Growing Old, Being Young

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Growing old is a wonderful thing provided we remember that the key word is growing. Very often growing old is not such a wonderful thing because the emphasis is on the word ‘old’ rather than on ‘growing’. One morning, at this Institute, when I was speaking with a monk who was physically old, told me that growing old is a curse. That makes sense because as far as the body is concerned, the process of growing old is a process over which none of us has any control.

The real challenge is whether this ‘curse’ can be transfigured into a blessing. One of the reasons why growing old is not such a pleasant thing is that, the kind of culture in which we live today increasingly glorifies youth. All the commercial advertisements display young models. Somehow, through a subtle and not-so-subtle message, everyone is made to feel that being young is a wonderful thing. Therefore those of us who no longer are considered young somehow feel that our time is over.

Interestingly a year ago, there was a book written by a Harvard Professor on happiness. In his book he came to a conclusion which is very counter-intuitive. Normally we think that young age is an age of real happiness and fun. But as we grow old we generally feel that there is not so much fun. The research conducted by the Harvard Professor, however, reveals that the youths in 15-25 age group are under an illusion that they are really enjoying life. As a matter of fact, that period is the time when they suffer from maximum anxiety and stress and they worry about their choice of career or what should they do in future and so on. Their happiness is only illusory. The research revealed further that the happiest people are those who are in the 45-55 age bracket because by that time the uncertainties about their future are gone. They have chosen one career or the other. That is the age when problems connected with old age have not yet made their way. So that is the best period when people enjoy the most. And then, when the old age-related problems arise, then it is not so funny of course, which he mentions in his book.

I just mention all these to show that the ideas that we are happy when we are young and we cannot be happy when we are old, are not necessarily interrelated. For, one thing, ‘young’ and ‘old’ themselves are very relative terms. Not all parts of a personality grow old at the same time. Even physically, not all limbs, not all parts of the body age at the same speed. It is possible to have a 40-year-old body with an 80-year-old heart. By that ‘old heart’ I mean those who have heart-related diseases, whose heart has grown older than the rest of the body. It is said that one person went to a doctor as his right knee was paining. The doctor examined him and said, ‘Oh! it’s nothing. It’s just due to ageing.’ The person said, ‘It cannot be due to ageing because my left knee is as old as my right one!’ But we know that different organs of the body do age differently.

We are not simply the body. We have other parts of our personality. Body of course is the most visible part of our personality. I can see the body. I can see the
physical body of other persons I meet. But we know that within the body we have the mind, the intellect, the storehouse of all our thoughts, our memories, our hopes. These are also parts of our personality. So we have to think about the age of the mind as well. Therefore, when we use the personal pronoun ‘I’, that ‘I’ certainly implies not only our physical body but also our mind, intellect, and our ego. We use the term ‘I’ from the very moment we wake up till we go to sleep. We use the word ‘I’ in all our activities. So if we are asked to define ‘I’ it is certainly a difficult question to answer.

Our scriptures say that besides the body, mind, intellect, ego and so on, there is still something else. What is that? It is the spirit, the spiritual part of our personality. The simple word used to denote it in our scriptures is Atman. Atman really means the Self, the real me. But then, sometimes I look upon the body as ‘I’, sometimes the mind as ‘I’. Thus we have too many parts of our personality, and everyone imagines that the Self is the ‘I’. For instance, when we celebrate our birthday, or when we say I am now 20 years old, what exactly do we mean? We mean to say that 20 years ago this body came to this planet. So I am really referring to the body as ‘I’. Then sometimes we say, ‘I am happy’ or ‘I am miserable’. Now, happiness, sorrow, etc. are the functions, processes that affect the mind. When I say I am happy or miserable, I am referring to the ‘mind’ as ‘I’. Nobody really says ‘I am a body’. But when I say ‘I am a human being’, or when we speak in terms of gender, or when we say ‘I am tall’, ‘fat’, ‘thin’—all these are characteristics of the body. Yet we say ‘I’. That means I look upon my body as I. Now, it is the body that grows old, but because I look upon the body as ‘I’, I feel I am growing old. What it means is this, how we think and how we move and relate to other people in the world depends on our identity.

Identity means how do I see myself. If I identify myself with the body, all the problems of the body become my problems. Suppose the head is aching. In that case we do not say my body has a headache. We say, I have a headache. In such cases we generally try to get some sleep which at times may come with difficulty, but come it does after maybe a certain time. Falling asleep one no longer feels the headache. Why? Because in sleep, your identification with the body is removed at least temporarily.

So as long as we identified ourselves with the body, the headache was our headache. I identified myself with the body and said I have a headache. The moment the mind withdraws itself from the body, as in sleep state, the headache is no more your headache or my headache.

Same is true with the mind. As we go through the day facing so many worries and anxieties—overcoming some and grappling with some—all comes to a stop for the time being when we fall asleep. In the sleeping state when we see a dream we may go through joys and worries making the dream pleasant or unpleasant. But they are different from the joys and worries of the waking state. What it means is that we look upon our body, mind and intellect at various points as ‘I’ and everything that happens to them seems to happen to us.

Our ancient Vedic rishis have said that body, mind, ego, etc are material parts of our personality. It obviously means that they are the products of matter. And because they are the products of matter, they are to follow the laws governing matter. The laws of matter are simple. First, particles of matter come together. When they come together we call it composition. But when the force which holds the particles together get loosened and separated, we call it de-composition. So the material particles have now formed this body. But a time will
come when the force that kept these material particles together will get dissipated and these material particles will get separated; and what remains at the end of someone’s life is a heap of dust or ashes. That is end of the body only. What happens to the mind, to the intellect, to the ego? The rishis said that just as the body is a material part, the mind, intellect and so on are also material components. There is nothing spiritual about the mind and intellect. The spiritual part of our personality is only the Ātman which is Pure Consciousness. Everything other than that is material.

That the body is material we can understand; but the mind is also material. If we think a little we will discover that there is not much difference between the body and the mind. The only difference is that you can see the body, while the mind is invisible. Except that, they are the same. For instance, you need nourishing food to have a healthy body. Similarly, you also need nourishing food for the mind and food for the mind is healthy thoughts. The body has its doctors, the mind too has its doctors. The body gets exhausted. The mind also gets exhausted. Thus you will see everything that is true of the body is true of the mind also. The only difference is that the body is visible, while the mind is not. But just because the mind is not visible, that does not necessarily make it spiritual. No one has seen an isolated electron for instance. There is nothing spiritual about an electron nevertheless. It is just a material particle, too tiny for our eyes to see. What the rishis said is that the mind, the buddhi, the āhamkāra and so on are subtler than the subtlest particle that modern science has been able to isolate. All the same, they are still material particles. As material particles they all age. They all come into being at some point and lose their forms at some other point. The only non-material part is the Ātman.

In the Upanishads the Ātman is described as purātana or purānam which at times is translated simply as ancient. The implication is, the Ātman or the Spirit, is never born and it will therefore never die. The body is born. So it will die. That which has a beginning will invariably have an end. But the Spirit has no beginning, so It is endless, eternal and ever fresh. It never ages. What it means is that if somehow we can detach our ‘I’ from the body, the mind, and the intellect and identify it with the Ātman, then we will never grow old.

We cannot stop ourselves from getting old, although taking help of the cosmetic surgery we can pretend we are not old. Cosmetic surgery is a growing industry in the West. Whatever may be the benefit of such surgery, the fact is we do not get any younger. It only tempts us to believe or pretend that we are not getting old. But how long can any pretension last? The only way of not getting old is the spiritual way.

Vedanta says that so long as my ‘I’ is centred on my body, I will get old with the ageing of my body. One cannot prevent oneself from getting old. Again, so long as my ‘I’ is centred on my mind, all the ups and downs of the mind are my ups and downs. I cannot prevent them. The only solution is to pick up or snatch away the ‘I’ from the body and the mind and place it on the Ātman. The word used in many Indian languages to enquire after a person’s well-being is svastha. Svastha is a Sanskrit word. Sva means ‘in me’ and stha means ‘established’. Etymologically it means, ‘to be established in your true Self’. So when you ask someone ‘Are you keeping well?’ , what you are actually asking is whether your ‘I’ is resting on your real Self. As long as my ‘I’ is in the body, I am not really healthy. As long as my ‘I’ is in the mind, intellect and ego, I am not really healthy. My ‘I’ should be in the Ātman. But how can it be done? The process is simple in
All it says is, we have to find out what the characteristics of the Ātman are and our Vedantic texts are replete with descriptions of the Ātman.

To put very simply, the Ātman is our real Self. It is never born and will never die. It is free from illness, always pure, never bound, and so on. But we human beings feel otherwise. We feel that we are born and someday we will die, no matter how much may we try to deny it for the present. So, ageing, illness, death are the harsh realities of our human existence that we cannot ignore.

When the Buddha says sarvam dukham—all life is suffering—it sounds like the babble of a very depressed and frustrated person. But remember, Buddha was a prince. The choicest pleasures were available to him. Yet he declared, ‘all life is suffering’.

How did Sri Krishna describe the nature of this world? He said in the Gità, ‘anityam asukham lokam imam prāpya bhajaya mām’ (9.33). The nature of the world Sri Krishna describes as anityam, ie not permanent; asukham, joyless. But what do we say? I think everyone will say honestly that our lives are filled with joys and sorrows, sukha and dukha. Of course, some people may feel that they face sorrows more than joys. In reality, however, joys and sorrows come and go. Most of us feel that life is a mixture of joys and sorrows. Sri Krishna views the reality differently. He says, this worldly life is joyless, asukham.

At another place in the Gità (8.15), He refers to the world as duhhālayam. Ālāya means an abode. So duhhālayam means an abode of sorrows. Mind you, it is difficult to find such a joyful, adorable and lovable person other than Krishna in the Hindu tradition. Still it is He who describes the world as duhhālayam!

Now what kind of pains they were referring to? They were referring to a deeper kind of pain that gnaws at us. And that pain is the reality of human existence and the agonies accompanying it—the pain due to the process of ageing, sickness, old age, death and also due to the incorrigible nature of the mind. With such imperfect instruments of body and mind that we have been saddled with, what can we do? The rishis have said: Let them go. It is not the body and the mind which are holding us. It is we who are holding the body and the mind. Swami Vivekananda says in his ‘The Song of the Sannyasin’, an amazing poem: ‘...Thine only is the hand that holds/The rope that drags thee on. .....Let go thy hold, Sannyasin bold!’ We might think that the life is dragging us and we are helpless victims, which is not true. We are, in fact, clutching the rope. We are holding the rope which is dragging us. All we have to do is to let the rope go. But that needs courage and faith.

A story goes that a man was passing through a forest in the darkness of the night. Poor visibility naturally impeded his steps. Suddenly he found himself on an edge of a cliff and tumbled. He was destined to die. Luckily a big and a strong branch of a tree was jutting out below and he clasped it and kept hanging. As he was holding the branch he started shouting: ‘Is anyone out there?’ But this shouting went unanswered. Then after some time the clouds parted, a divine light shone, and a divine voice was heard: ‘My child, do not be afraid. I am here to protect you. Let go of the branch.’ The person thought for a while and said again: ‘Is anyone else out there?’

This is our problem. Each one of us is that person. The branch that we are holding onto is nothing but this body, mind, and ego. How many hours do we spend to cater to the demands and needs of this body, mind, and ego? But all along the scriptures say, ‘Hold onto God’. Our problem is that we want to
hold onto both. But as we begin to take our spiritual life seriously, we have to make a tough choice between the two. We realize then that we cannot have both. We have to loosen our hold on the body and the mind if we want to get a clear and firm grip on the Spirit. All the characteristics of the body and the mind which I see now as ‘mine’, as my very own, have to be disowned. So stop thinking that you were born some day. Of course, you can still celebrate your birthday; otherwise your birthday gifts will stop. But inside your heart, even when you celebrate your birthday, deep down you must know ‘I was never born’.

There is a wonderful story in the life of Mahapurush Maharaj (Srimat Swami Sivananda). One day someone asked, ‘Maharaj, what is your birthday?’ Mahapurushji replied, ‘Ah fool! I was never born’. What he hinted was that he was the Ātman. Birth and death belong to the body. Transforming the ‘I’ from the body and the mind into the Spirit or the Ātman may seem only an intellectual exercise in the beginning. But if we practise sincerely we will begin to see that our lives are changing slowly. You might ask: ‘How to go about this?’ The simple way might be of the four yogas that Swami Vivekananda mentions—Bhakti-Yoga, Rāja-Yoga, Karma-Yoga and Jñāna-Yoga. You may practise one or more yogas or a combination of all the four yogas to realize your true ‘I’. That is why all scriptures advise the practice of reading holy books and sacred texts. Such reading, even if it is done for a few minutes every day, helps us to withdraw the mind from material entities and place it on the Spirit. The same Spirit, when viewed subjectively, is called Ātman and when seen objectively, It is called the Bhagavān. Sri Ramakrishna says that the unripe ‘I’ is associated with material entities such as body, mind etc and the ripe ‘I’ is associated with God. So, you have to think that you are the child of God, or you are the servant of God. Whichever attitude comes to us naturally, we can follow that. And what it will do? It will prevent us from getting old. The body will get old but we will continue to be young. This is the first step.

The second thing that we can do is to try to loosen the hold of time in our lives. Swami Vivekananda says: ‘Time is but the method of our thinking, but we are the eternally present tense’ (The Complete Works, Vol. VIII, p. 22). Truly, we divide time into past, present and future which is a very artificial division. Sometimes we say—so much time has passed! Poet Bhartrihari says, time is not passing. Time is always here. It is we who are passing. It is like the law of relative motion. When we look at Time in that manner we divide it into past, present, and future. So Time is stationary. It is we who are passing, and not Time. We see unfortunately that most of us are not living in the present. We either think of the past or the future. The uncertainties of the future keep us on our toes worried and anxious. And when we are not worrying about the future, we are thinking of the past! What happened yesterday? What happened last year? If we look back at our own lives, we see how simply time has passed. But when we look ahead, Time seems to be a long time—such as ten years from now, or twenty years from now. It seems a long way! But look at ten or twenty years back. It will seem as if time has passed so quickly! When such is the case, what makes you think that the next ten years will be slow? Our books therefore say life is momentary. This is not a statement made metaphorically. So the second thing is to live now. This is not easy to do. In order to live at the present moment we have to make our peace with our past. Food that is not digested creates problems for our bodies. Just as undigested food creates problems for the
body, undigested thoughts and experiences create mental problems. So, making peace with our past is to look bravely at those painful experiences which haunt our thoughts at present.

We are all familiar with the story of Swami Vivekananda being chased by a pack of monkeys at Benares. Swamiji ran faster to escape them. But the monkeys chased faster to catch him. Suddenly an old monk coming from the opposite direction told him to stop and face the brutes. Swamiji stopped and looked back into their eyes. Then the monkeys also stopped and went away quietly. In the same manner, we have to stop and look into the eyes of our own painful experiences and stop them from chasing our present. We can think that all those painful experiences had their own place in our lives and they occurred to teach us something or the other and we learnt from them and have become mature. If we can say all those experiences taught us something, they stop troubling us. What I am today is the result of everything that happened in the past. So we have to be grateful for everything that happened as all these experiences have brought a message into our lives.

Similarly, the future is to be looked at. A devotee is a person who not only believes in the existence of God but also believes that God protects him. If we can gather that sort of a faith, then we will stop worrying about the future. Here we can learn from the babies and see how peacefully they sleep and how joyfully they live. They are not worried about the future. The baby knows that his mother is going to take care of him. But as we grow we miss that connection. Even Holy Mother Sarada Devi had to remind us: ‘Always remember that you have a mother’. But we keep worrying and lament ‘Who will look after me? I myself have to take care of myself.’ Here comes in our ego and we forget that we have a Mother. If we really believe that God is there to protect us, then there is no scope for anxiety about our future.

Finally, keeping young also needs keeping our minds fresh. Let me explain what it means. If you observe the babies you will find that there is ‘something’ in their eyes. That something flashes every time it looks at something new. As we grow older, we lose that freshness. When we look at something we begin to think, ‘Oh, I know what it is’, and then we stop looking, stop experiencing the world. It is because of the illusion that I know everything. This is the third secret of staying young, by giving up the idea that ‘I know’. We think, just because we live in the family we know each member of the family. Probably not. Many times it has been found that people have been living together for ten, twenty, thirty, and even forty years without knowing the other person. If we look afresh at the other person’s eyes we may realize that some point or quality I had not noticed in him or her earlier. For example, why is regular reading of Kathamrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna) beneficial? Because every time we read it, we gain some new insights.

So the first among the three ways of remaining young is to get hold of the ‘ripe ego’ and let go the ‘unripe ego’. Second, to live in the present. And thirdly, to take a fresh look at things and life. These will keep us young as we will learn through our and through others’ experiences. The body may grow old but we will continue to remain young by reminding ourselves of our imperishable divine nature.

* This article is based on the transcription of the lecture Swami Tyagananda, Minister-in-Charge, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, U.S.A., delivered at the Institute on 13 December 2008.