

When Aging Closes In

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The general pattern of life is that you get a body, and as it grows you find you can do more and more things with it. Your sense of who you are, and what you're capable of doing, gets more and more expansive.

Then it gets turned around the other way. You start losing some of those faculties. It's different for each of us, which faculties we lose at what rate. But what's the same for all of us is the sense of confinement. Things that you used to be able to do, now you can't do anymore. You look ahead and you see it's going to be more and more like that. You get more and more penned in.

Fortunately, the story of the body isn't the whole story of your life. You also have the mind. Some of your mental functions do depend on the brain, which like the rest of the body develops and then turns around and goes the other way. But some aspects of the mind don't seem to be dependent on the brain. That's what we want to work on: developing those aspects and strengthening them. The strength of the mind doesn't have to deteriorate with the strength of the body.

As you notice the body's wearing away: It's a warning, okay, that this is going to end at some point. So you want to get the most out of it while you can.

There's a story of a woman who went with her friend one time to see Ajaan Maha Boowa. The friend had cancer and was dying. She wanted to spend at least some of the last months of her life meditating. The first woman, who had been a doctor before she retired, went along to be of help. Almost every night for three months, Ajaan Maha Boowa would give them a Dhamma talk, which they recorded. At the end of the time they had lots of tapes of Dhamma talks. So the doctor decided that she would see how much of the transcribing she could do herself, even though she was in her eighties.

So even with the limitations of an older body, she found that she could do a lot of good. Instead of railing against the things you can't do, you have to look at what you still can do. And try to do that as best you can, as a way of squeezing the most goodness out of this body before you have to leave it.

This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the body into 32 parts. It's not to make you think that the body is a horrible thing. It's simply to remind you that the important aspect of the body is not in how it looks or how attractive it is. It's the good you can do with it. Then as you find yourself more and more confined, as disease sets in and as aging sets in, keep reminding yourself that there are still some good things you can do with the body.

One of the most important, of course, is using it as a way to develop good qualities of the mind: through being generous, through being virtuous, and especially through the meditation, because meditation allows you to develop strengths of mind that don't have to depend on the strength of the body.

There's the strength of conviction, that the training of the mind really is important. This after all was how the Buddha found his awakening.

Traditionally they talk about conviction being conviction in just that: the fact that the Buddha really was awakened. But the implications turn around and focus on you. The Buddha was a human being; he was able to do this with a human mind and a human body. He was younger at the time but still there were a lot of older people who gained awakening in the Buddha's time and all the way up to the present. Even those that don't gain awakening find that they benefit a lot from all the effort they put into training the mind.

Ajaan Suwat, after he'd had his car accident and was suffering some brain damage, could still tell when the brain was giving him wrong information and when it was not. That was the result of his training.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students was a middle-aged man who had to go in for a heart operation. When he came out, he realized that the doctors had shut off an artery to his brain. His brain wasn't functioning quite right. At least he had the presence of mind and the alertness to figure out what was going on. So he learned how to live with that, as he gradually regained his functions. Because of the powers of observation he had developed through meditating, he handled that situation much better than most people would.

Two of Ajaan Fuang's older students had cancer. They were able to deal with the illness with a lot more equanimity—and to deal with the pain without being overcome by the pain—again because of their practice.

So the practice does a lot for you as the body grows ill, even as it dies. And it will grow sick and die: There's no guarantee that because your mind is in good shape, suddenly your body will be healthy. There's that New Age belief that disease exists only because you believe in it. That's not the case. Disease exists because you've got past karma. You've got a body that's created out of fabrication. It's going to go.

But you can make sure that your mind doesn't have to suffer from this. Part of that is accepting that this is the nature of bodies, this is the nature of karma. Still, there's always that aspect of present karma where you really can make a difference. That's what you've got to have conviction in.

This leads to the other strengths of mind, such as persistence, when you really keep at it. When it's going well, you keep at it. When it's not going well, you keep

at it. You do it because this is the only way to escape the suffering that can come when aging and illness start closing in.

When the results aren't coming as fast as you'd like, you find ways of encouraging yourself. This is where the conviction comes in again. When the results do go well, you try to figure out ways of putting them to use. Keep trying to make the best use of what you've got. It may be limited at first, but at least you're not giving in to the limitations. You're pushing against them.

From here you get into the strengths directly related to the meditation: mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. You practice it together with alertness. The first thing you need to keep in mind, of course, is the fact that the training of the mind is the most important thing there is.

When you look back on your life, you want to be able to see that you developed some of the perfections, the same perfections that make ordinary people into arahants, that made Prince Siddhartha into a Buddha. That's a good legacy from each human life, and that's what you want to be able to look back on. You develop more generosity, virtue, persistence, endurance, determination, goodwill, discernment, equanimity. All these good qualities are your real treasures.

That's what you want to keep in mind: that true worth of a human life lies in the quality of the mind, the quality of the heart.

When you have that conviction, it nurtures your mindfulness so that it grows into concentration. From the concentration, you learn how to nourish the body with the breath so that you can counteract at least to some extent the effects of aging, the effects of illness.

Having the breath as an alternative place to put your awareness also puts the mind in a much better mood. When the mind is in a better mood, it doesn't make the illness worse. It actually can improve the quality of your health.

Even if the body's going to die, the mind has a better place to stay: with the sense of awareness itself that develops as you focus on the breath and learn how to make that distinction with your discernment that "Here's the breath; here's the awareness. The awareness is present right here." Even though it touches these things and is aware of these things as the body deteriorates and decays, the awareness itself doesn't have to be affected by those changes. That's the sign of a really well-trained mind. It's gotten the most out of the fact that even though the body's aging, there are many good things you can do with it—maybe not the things that you had planned, but then again, maybe your plans weren't all that wise.

This is why we have the teachings of the Buddha to remind us that the

goodness of a human being doesn't lie in having a healthy body, it lies in having a healthy mind.

There's that story of the old man who went to visit the Buddha. He'd been ailing. And the Buddha told him, "Well, at the very least make sure that even though the body isn't healthy, your mind is healthy."

Before leaving the monastery, the man went to see Ven. Sariputta. And Sariputta said, "Oh, you look like you've heard a Dhamma talk from the Buddha." The man said, "Yes," so Sariputta asked him what it was. The man said, "The Buddha said, 'Even though the body isn't healthy, make sure that your mind is healthy.'" And Sariputta said, "Did he explain how you do that?" The man said, "No. I was just struck by the thought."

So Sariputta explained. It's a matter developing the mind to the point where you no longer have to identify with the body, with feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, or consciousness. That way, when these things change, as they inevitably will, the mind won't be affected by the change. That's a really healthy mind.

This is what we're working on as we meditate. We develop concentration so that we can develop the strength inside—along with the discernment that goes with that strength—to get the mind in a position where even though it lives in a body that's ill, the mind isn't ill. It lives in a body that's aging, but the mind isn't aging. Even when the body dies, the mind doesn't die and isn't affected by the death of the body. That's a really healthy mind. And that's a direction toward which we can all work, regardless of the state of the body.

So keep these thoughts in mind.