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Aging

People do not quit playing because they grow old.
They grow old because they quit playing.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Aging is a vast topic. It can cover anything from hair dye to stroke or from skin wrinkles to dementia. Therefore, we need to narrow our discussion of the subject to the context of this book. The following factors will keep us within that boundary.

- ◆ We will keep the mind/brain as the pivotal point of our discussion, since inner peace (our subject) is a phenomenon of the mind. We will deal with the body to the extent that the mind depends on a healthy body in certain aspects for optimum performance to progress to inner peace.
- ◆ Although the aging process starts from birth, for our purposes we will use that term to refer to the time beyond 40 years, the age at which people are usually *perceived* to begin aging.
- ◆ Much progress has been made in Health Science¹⁰³ to increase our life expectancy. For example, in 1900 the average life expectancy of a North American was 47 years, while by 2000 it had risen dramatically to about 78 years. However, we will not place emphasis on longevity or athletic prowess or external appearance for their own sake but rather on the *wellbeing* of the individual as the person ages. In essence, a life ending at 42 is as good as a life ending at 105 years, so long as both lives had achieved inner peace before the end.

Aging is a process that virtually all of us are conditioned to look upon with aversion and youthfulness with longing (craving). While youth disregard the topic of aging for the time being, those who are already old worry about all kinds of dreadful things that could happen to them.

¹⁰³ In this chapter we will use the term Health Science to comprise of all scientific disciplines directed towards the treatment, cure, prevention and delaying of sickness and injury.

That worrying, or anxiety, most often dispirits them further, precipitating additional mental distress. Sometimes the mental distress, if intense and persistent, can also bring about or aggravate physical problems, such as cardiovascular illness.

In view of the forgoing, some important questions arise. Is our aversion of aging in touch with reality? If not, what should one's attitude be towards it? What, if any, are the things one can do to make the aging process one of peace rather than distress?

Aging, as will be established in the analysis below, is not something to be averse to at all. The primary reason behind our aversion to anything, and therefore also to aging, is *ignorance*. When we find out what we are ignorant of, and what is reality with regards to aging, we will be able to *accept* those facts of aging that we can do nothing about. At the same time, this same investigation will also identify *action* we can take to make this phase of life as meaningful as it is meant to be. These two outcomes will alleviate or eliminate not only our aversion to aging but also the anxiety and other emotional problems that always follow aversion.

To make our investigation most meaningful, we will conduct it in two parts, based on the two-pronged statement of the principle of self/no-self discussed in Chapter 28: Anatomy of the Self:

- (a) *There is a self*, only as perceived by our truth-distorting sensory mechanisms, and
- (b) *There is no self* in Absolute Reality (truth), that is, upon transcending the senses.

The first part, titled *investigation on worldly terms* is based on (a) and the second part titled *investigation on transcendental terms* is based on (b).

(A) INVESTIGATION ON WORLDLY TERMS

First we will list the more common symptoms ('signs') of natural aging, that is, what aging would have entailed, had we not taken into account the beneficial impact of modern Health Science. Next we will try to understand the reasons or causes behind these signs of aging. Finally, we will look at what Health Science can do to alter the course of natural aging within limits, for our benefit.

Symptoms ('Signs') of Natural Aging

Of the many perceptible changes that are characteristic of aging, the common ones are listed below.

- Perhaps the first sign of aging is in our vision in the form of difficulty in reading small print (presbyopia) and this begins at about age 40 for most of us. As we progress in years, we may get glaucoma (loss of vision due to an increase of pressure in the eyeball that damages the optic nerve) and by about age 60 most of us will have cataracts (cloudiness in the lens of the eyes that diminishes vision) to some degree.
- We may experience some hearing loss, in particular, hearing the highest pitched tones. In practice this may appear as inability to hear certain sounds like *s* and *ch* (when someone talks) or certain tones in music we enjoyed fully when younger.
- Many of us will notice our hair graying and most men will have partial baldness.
- The skin becomes wrinkled and thinner. The distribution of fat changes. When younger, the fat was somewhat evenly distributed under the skin. Now, more fat gets deposited in the abdominal area. Also the skin may breakdown due to prolonged pressure caused primarily by immobility.
- People become more prone to developing certain disorders when they are older. These include the following:
 - cardiovascular disorders (including stroke)¹⁰⁴,
 - cancer,
 - bone and joint problems (specially arthritis and osteoporosis),
 - prostate problems in men,
 - urinary incontinence,
 - symptoms of diabetes
 - brain disorders (such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's), and
 - a certain degree of cognitive impairment including memory loss.

¹⁰⁴ Cardiovascular disorders are the #1 cause of death in the general population and cancer is #2.

A number of the above developments collectively, lead to the conclusion that the person “is old” or “looks old”. Also, disorders that are latent while a person is young can surface when the person ages and the disease fighting mechanisms weaken.

We must note that, obviously, all the above symptoms do not impact one person. Different disorders affect one person singly or in combination. As we continue to age, more disorders may effect us. On the other hand, some have few of these disorders, or only mild forms of certain disorders, and stay relatively healthy into very old age. Being a ‘healthy old person’ is dependent on certain conditions, such as genetic factors, lifestyle and the nature of medical care received.

Reasons Behind Signs of Aging

Underlying the perceptible signs of aging which we have discussed above are changes to body systems and organs imperceptible to the direct senses but detectable by scientific means. These are caused by activities at cellular and sub-cellular levels, again detectable by scientific means. Some of these aging-related changes are listed below.

- The maximum heart rate and the maximum volume of blood pumped out by the heart decreases.
- Gradual accumulation of fatty deposits and scar tissue in the blood vessels reduce blood flow to the heart, brain, liver, kidneys and other organs. This may also cause the blood pressure to increase.
- The amount of blood received by the brain, liver and kidneys decreases.
- The lung's pumping capacity decreases while the volume of residual air after exhalation increases.
- The ability of the liver and kidneys to clear toxins decreases. So does their ability to deal with drugs.
- Glucose tolerance drops.
- The ability of cells to fight infection wanes.
- Starting at about age 30, the brain gradually loses weight – about 3 oz (6%) by age 60 and about 5 oz (10%) by age 90.

One of the most important aspects of any healing process is to understand reality and accept it, even if, at the start, we are averse to the reality. This very acceptance dispels the aversion we started with, helping us to move towards inner peace.

Therefore, with regard to aging it is crucially important that we *accept* the above changes as nature's way and the fact that these changes have

befallen humans since the inception of the species. Aging is an integral part of nature, because it is a manifestation of the universal law of impermanence. What is born has to die and aging is the bridge that takes one from birth to death.

Once we accept aging as nature's way, we can proceed to take stock of what today's Health Science has to offer us to ameliorate things and consider that help as a bonus.

Impact of Health Science

One of the most important factors that enables one to feel well while aging is one's lifestyle (perhaps in par with hereditary factors). A healthy lifestyle means following guidelines and advice available from Health Science.

It is now known that older adults who keep themselves physically and mentally active and eat a healthy diet can be 10 to 20 years *functionally* younger than older adults who do not follow these lifestyle practices.

Even identical twins, who have greater commonality than other siblings, have been shown to display stark differences in their physical conditions and appearances when their lifestyles have been very different, thus establishing the major role played by nurture (especially lifestyle) on how we age.

For our inspiration, here are a few cases of seniors who chose to be active. Ella Peckham was 86 when she took part in a competition swimming event at the Masters Games in Toronto. Great-grandmother Ida Birdie Berk was 91 when she enrolled in a criminal psychology degree program at the University of Toronto. Lucille Jeffrey Thompson was 88 when she enrolled in a karate program and 90 when she got her black belt. Frank Kennedy was 72 when he climbed all the stairs of CN tower and reached the top. Astronaut John Glenn was 77 when he relived his glory days (of being the first American to orbit the earth) by making his second trip to space, aboard the shuttle Discovery. Konrad Adenauer was Chancellor of West Germany at age 87.

Our purpose in listing the achievements of these seniors is not to suggest that we strive for the kind of goals reached by these people, but to bring out the message that aging should not be a barrier to maintaining an active and fruitful life. If we use our minds to create active lives utilizing the unique potential each one of us possesses, we too can realize goals that are meaningful to us, as the described

accomplishments were to the seniors listed above. In that sense, creating a beautiful garden can be as meaningful as a trip to space.

During the last few decades Health Science has made astonishing progress in the understanding, treatment, prevention and delaying of physical illness. To live at the present juncture in human evolution and not benefit from this progress, at least in so far as it affects mental wellbeing would be unwise. Let's therefore touch briefly on some of the key areas of interest. Detailed discussion of these topics is outside the scope of this book. Therefore for currently available information on Health Sciences topics of interest, the reader may consult from amongst the abundant resources (such as books, TV and the Internet).

For all medically related concerns the reader must consult a physician. In particular, an annual medical examination is highly recommended. Prior to starting an exercise program or re-starting one after a long lapse, a consultation with a physician is a must.

By targeting the underlying causes operating at organ, tissue, cellular and sub-cellular levels discussed earlier, Health Science has been able to provide us proven guidelines from which we can benefit at any age. Some of the most important actions for healthy living are listed below in brief:

- Exercise
 - Swimming, cycling and walking briskly are good exercises, particularly for cardiovascular health.
 - Include some weight-bearing exercises for building bone strength and stretching exercises for toning the muscles.
- Eat a diet rich in vegetables, whole grain and fruits.
- Reduce the intake of foods that are rich in saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Maintain weight at healthy levels.
- Quit smoking. (Quitting even in old age helps).
- Cut down on excessive salt intake.
- Avoid exposure to loud noises as much as possible. If you think you have hearing problems, see your physician. There is plenty of help available.
- Avoid excessive exposure to sunlight.
- Have an annual eye examination. A lot of help is available. For example, presbyopia can be corrected with eyeglasses, glaucoma with medications/surgery and cataracts with surgery.
- Get sufficient sleep

- Do things to keep the mind active (e.g., crossword puzzles, helping younger people with their school work, etc.)

(B) INVESTIGATION ON TRANSCENDENTAL TERMS

Any effective means of overcoming mental distress must transcend the senses and look toward the truth that lies beyond because it is our ignorance of the truth that causes the distress.

At a transcendental level we will look at two views born of ignorance that cause mental distress: (1) the dichotomies created by human beings as reflected in arbitrary labels and (2) the notion of self.

As we grow, we form erroneous views about the world via our truth-distorting senses. Of importance are the views of the dichotomies we make through arbitrary judgements of the world. These can be, for example, that an entity is good or bad, pretty or ugly, and youthful (meant in a glorified sense) and aged (meant in a sense of abhorrence). When we transcend our truth-distorting senses, all these labels are seen to have no existence, therefore no meaning, in reality. Yet, due to the nature of our sensory mechanisms, we crave for the good, the pretty and youthfulness while being averse to the bad, the ugly and the aged, not realizing they are all illusions in reality.

In the eyes of truth, infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood and old age reduce to one indivisible continuum and consequently their separate existences disappear, except in our minds. Therefore, during our brief appearance upon this planet it is meaningless and wasteful of precious mental energy to separate old age from the rest (except for societal convenience, mainly communication purposes) or to worry about a thing called aging.

The other important point relating to the property of truth-distortion of the senses is the core notion of self (Chapter 28: Anatomy of the Self).

Once we erroneously establish, and believe in, a negativity about the aging process as discussed above, the act of personalization by thinking “I am old” or “My is old” (e.g., “My mother is old”) becomes a case of adding fuel to the fire. In truth, not only is the label ‘old’ meaningless as discussed above, but also there is no self (I or My). This compounded erroneous thinking from negative labeling (‘old’) and personalization (I or My) results in aversion, particularly *fear* (anxiety). Thus deep contemplation of *no-self* will become the ultimate therapy for any mental distress associated with aging. Adapting the

famous quotation from the *Path of Purification* referred to earlier in the book on the subject of aging, we can make the transcendental statement “There is aging, but no person (I) that ages.”

Miscellaneous points to note:

Before we close this chapter, let's cover some miscellaneous points on the subject of aging.

1. *Physical distress (pain) vs. mental distress.* We can move from any distress (even the ‘worst’) to inner peace if we separate physical pain from mental distress and view them separately. As stated earlier, the physical distress that exists beyond relief from current Health Science is something we have to live with. However, mental distress can be alleviated, and even eliminated, by altering our thinking patterns to be in touch with reality.
2. *Self-reliance in old age.* While self-reliance is very important during all stages of our adult life, it becomes an essential adjunct in old age if we are to realize inner peace.

More and more people, in all age groups - youth, middle-aged and elderly - are spending more time alone, or living alone now, than in earlier times. In fact the percentages have been rapidly increasing over the last few decades, most visible in the seniors category. For example, government statistics show that in 1971, in Canada, 39% of widowed seniors over age 65 lived alone. Thirty years later, in 2001, that rose to 72%, almost doubling the 1971 figure. Thus, living alone is a hard fact of modern times, particularly as we grow older. Whether life lived alone will be a happy period or a miserable one will be primarily determined by one factor – our degree of self-reliance. For a detailed discussion of self-reliance see chapter 10.

3. *Maximum lifespan.* Even with the best lifestyle and best help from Health Science, we cannot live more than about 120 years, because that is what the dictates of nature/nurture (genes/environment) allow us. When we compare that with cosmic time frames, any life on this planet is like the ‘blink of an eye’. For that reason alone, it is prudent for us to live meaningfully whatever is left of our lives.
4. *Aging is a fact of existence.* The fact that one ages is known even as a being is born. So why be averse toward something that was

known as an immutable fact of existence ever since intelligent human life began?

5. *We all age.* Except for those who die prematurely due to illness or accident, we all will age – that is billions of us. So, it would be prudent on our part not to ‘make a big issue’ of our individual aging.
6. *Can it be too late for action?* We have discussed things that can be done (exercise, healthy diet, transcendental thinking etc.) to make our aging process as peaceful as possible. However, what if I am a very old person, frail in health, who missed the window of knowing when able and young and who does not now have the energy or motivation to carry out all these wholesome practices? There is still hope, as discussed in Chapter 36: Unfinished Business, coming up.

Chapter Insights and Highlights

1. The youth view aging with aversion and the elderly look at age with fear and anxiety. This is all due to *ignorance*.
2. We can replace this ignorance with wisdom, that is, understanding the facts of aging in touch with reality. Then we will be able to separate what’s changeable from what must be *accepted* for peaceful aging.
3. Worldly view. Specific signs (e.g., cataracts) accompany aging. Health Science has revealed to us the underlying reasons for these changes (e.g., cloudiness in the lens of the eye) and furthermore, what can be done to treat, prevent or delay illness (e.g., surgery for cataract).
4. We can help the body age healthily by exercising, eating a healthy diet and using other help available from Health Science.
5. Transcendental View
 - a) Any mental distress we undergo on account of aging is due to personalization of the aging process and arbitrarily assigning labels of aversion to it, which are meaningless in reality. Therefore meditating on no-self is the lasting cure for mental distress associated with aging (or for any mental distress).

- b) Infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood and old age reduce to one indivisible continuum in the eyes of nature and consequently their separate existences disappear, except in our minds.