Finally it is up to us to take the life we have been given and make the most of our opportunities to develop our potential. This precious human body is precious because we are using it as a means to develop

the mind and advance along the path. Let us use our days to create the circumstances by which we can die without regrets.

Sometimes as we age we can become very ill with life threatening diseases such as cancer or heart problems. This is common. Many people look on the onset of such sickness with dread and horror and hope to die quietly in their sleep with no prior warning. However it is not always such an advantage to pass on without any preparation.

When we know in advance that our allotted time here is limited - even though this is actually true for all of us - it allows us the opportunity to make arrangements for leaving this life in an orderly and satisfactory manner. Knowing that we are truly going to die and the time is running out, can focus the mind wonderfully on what is important and what is not important. People are so often transformed as they begin to finally let go of their attachments and their long-held resentments in readiness to pass on.

This is the chance to reconcile our differences, repair broken relationships, and allow those whom we hold dear to know that they are loved and appreciated. In the face of our imminent mortality, we have nothing to lose but our hang-ups.

At the point of death it is best to focus the mind on one's personal practice or object of devotion. Or at least try to concentrate on light and absorb oneself into that. The people surrounding the dying person should remain calm and supportive, not giving way to grief, but perhaps gently chanting something appropriate.

On the whole if one has led a fairly decent life - and especially if one has made some effort to merge the Dharma with one's mind, then death holds no fears. The consciousness will follow along its accustomed path. So it is vital to make sure - while we still have some control over our thoughts and emotions - that this will be a pathway we would wish to travel.

As Professor Dumbledore advised young Harry Potter, "For one with a well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."

