

# **Aging and Dying**

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by

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Distinguished participants:

Today I have been expected to speak on death and dying, but I would like instead to speak on aging and dying rather than on death and dying.

Old age and death are natural phenomena. In accordance with the law of nature all conditioned things are impermanent and liable to change, being subject to causes and conditions. Everything that has a beginning must at last come to an end. The lives of all beings, after being born, must decay and die. Aging is just the decline of life and the decay of the faculties; and death is the passing-away, the termination of the time of life, the break-up of the aggregates and the casting off of the body.

Although, by nature, aging and death are merely facts of life, psychologically they often mean to the worldlings a loss of hope, the frustration of all aspirations, a leap into a great darkness, and thus the feelings of fear and anguish.

In spite of degeneration and loss inherent in aging and dying, old age can be turned into an opportunity for development, and death into that for a sublime attainment. At the least, one should live the good and worthwhile life of the old, and can then die unconfused or even die an enlightened death.

A human's life span is traditionally divided into three stages, the first, the middle and the last stage. Of course, with attention to what is good and right, one should live a good life through all the three stages of life. However if, through negligence, one fails to fulfill the good life in the first and middle stages of life, there is still room left for one to fulfill it in the last one, that is, in one's old age.

Not only when still a young black-haired man in the prime of youth, but also when he became old, the Buddha was still perfect in his lucid wisdom. This means a happy and fruitful life in old age is a possibility. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, one can even make progress in the good life and attain to perfection in this last stage of life.

So many people spend the whole time of their early and middle years in search of fame and fortune, in seeking after wealth and power, and in pursuit of material pleasures. They might say that their lives have been worthwhile. Really, they are not. It is not enough. They have not got the best of their lives. They have not realized the full potential of being human. To live longer into old age gives them an advantage over other people as they are in a position to make advances towards fulfilling these potentials.

What are these potentials? There are a lot of them. Examples

are the various kinds of inner and independent happiness through inner development. In short, there are a lot of the good that people in search of wealth, power and pleasures will never experience and enjoy except that they survive to develop them in their old age.

As long life up to an old age is an advantage if one learns how to utilize it, we should look after ourselves well so that we will have long lives. Of course, good care of life is needed. We should look after ourselves well, physically and behaviorally, emotionally and volitionally, and intellectually and intuitively. The interdependence and interrelationship among these aspects of life should be rightly steered so that they become intercontributory.

First, physical care should not be separated from behavioral development in relationship with the social and natural environment. In addition to sufficient nutritious food and physical exercise, right attitudes and behavior such as beneficial habits should be developed in connection with eating, general material consumption and recreations.

As all know well, the present-day society functions as a system of competition and consumption where people fall into the state of time-scarcity because of competitive individualism and personal pursuit of material pleasures. In the context of such a society, people find it difficult to take care of other people and, therefore, people in old age should be more self-reliant. In these situations, they should devote themselves more to an intimate relationship with the natural environment. They should enjoy physical movements and activities amidst nature.

As far as personal relationships are concerned, love of sons and daughters leads to concerns about their weal and woe which are satisfied by parental care. However, when children have grown up and can take care of themselves, they take responsibility for themselves. At this point, the concerns of the old parents over their grown-up sons and daughters, or of the grandparents over their grand-children, often lead to vexation on the part of the latter and an upset on the part of the former. It is not good to the mental health of both sides.

There is a principle in the Buddha's teaching that when children grow up and are able to take responsibility for their own lives, parents are expected to develop equanimity. This means love must be balanced by equanimity. In other words, love that grows into attachment, whether to persons or things, must be replaced by equanimity. Love must be maintained at the level of loving-kindness or friendly love. In Thailand, aged people find the balance of loving-kindness with equanimity in joining their peers in the Buddhist observances at a village monastery and even stay there overnight every seven or eight days.

To go further in emotional care and volitional encouragement, the elderly should develop in themselves the will to do something. This means that one should have something in mind that one values highly and has a loving interest in, which one wants very strongly to do, for example, the writing of some book on one's cherished experiences, the carrying out of a gardening program, or the search for knowledge of a spiritual matter. Let one's will to action be so strong as to make one say to oneself: "I cannot die if I have not completed this task."

Many of us can think of elderly people, especially those after

retirement, who, not long after retiring from work, became subject to loneliness, dejected, down-hearted and gloomy. They quickly withered away and died. Some suffer from depression and even commit suicide. But the elderly who develop the will to action will not be so. Their willpower and strong spirit will only develop. They have something to commit themselves to and there, also, they will apply reasoning and intellectual investigation. They will become strong and healthy, both in mind and in body. The Buddha says that one who has the four qualities of the desire to act, strong willpower, the sense of commitment, and the spirit of investigation or experimentation, can live long throughout the whole life span.

Now we come to the boundary between the heart and the head, where the emotion will be refined, made wholesome and strengthened by the intellectual faculty. However, in passing, I would like to mention another two points.

Elderly people usually have bodies that are frail and easily afflicted with diseases. This tends to make them worried and dejected. Here they are encouraged by the Buddha to train themselves: "Although my body is ill, my mind shall not be ill," or "Even though my body becomes frail, my mind shall not be weakened."

Another point is concerned with happiness. Many or most people think of happiness in terms of sensual or material pleasures. If happiness consists in satisfying the senses, life in old age will be a great torment, forever deprived of happiness, because aging means, among other things, the degeneration and decay of the sense-faculties.

In reality, there are roughly two kinds of happiness. One is sensual happiness, dependent on external material pleasures. As this kind of happiness is dependent on material objects outside ourselves, those who are devoted to its enjoyment become pleasure-seekers or the seekers after happiness. In the pursuit of this kind of happiness, the pleasure-seekers learn and spend a lot of energy to develop the ability to look for and recognize the goods to gratify their senses. This has even been unconsciously taken by these people to be the meaning of education.

But it is the gift of human beings that they are possessed of the potential for creativity. Through this potential, they have created, using their creative thinking and constructive ideas, the human world of inventions and technologies. Directed inside, this potential can be developed for the creation of inner happiness and the various kinds of skillful mental qualities.

Unfortunately, the pleasure-seekers or happiness-pursuers, being engrossed in the search for external objects to gratify their senses, fail to develop this potential for the inner creativity. This creative or formative potential left undeveloped then works out for their inner lack of happiness and for various negative mental states. Thus in this way the pleasure-seekers, while seeking external happiness through the gratification of the senses with material objects, create or form inside themselves stress, anxiety, worry, depression, fear, insomnia and all kinds of negative mental states, and even clinical mental disorders.

To be sure, these pleasure-seekers in their old age will suffer double anguish. Externally, because of the degeneration of their sense-faculties, they experience the frustration of the sensual happiness. Internally, they are subject to the formation and

arising of unskillful feelings such as fear, anxiety, stress, and depression, and the frustration of the external happiness intensifies these negative emotions even more. This seems to be a very unhappy life in old age.

Wise people not only develop the ability to seek for external objects to satisfy sensual desires, they develop the potential for creativity to create in themselves various positive mental qualities and inner happiness. We are usually advised by the Buddha to develop five skillful qualities as the constant factors of the mind, namely joy, delight, relaxing calm, happiness and concentration. These five qualities will keep away all negative emotions and unhappiness. It is the development of the ability to create happiness or to be happy. As this second kind of happiness is an internal mental quality independent of material objects outside, the person who has developed it becomes, in contrast to the pleasure-seeker, the possessor of happiness. In their old age, the elderly should learn to develop more and more inner happiness so that they will enjoy lives of peace, freedom and happiness.

There is still a higher level of happiness. It is happiness beyond all formations. This is the highest kind of happiness, to be realized through the liberating wisdom or insight into the true nature of things.

In the way of liberating the mind through wisdom and insight, we are advised by the Buddha to free and learn the truth of things at every step. Aging and death are among the facts of life that should be constantly reviewed. In the words of the Buddha:

"These five facts of life should be again and again

contemplated by everyone, whether female or male, whether layperson or monk:

"I am subject to old age: I am not freed from it.

"I am subject to disease: I am not freed from it.

"I am subject to death: I am not freed from it.

"There will be division and separation from all that is dear to me.

"I am the owner of my actions: whatever I do, whether good or bad, I become heir to it."

Death, in particular, which is the central point or culmination of these facts, is a special focus of contemplation. Buddhists are advised to practice mindfulness or contemplation of death (*maranasati*). This mindfulness or contemplation is far different from imagination or fanciful thinking, which often leads to fear, sorrow and downheartedness. That is called unwise attention. The right and wise contemplation of death leads to the acceptance of the fact of the impermanence of life, and further to leading a life of diligence or earnestness to get the best of life before it comes to an end. Furthermore, it leads to the realization of the truth of the impermanence of all things. The insight into the true nature of all things will bring about wisdom that liberates the mind. The mind of the wise who realize the truth, being freed, is set to equilibrium and stands in equanimity. The person who is in this state of being is in the position to enjoy the highest happiness.

Some of the disciples of the Buddha attained to enlightenment and final freedom even at the moment of death. For those who have not realized the final goal of perfect freedom, at the

moment of death they are advised to die with a clear and peaceful mind, unconfused.

In short, three points should be observed concerning aging and death. First, aging and death are plain facts of life, the contemplation of which may lead to insight into the truth of all things. Second, aging and death can be an opportunity for the development of a good life, we should make the best out of them. Third, relying on aging and death, even the ageless and the deathless can be attained to.

With these remarks, I bring my talk to a close. Thank you.

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Source: Chieng-Mai Dhamma Study Group,  
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