

Ageing: the Great Adventure

A Buddhist Guide

Ken Jones

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Preface

This pamphlet grew out of a series of workshops conducted by the author. There are four themes: The Art of Ageing (p4); Embodying our Age (p.8); Ageing into Dying and Death (p.9); and Celebration (p. 11). It is hoped that it will stimulate further discussion, particularly in *Raft*, the journal of the Buddhist Hospice Trust (see endpapers), to which readers are encouraged to send their letters and comments.

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Ken Jones is a Zen Buddhist practitioner of some thirty years' standing. He is secretary of the UK Network of Engaged Buddhists and has written and spoken extensively on socially engaged Buddhism. His most recent book is *The New Social Face of Buddhism* (Wisdom Publications, 2003). Jones is also a widely published haiku poet. Ageing and the mysterious nature of time are major themes in *Pilgrim Foxes* (Pilgrim Press, 2001, co-authored with Jim Norton and Sean O'Connor), *Arrow of Stones* (British Haiku Society, 2002), and *Stallion's Crag* (Iron Press, 2003).

1 – The Art of Ageing

It was the shock of witnessing sickness, old age and death at first hand that moved the youthful Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha, to search for a way out of suffering. Those of us who are no longer young are faced with the same challenge more directly. How can we best respond to it ?

Ageing is the supreme challenge of our life. Physically we begin to deteriorate. Socially we may now find ourselves discounted and patronised in various subtle and not so subtle ways. Ageism is the last and most difficult of the discriminations to be rooted out. These physical and social discomfitures combine to threaten and undermine our self-image and how we value ourselves. Commonly old age is viewed as a time when the best of life is behind us. What remains is to enjoy the “compensations” of old age, and even these are customarily presented in a sentimental and patronising light.

I offer here a very different perspective, a Buddhist perspective, together with some practical proposals about how to embody it. Ageing can be the culminating adventure of our lives, up to which the earlier years may be seen as a *preparation*. I do not refer here to the promise of perpetual youth peddled by golden oldie consumerism. That is more evasion than adventure. The adventure of ageing is nothing less than opportunity to transcend the self which has lived its life up to now, and hence to transcend the decrepitude and death of that self. At its simplest that grand word “transcendence” is about being totally at ease with ourselves, and hence at ease with others. Freed from self preoccupations and anxieties we can wholeheartedly serve others.

The essence of an adventure, however, is that it is scary and unpredictable, a venture into the unknown which demands courage and risking ourselves. The more we resort to safety-nets, diversions and evasions the less of an adventure it becomes. We sell ourselves short.

Moreover, an adventure requires training, skill and practice. So if we are to make an art of growing old and dying we need a practice, a way of cultivation, not as a part-time hobby, but with all our heart all our time. What I shall offer here is a number of perspectives and practices which readers can adapt to their own situations and needs. They will be around four themes: ageing, physical embodiment, dying, and celebration.

Making a Start

“Suffering I teach, and the way out of suffering”, proclaimed the Buddha. Here “suffering” does not mean pain but the profound discomfiture which we experience when all our attempts to remedy or evade pain prove futile. Our suffering presents us with a powerful incentive to undertake a practice in which we learn to work intimately with the suffering and thereby transform it or at the least make it more manageable.

So the first task of each of us is to identify and define what it is about ageing that particularly discomfits and frustrates us. Where is the shoe pinching ? Indeed we may be able to identify and work with two or three such discomfitures..

Note that what we have to work with is not the *cause* of our discomfiture (that is, the pain itself) but how we *experience* it (that is, our sense of discomfiture) – not what is afflicting us out there, but what it feels like in here, in the mind. The Buddha explained this distinction between pain and suffering from pain as follows:

When afflicted with a feeling of pain those who lack inner awareness sorrow, grieve and lament, beating their breasts and becoming distraught. So they feel two pains, physical and mental. It is just like being shot with an arrow, and right afterwards being shot with a second one, so that they feel two arrows.

Some people find it difficult to make this distinction, but to be able to do so is a first big step towards overcoming suffering. Thus we may be afflicted by the pain of arthritis, plus the painful fact of not being able to manage on a reduced income. Secondly, we need to clarify consciousness of how each of these afflictions upsets us. How this is to be done will be explained shortly. But it is noteworthy that different people may experience

much the same affliction in very different ways. Some make light of what others find deeply depressing.

External fixes

In our contemporary culture a great many afflictions can be remedied or alleviated by some external fix. Medication can control arthritic pain. State welfare benefits can alleviate financial distress. Certainly such remedies should be explored and applied as needs be.

Those of us who are financially comfortable and live in prosperous high tech cultures have access to so many external fixes that we tend to develop a “fix it” mentality. We become totally dependent on external solutions and feel particularly frightened and vulnerable when these are not available or do not work any longer. This contrasts with more traditional cultures where greater psycho-spiritual and cultural resources have been developed to enable people to *experience* affliction less painfully in the substantial absence of technical and social fixes. However, with ageing, medical interventions and favourable social conditions can be only of limited value in the face of our mortality and the inevitable deterioration of our bodies. It is this that makes the experience of ageing particularly challenging.

It is our self-identity that is challenged. This vulnerable and transient sense of self needs to affirm itself, to feel secure, by holding on to whatever it can, getting enough of what it wants and avoiding enough of what it doesn't want. For a variety of reasons this tends to become more difficult with ageing, and there is commonly a growing sense of powerlessness and loss of control over our lives. This exposes the root fear, the sense of *lack*, that lies at the heart of the human condition but which in earlier years we are better placed to keep covered up.

Threats to the Ageing Self

There are two intertwined strategies by which we struggle to sustain our sense of self in the course of our lives. They are belongingness-identity (of gender, nationality and so on) and strongly standing out as a unique individual who makes his or her mark. Both of these identity-creating strategies are threatened by ageing.

On the day I retired from my institutional career, cleared my desk, and handed in my ID card, I recall wandering about disconsolately amidst the rush of purposive commuters, who knew where they were going that day, and probably for several years to come. “Retired” and “O.A.P.” are back-number identities which imply a kind of belongingness we may be reluctant to embrace. Behind the social invisibility of old age there is much alienation and loneliness. This includes alienation from our contemporary speedy, clever youth culture, which can become increasingly strange with each passing decade. The aged tend to become strangers in their own land.

Ours is an up-front culture of individualism with attitude. Get a life ! In a culture which places a high value on independence, standing up and standing out, physical and financial dependence can induce feelings of failure and inadequacy.

In the area of gender and sexuality to be a “real man” or a “real woman” is commonly important in sustaining a strong self-identity. Here again old age can diminish self-regard. Men's sexual drive is lost or diminished; women are said to lose their looks.

Responses to Ageing – Keeping Young

It is just possible for a few to avoid both the tribulations and the challenges of ageing, and never really to grow old at all. These are commonly robust, healthy and well-to-do extraverts who manage to keep reinventing their youthful selves, always on the go. Then one day they go out like a light, perhaps in their sleep, perhaps from a heart attack. Still as busy and self-fulfilled as ever they crash into the buffers and are gone.

In our culture this is widely considered the best possible way to go. And indeed such a life may be envied by those for whom ageing is a wretched decline. Of all the geriatric evasion strategies it is deservedly the most

popular, though not one that can always be chosen at will. But is there not something supremely important which this eternal-youth-and-into-the-buffers school may be missing ?

Many of those who strive to keep young find that being actively involved in service to others helps them to do this. Thus life continues to appear meaningful and they have the status of the helper who assists the needy. But for people of any age, helping others can be a major distraction from truly seeking to help ourselves. True, the aged have many opportunities to be of service to others in ways not possible when younger. However, what that service really *means* depends on motivation. How far are we really serving ourselves and how far are we selflessly serving others ? Only the cultivation of scrupulously honest insight can give a clear answer. For if we are predominantly serving our selves then the quality of our service is likely to be flawed. This is a difficult and delicate matter. We should certainly not be deterred from helping others if they are in need and we feel we can be of assistance. It is by the actual experience of helping that we have an opportunity to observe what underlying motivations are at work. And certainly if we are helping older people one of the most valuable services we can offer is to become an example of how to age in an inspiring and creative way ourselves.

Some Negative Responses to Ageing

Jung observed that “many old people prefer to be hypochondriacs, niggards, pedants, applauders of the past or else eternal adolescents. – all lamentable substitutes for the illumination of the self.”

In response to the multiple discomfitures of ageing, our personality and behaviour may be deformed, though we may remain unaware of the extent to which we have changed. We may become curmudgeonly, grudging and cantankerous, full of bile against the world for all we have lost. Why me ? From there it is an easy slide into self-pity and then into depression and then into withdrawal and denial – seemingly bereft of all emotion. Our immune system weakens and we become an easy prey to illness.

A different response is to play the Uncle Tom role. We reinvent ourselves as old fogies (which is at least some kind of distinctive identity) or, better still, we cosy up to being patronised as jolly old birds and amiable codgers.

Another kind of evasion is that of the fusspot, struggling desperately to keep everything in place. We become anxious and obsessive about more and more petty details. It is as if our larger concerns had now escaped us (or we had managed to forget them) and hence control over what remains to us becomes increasingly important. And yet for others growing old brings the opposite – an enlargement of all our sensibilities.

And, finally, the Existential Option

Advancing age makes it more and more difficult for us to feel in full control of our lives. It loosens our grip on many of our attachments. It helps us to let go of clinging. For the first time we may sense the full human potential that lies beyond this small, obsessed self.

And so the third kind of response is to undertake a transformation of the experience of ageing. There are some people who seem able to do this quite naturally and effortlessly. But the meditative practice of “bare awareness” (or “mindfulness”) through which it can be achieved is available to all of us.

A start has been made already here with the identification of each our own most acutely felt discomfitures of ageing. Discomfiture refers here to the painful experience of some external affliction, including bodily afflictions.

Awareness practice is learning to open up to powerful emotions without either letting them discharge themselves (as anger or self-pity, for example), or suppressing them (perhaps by trying to rationalize them or otherwise get them under control]. This, incidentally, is not to deny that anger may be a healthy response to some injustice out there – but when angry we can often sense how much is in fact coming from some gutsy ego frustration. This middle way of creative containment is not easy to describe, and harder still to do. It requires a lot of personal experimentation.

John Welwood, a transpersonal psychologist, writes of “befriending emotion” which, “by neither suppressing emotions nor exploring the meaning in them, teaches us a way to feel their naked aliveness and contain their energy.” Some further explanation from teachers in different Buddhist traditions may help to get the measure of awareness practice. In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, Nyanaponika Mahathera writes that “by the methodical application of Bare Attention ... all the latent powers of a non-coercive approach will gradually unfold themselves with their beneficial results and their wide and unexpected implications.” “Let yourself be in the emotion”, wrote the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa. “Go through it, give in to it, experience it ... then the most powerful energies become absolutely workable rather than taking you over, because there is nothing to take over if you are not putting up any resistance.” Zen philosopher Hubert Benoit warns as follows: “If a humiliating circumstance turns up, offering me a marvellous chance of initiation, at once my imagination strives to conjure what appears to me to be in danger... It does everything to restore me to that habitual state of satisfied arrogance in which I find a transitory respite, but also the certainty of further distress. In short, I constantly defend myself against that which offers to save me; I fight foot by foot to defend the very source of my unhappiness !”

Thus, in ageing, we seek to open in stark awareness to one or more of the particular discomfitures – hurts, anxiety, unease – which we have identified, working for a period of time with each if there are more than one. These feelings are threatening when we try to look them straight in the face. It is like spilling cold water on a hot stove: the bubbles run in all directions and turn to steam. Anything to escape ! For this reason it is best to begin with whatever might be our favourite *evasions* of a specific discomfiture. We can begin by examining possible evasion in terms of lifestyle, as described earlier, like the escape into busyness or into fussy and petty preoccupations. Next we can move in closer and try to get a taste of the inner, psychological evasions that lie beneath what I have called lifestyle evasions. For example, Elizabeth Kubler Ross identified a sequence of successive attitudes to death and dying as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

We each have our favourite evasions when blocked, frustrated or frightened by some circumstance that threatens our control over our lives. In my experience, strongly masculine personalities often fixate on “my problem out there” and may find it very difficult to get in touch with “how it feels in here”. Another first line of defence is denial (“I’m not really ill at all !”). Or we may try to rationalise and intellectualise painful feelings (like kidding ourselves we are not really in denial, or burying ourselves – thanks to the internet -- in study and discussion of the minutiae of our illness). Or, again, anger and frustration may be projected onto others or the world in general (“Young people today”). Even feeling guilty is evasive, in that by punishing *ourselves* we do retain a perverse kind of control. The same can be said of self-pity, often a final resort. Here we are getting down to very basic emotions, stripping away successive self-protecting layers. Anger itself, for example, is an evasion which protects us from what we eventually discover lies beneath it and fires it up – root fear.

Always this practice is about deepening our physical awareness of how affliction feels. What are its physical sensations ? Its colour ? The taste of it ? Getting in touch will be easiest in sitting meditation, when the surface of the mind has become still and the deeper feelings can be observed.

When the root fear in which our evasions originate does itself become transparent we are left only with the emptiness of the self-seeking self. The self just gives up trying to sustain its illusions (sometimes in a state of extreme despair) and is freed at last into acceptance of the “suchness” of things, of “just how it is”, “just how we are”. Reality appears without our need to colour and shape it, to make pictures, and hence we become more open to other people’s realities. Indeed, it has always been there, trying to break through to us, but obscured by the clouds of self-protectiveness. There is here a sense of liberative joy, of gratitude, freed of the constant strain of trying to make our condition as we vainly desire it to be. Note that “acceptance” here signifies a positive liberation instead of the grudging putting up with things that the word might otherwise suggest.

Similarly the “empowerment” we experience is not a self-empowerment, but the empowerment of a universal energy that floods in when we give up our futile attempts at self-empowerment. When all our evasions become transparent they lose their compulsive power. We see more clearly how to respond to our problems, which now appear more open and manageable. And if there is little we can do about our decrepitude and death in a few years time, in that deep hearted acceptance lies liberation.

Stacking firewood
this winter evening
how simple death seems

Freed of self-preoccupation we are freed wholly to respond to others' needs. The wisdom of bare awareness thus manifests itself as compassion in the world. Laughter and tears mingle when we become aware of the tragi-comedy of our unavailing struggle to be free of this or that without being able to see that struggle as itself the greatest of our problems.

This, then, is how we can transcend ageing as it is conventionally experienced. And it is with ageing that this practice achieves its greatest potential, when all the customary evasions to which we may have become habituated in earlier years begin to wear thin and we are obliged truly to confront our human condition.

2 – Embodying our Age

Shaving mirror
an ancient man surprised
stares back

And the full length mirror may be even more nakedly discomfiting. Who is this staring back at us ? This seemingly unchanging *me* is confronted by this thing I own as “my body”. And yet how can it be no more than something dangling at the end of my mind ? For as this body deteriorates, its pains multiply, disturbing the “I” who once took my body very much for granted.

Women in particular may begin to feel more at home in their bodies only with the onset of ageing. There are various possible reasons for this, such as the alienation experienced by women traditionally presented as objects of desire, and in some cultures, repressive attitudes to sex and the body.

For the most part, however, our youthful embodiment tends to be narcissistic, stimulated by a commercialised culture of physical improvement, youthful appearance, and obsessional sex. With ageing we may begin to experience embarrassment with our bodies and even revulsion. A once prized exhibit becomes a liability.

Most religious traditions have tended to revile the body. The concern has been to discourage any inclination to identify with our sensuous flesh – and even more so with somebody else's. Women especially have been seen as (for men) dangerously embodied creatures and a threat to ascetic rectitude.

So far I have supposed a dualistic understanding of mind versus a “separate” body, a split mind/body person. Krishnamurti once observed that all the miseries of the world were to be found in even the smallest gap between *this* and *other*, in other words, in dualistic perceptions. Here the challenge of old age is for the self to embody itself, for mind and body to be experienced as one.

Such an embodiment can occur spontaneously when the self-consciousness of body and mind are lost in some absorbingly creative task, in athletic and sporting skills, in making love, and so on. Pairing meditation with hatha yoga makes for a particularly valuable embodiment practice. And the practice of bare awareness as previously described is, of course, also a healing embodiment, working with the physicality of emotion, and particularly with physical pain. This is a large subject in itself, but Stephen Levine's book *Who dies ?* has a particularly valuable chapter on working with pain.

As our ageing body accumulates aches and pains these become not a distraction from cultivating meditative awareness but an ally, strongly holding our attention and keeping us earthed. In the mind's meditative experience of the body, body and mind become the one *presence* which is no longer an awareness of any *thing*. This in its purest form is an awakening from life's dream.

3 – Ageing into Dying and Death

Buddhist writer Larry Rosenberg maintains that “we’re not really afraid of dying – we’re afraid of the *idea* of dying”. The discussion of ideas about dying has become quite fashionable – though they are not usually recognised as no more than ideas. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its famous variant, Sogyal Rinpoche’s *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, have become bestsellers. At any public meeting on Buddhism you can be sure of at least one question about rebirth.

In meditative enquiry it is important to distinguish between ideas and personal experience. Buddhist ideas about death are an expression of the experience of highly evolved yogins, raised in or living in traditional spiritually saturated cultures. Such ideas can sustain faith. They are also valuable in that they may contain specific meditation and visualisation instructions which, in gifted and advanced practitioners, can lead to altered states of consciousness. However, it is all too easy to forget that these are mere ideas, which we may have made into fascinating and consoling mind pictures. They then become, in effect, evasions, in that they make it more difficult to sustain a *don’t know* mind, empty and open to receive whatever gifts of insight may be offered. The ancient Ch’an scripture *On Trust in the Heart* warns us that, of death and all the grave and constant concerns of life, “the more you think about it, the more you talk about it, the further from it you go. Put an end to wordiness and intellection and there is nothing you will not understand. For what can words tell of that which has no yesterday, tomorrow or today?”. Similarly, many centuries later, the great Zen master Dogen, who emphasised death as the central concern and practice, urged us not to analyse it or speak about it. “Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of Buddha; then all is done by Buddha”

If we ask ourselves questions like “What is my death?” and “Where do I go after I die?” we may be able to come up with some interesting ideas. But in the shadow of death we shall need more than fascinating explanations to sustain us. Our salvation lies in sustaining holy ignorance, the open, receptive mind of bare awareness. This requires faith, courage and determination, because when we penetrate beyond *ideas* about dying we uncover what we really fear, and with good reason – our *feelings* about dying.

A Good Death ?

In recent years there has been some shift away from the preoccupation with the spiritual and existential experience of death and dying towards bodily deterioration and its psychological and social implications. As we live longer more and more of us endure decades of low level, chronic ill-health, often followed by prolonged terminal illness, from which we may be “rescued” time and time again by sophisticated medical interventions.

The classic “good death” is about the experience of acceptance and awareness – a kind of epiphany – in the final hours of life. However, Sherwin B. Nuland, in a pioneering critique, warned that “the comfort and peace, and especially the conscious serenity, of final lingering days on earth have been vastly overestimated by many commentators; we are not well served by being lulled into unjustified expectations.” A survey by Karlis Osis of over 35,000 observations by doctors and nurses. concluded that only 10% of patients were even conscious in the hour before death. Of these only one in twenty (0.5% of the total) showed any signs of elation. We may surmise that many of them may in fact have rejoiced at no more than a merciful release from prolonged suffering.

Thus few of us are likely to enjoy the privilege of the “good death”. It is true that within certain limits we *can* prepare for how we shall die, and hence influence our experience of dying, but these limits are narrowly set by the nature of whatever kind of physical deterioration eventually afflicts us. We are most likely to die in a coma or under heavy sedation. Long before that the person who we recognisably are, to ourselves and to our friends and relations, may have become distorted almost beyond recognition.

It is true that advances and wider use of palliative treatment has led to the more pain effective control. But

this has in turn brought to the fore other afflictions which patients find frightening and depressing. There may be a crisis of identity: no longer able to recognise oneself, reinforced by the evident difficulty that the nearest and dearest may have in treating you as the person they once knew and loved. Also there is the frightening lack of bodily control and ability to sustain dignity when reduced to helplessness by vomiting, incontinence, and the like.

There is now a growing awareness of the very diverse ways in which people evolve through terminal illness and approach their deaths. Researchers have claimed that as the hospice movement has grown what were the creative and flexible perspectives of the founders have tended to become institutionalised stereotypes, in both training and care. The good death, they claim, has become a bench mark, even an “ideology”, against which patients can be measured, as also the stages through which they are supposed to pass in getting to it. Those, for example, who remain in denial may be considered the awkward and unsatisfactory ones, who subtly threaten the equanimity of the staff by not doing what they are supposed to do and not dying by the book. This can amount to a discriminatory lack of respect for some patients’ autonomy, and has provoked calls for greater concern for that autonomy.

The above critique suggests that there may be a something of a contemporary Western Buddhist *ideology* of death, an idealisation which has tended to obscure the diverse realities of dying . The following testimony from Frank Ostaseski, administrator of the 1992 San Francisco Zen Hospice Project, is worth bearing in mind:

However many dying people I have known, this person is dying for the first time and I don’t know what they need: everyone has different needs. You must hold your previous experience of dying patients very lightly, so if they prove incorrect for this person you can shift very quickly.

In the light of the above I believe it is now time for a shift away from the final hours of the “good death” to an emphasis on the good life. How we have lived is more important than how we die, over which we may very well have little or no control. More particularly, whatever our dying lot turns out to be, we can as from now prepare ourselves by the practice of bare awareness described earlier. Through this we can make the experience of our terminal afflictions more manageable and endurable, and can longer sustain our personal integrity. In dropping all illusion and evasion this can indeed be a time of insight and transformation, and in this sense a true culmination of the life we have lived.

Thus, in her excellent book *Making Friends with Death*, Judith Lief advises:

When death occurs, our old strategies no longer apply, so we are disorientated and frightened. How can we work with this ? How can we better prepare ourselves to deal with death ? The best preparation is working with our state of mind *now* rather than thinking about exotic things we might do later when we are looking death in the eyes. It is better to learn to relate to death now, when we still have the strength and ability... People have different paths and different teachers and different traditions – but whatever our tradition is, it is not going to help us very much if we don’t actually apply it. The point is: do it now; don’t wait.

Lief advises working with the many smaller “deaths” we encounter day by day, year by year, ranging from losing a favourite pen to losing someone we love, from missing a train to receiving a fateful diagnosis – all the many shocks and losses of life. Such an awareness practice prepares for facing the greatest of the self’s losses – of itself, of its life.

There are No Old People in this Room !

“There is no time. What is memory ?” This intriguing and beautiful question is inscribed on a temple arch in Hong Kong. It compassionately challenges our conventional view of time which moves forward through youth, ageing and death. It invites us to experience time in a way that is unfamiliar but which is no less true.

From this viewpoint our past can only exist embodied in some way in the present – such as a memory recalled to mind, or an entry in a diary, a picture in a family photo album. Similarly the future can only exist as it is

imagined in the present. In this sense there is only the present. And so we are neither young nor old and we are not growing older either; we are just who we are now. In this sense, in a room of old age pensioners, there are no old people.

This mode of experiencing who we are can be very liberating if it is taken deeply to heart. This *suchness* of our situation has been distilled in music, poetry, and art.

However, the present resembles Euclid's definition of a line: it has no thickness. (And, in terms of conventional, relative truth it is an endlessly moving line.). So not only do we have no past or future, we have no present either !

Similarly, we are accustomed to experiencing our embodiment in certain conventional ways – like as a reflection in a mirror. But a biologist, a chemist or a physicist would have very different representations of a human body. Not only does our self have no time; there is no substantiality about it either. So, what is this mystery ?

And yet it is no less true that we set our alarm clock to wake us in the morning, and that we then have to get this body out of bed. So, from another aspect, there *is* time, there *is* substance. And yet they are “empty” of time and substance. This paradox is sometimes called in Buddhism the doctrine of the two truths. It cannot be understood by any amount of thinking about it. We can only experience with our “don't know” mind, what it is to live timelessly in time, and to be old and yet neither-old-nor-young. We can live beyond life-and-death, and yet still age and die. As the *Heart Sutra* says: “...No withering nor death, nor end of them...”

In such life-and-death we truly are at home – or whatever you wish to call it: the Tao, the Universe, the Buddha Mind. Life and death have been likened to a great waterfall. For a brief moment the water of the river is flung out in isolated droplets, drawn down and down by the pull of gravity. Finally with a crash they come together to form the great river again.

Is it not strangely arrogant and irrational for us “to rage against the fading of the light”, against our ageing and death, when everything else blooms, fades and dies ? Why do we distress ourselves with this futile lawsuit against how it is, when it is within our power to drop this illusion that we are somehow not part of a perpetually changing reality ? Here, in the ageing of this embodied self and the prospect of death, when evasion has become so difficult, we are confronted with the great opportunity finally to fulfil our human potential. William Blake has expressed it thus:

Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know
Through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.

4 – Celebration

Finally, let us not neglect the celebration of old age, which gets less prominence in our culture than either the bad news or the ever-youthful evasions of it. What we celebrate is the accumulated wisdom of just having lived so long. As opposed to the negativity of ageism this is our contribution to a fast moving culture which is becoming increasingly disorientated.

For my part I am deeply grateful to have made it through seventy-three years. There's doubtless more to come yet, but I do feel a sense of completion in looking back down the travelled road, and all that has been learnt, achieved and contributed.

There are, of course, also the follies, regrets and wrong turnings. But, by old age, if we have been guilty we have now been guilty for long enough, and it is time to close any unfinished business both with people whom we feel we have wronged and those we believe have wronged us. Now or never is the time to make peace with our past. One by one we need to invite these people in (alive or dead), and visualize ourselves standing in their shoes, listening to what they need to say. We can then offer our final apologies or forgiveness.

We should not dismiss or condone the ingrained follies which may have disfigured our lives. But after we have made whatever atonement is called for we should let them go. Otherwise they can continue to shackle us with a guilt which can disable the creative opportunities of our old age. And if we continue to blame others we may perversely prefer to go on living with such an obsession rather than facing the scary freedom of taking full responsibility for ourselves. I believe it is healing to *honour* at least some of our follies, even as we regret them, as having their own logic in the unfolding of our lives.

There is much to celebrate about the inner resources we now have and which we probably lacked in earlier years. There is the self-reliance which comes from having weathered so many of the storms of life. There is also a deeper appreciation of the complexity of life's situations, and of their problematic character. This makes for greater tolerance, wiser solutions, and amused detachment. And for many, life is lived more of a piece, in contrast to the separate and sometimes conflicting roles which we may have had to sustain when younger

There is an old French proverb, *vient la mort on danse*, as death approaches we can dance. By now we have probably done most of the things we are *supposed* to do and *ought* to do. At last we are *free*, variously, to idle, to contemplate, to explore, to take risks, to take off, -- all in a relaxed and creative way. How very sad if we continue to drive ourselves with all our old habitual imperatives, on which we may have covertly become so dependent that we may have difficulty giving them up.

What a pity to have had the good fortune to have lived to be so old and yet to remain trapped in whom we were, without being able to step out into the new life that awaits us !

A single moon
Bright and clear
In an unclouded sky:
Yet still we stumble
In the world's darkness
-- Zen Master Ikkyu

References and Readings

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