



BUDDHISM AND AGEING: IN PRAISE OF AGEING

by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

The Lord Buddha described birth, sickness, old age, and death as *dukkha*, or suffering. If we do not die young, we are all going to experience old age and death. Therefore, ageing is a topic that concerns everyone.

In contemporary society, we find a 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 forever. Indeed, beauty is usually associated with youthfulness. So we find countless books and articles on how to keep old age at a distance and stay young forever. But no matter how many facelifts we undergo or how many exercise and diet regimes we submit to, eventually the body will deteriorate and the likelihood of illness will increase. Deterioration is the nature of all conditioned things. Buddhism faces up to the unpalatable facts of life and death. Buddhism even uses these facts as the path itself, as a means to transcend birth and death.

In more traditional societies, the advent of ageing is seen as natural and is not regarded as something to be avoided or 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. Old age is often equated with wisdom and experience. The older members of the family are accorded respect and often assume roles as councilors and guides. They have an important role to play in 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. In fact, old wrinkled faces with shining eyes full of love and intelligence often display real beauty.

Unfortunately, even though nowadays women over the age of 50 make up the majority of the population, in the modern social order the elderly are increasingly shunted aside, isolated among their senior contemporaries, and ignored by the world around them. Many feel 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 is, 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 daily activities become more inwardly directed, we can direct 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 eight precepts and pass their time in meditation or other meritorious



Pilgrims and tourists converge at the monumental Borobudur, Indonesia.

activities, such as circumambulating holy objects, making prostrations, chanting, visiting temples, and so on. The Dharma becomes the focus of their lives and they cultivate devotion. In this way, 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. First, as physical objects of desire we strive to be as attractive and alluring as possible to fulfill male fantasies. Then as wives and mothers, we devote ourselves to nurturing our homes and families. Nowadays, most women also have full-time careers in which they must work hard to keep ahead. Even while enjoying many advantages, women live stress-filled lifestyles designed to meet the expectations of others.

Even in the modern world, however, we see an interesting phenomenon occurring. Many people, especially women, having fulfilled their life's tasks as wives, mothers, and professionals, are now ready to give their attention to more introspective callings such as the arts, the alternative healing professions, psychology, and the study and practice of spiritual paths. Since these women are often highly educated and motivated, they are able to acquire new skills and extend a positive outreach to 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.

Awhile 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 philanthropic activities. These women were benefitting not only their own neighborhoods, but also reaching out to people in other cultures and lands. They felt very happy and fulfilled to be using their time for the benefit of others as well as themselves.

It seems that the foremost regret expressed by the dying is, "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." By contrast, 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. Although they accept that their earlier life experience was necessary for what has developed later, like a tree that grows slowly and only in time can reveal its true characteristics, yet they feel that they have finally found their reason for living.



Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo at the 13th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Vashaili, India in January, 2013.

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 the unavoidable loss of physical and mental flexibility, we can welcome this new stage of life and explore its potential. We have a choice either 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 that is not so dependent on the 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 health issues slow us down physically, 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 lifestyle 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 put the skills acquired over our lifetime to good use. We are reborn to a new life without having to discard the old one!

Many people chose to travel or learn new skills, sports, or crafts once their “official” work and responsibilities come to an end. As Buddhists, the question we can ask ourselves 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?” Our path need not 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-understanding, and hopefully our formal practice has also deepened over the years. Now we have the time and space to nurture the *bodhi* saplings of our practice toward fruition and to encourage the *bodhi* tree of realization to reach 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

no longer offers 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 surrounded by people and caregivers who have no interest in spiritual matters can be a very gloomy prospect. Therefore, it is time to start talk about starting retirement homes for senior Buddhists – communities not limited to any particular tradition. The main problem is probably 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. It is important to make good use of our later years, while our faculties are still functioning, even as our physical vigor declines.

Finally, it is up to us to take the life we have been given and make the most of the opportunity to develop our potential. This precious human body is precious because we can use it to cultivate our mind and advance along the path. We can use our remaining days to create the circumstances to 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 sicknesses with dread and horror and hope to die quietly in their sleep with no prior warning. However, it is not always an advantage to pass away without any preparation.

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

Facing death gives us a 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 our personal practice or object of devotion. At least we can try to concentrate on light and absorb our minds in that. Friends and loved ones surrounding a 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.”

