

Ageing - Glimpses into Ancient Indian Texts*

A Venkoba Rao

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Demography: Longevity

The length of human life has steadily declined by 100 years for each yuga: from 400 in Krita, through 300 in Treta, 200 in Dwapara to 100 in the current Kali yuga. A longer life of the earlier yugas (epochs) was attributed to health promoting life-styles which included food habits, satvik mode of thinking and activities, penance and to the value system based on dharma appropriate to each epoch (yuga dharma). Dharma fell by a quarter in each yuga from its fullness in Krita yuga crashing to zero level in Kali yuga.¹

To Buddha, old age was a spectacle of misery and sorrow which needs to be eliminated. As against this, Upanishad speaks of active and joyful ageing 'Kurvaniveh Karmani Jijivasat satam samh: evam tvai naanyatathosti na karma lipyate nare (in this world one should desire to live a hundred years but only by performing actions; thus in no other way can man be free from the taint of action) (Isa-Upanishad-2). The full span of human life according to Vedas is hundred years – 'satayur vai purusah'. Old age is a 'natural disease' which is irremediable according to Ayurveda. By contrast premature old age is an unnatural disease to be treated. Charaka Samhita offers many phenomena that are common between universe and man. For example: old age corresponds to Dwapara Yuga while Kali corresponds to infirmity and death, Krita yuga and Treta yuga correspond respectively to childhood and youth.²

Traditionally there are three stages of life span as described in Gita and Ayurveda: Kaumaram (childhood), Youvanam (youth) and Jara (old age). It may be noted that there has been a neglect of the middle-years: the period that extends from 50-75 years.³ This is the period of vanaprastha - the prelude to the old age (sanyas) commencing from 75th year.

Dr. A Venkoba Rao
MD, PhD, DSc, DPM, FAMS, FASc, FRCPsych, International Fellow APA, FRANZCP, FNA

Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, Madurai Medical College, Madurai-20

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The division of life into four ashrams (brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha and sanyas) is to be found in the Dharma sastras and Manu smriti.

Positive Mental Health (Swastha Vritti)

In ancient Indian thinking, there has been a stress on keeping the body in good health and free from disease. This is necessary for a long and healthy life (dhirga ayuh). Healthy body is also a prerequisite for spiritual growth: "sariramadyam khalu dharma sadanam" remarked Kalidasa. The invocative verse in Mundaka Upanishad says "let us fully enjoy and live our allotted days with firm limbs and strong body". A longer life is also intended to utilize the later part of one's life towards spiritual pursuit. This is said to shorten or lighten the "sufferings" of subsequent rebirths since the theory of reincarnation is accepted in Indian thought. There was a view that the human body was a necessary evil, a home of dirt (roga: "rajassayathanam" in Buddhist text) and does not allow salvation if it is not eliminated or humbled. But Ayurveda in contrast holds that the body, even in old age is the foundation of all wisdom, virtues and enjoyments (Bhoga) and the source of all "purusharthas" – dharma, artha, kama and moksha.⁴

Old age medicine is among the eight divisions (Ashtanga) of Ayurveda offered by Susruta. Vajikarna (virilification and use of aphrodisiacs) and Rasayana (Rejuvenation of the oldsters in the event of decline or loss of vitality) fall under this category. Diseases due to senile degeneration causing "medhakshya" and "smritikshaya" (decline of intellect and memory) are referred to. These are the pointers to the modern diseases like Alzheimer's and other dementias.⁵ The diseases may result from malfunctioning of doshas, from divine causes or from seasonal factors; "dosha bala", "devibala" (from karma) and "kalabala pravritta" respectively. Promotion of health by a way of life (dinacharya, ritucharya) is prescribed in Ayurveda.⁶ The Ayurvedic approach is towards the prevention of diseases, prolongation of life and maintenance of positive health. An Ayurvedic sloka runs as:

*“Always cheery with no thoughts
(No sensitive response to situations)
Always taking in body – building fatty food only,
Excessive sleep tends a lean man to be a fatty pig”⁵*

Miraculous powers were ascribed to the fruit “amalaka” (embelic myorbalam) for its life prolonging virtue leading to “immortality”. Siddha system of medicine has a preparation called “Muppu” consisting of pills of mercury (muppu – “philosopher’s stone”). Muppu administered to prolong life is known as “vaidya muppu”.

Psychiatric Features

The essential conflict of the declining years preceding the proper old-age is between enjoyment of worldly pleasure and their renunciation. A successful resolution of the conflict results in “equanimity”.³ Aristotle used the term ‘eueria’ to indicate ‘successful ageing’ and defined it as living a long and happy life, without suffering and without being a burden to others.

Psychiatric states occurring in the old age are featured in the characters of Indian epics.

Dasaratha’s grief

The king Dasaratha, suffers from three episodes of “grief”. The first was precipitated by his accidentally causing the death of the only child of the blind and aged couple; the second was triggered by the separation from his children when the latter were led away by the sage Viswamitra. These two were transient. The final episode set in when the prince Rama accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana left for the Dandaka forest abode in fulfillment of the vow of his father to Kaikeyi.⁷ The king was overwhelmed by a fatal grief. This is the result of the curse of the blind aged couple when they ascended the funeral pyre of their son killed by Dasaratha, “This great grief you have brought about for us, you too, will endure in good time. You will die of grief, parted from your son”.⁸

There is yet another explanation as to why Dasaratha succumbed to grief.⁹ King Manu and Queen Shatrupa in their ripe age spent the remaining years in austere penance. Their devotion pleased God and they were granted a boon. Manu expressed his desire that God be born as his son in his next life. Manu was born as king Dasaratha and Shatrupa as queen Kaushalya. Manu had desired not to ever have the visions of divinity in his son, whereas Shatrupa had desired to never for once lose sight of that inherent

divinity. The result was that at the time of Rama’s exile for fourteen years king Dasaratha had to experience the human anguish, suffering and eventual death; whereas the more tender, the more emotion prone, the more sensitive mother’s heart could accept the exile. Thus Kaushalya could experience Lord Rama as the dweller of her inner self, her “antaraman”, that offered her solace and bliss.

Dasaratha’s father Aja too suffered from prolonged bereavement for eight years following the death of his wife Indumathi. He starved himself to death. In his haste to follow his beloved, Aja looked upon even that cause which was sure to terminate his life and which was incurable by physicians, as a gain. The depressive illness in the dynasty is described in Kalidasa’s Raghuvansam. Such hereditary features of the disease are described in Ayurveda as “kshipti”.

Dhritarashtra’s doting on Duryodhan and his failure to exercise discretion and acting without the “inner” eye besides being blind physically is narrated in Mahabharata. Mahabharata says that Dhritarashtra used to listen to Ramayana during time of distress (to overcome it).¹⁰ Yayathi’s exchanging his old age (result of a curse) for youth only to get satiated with sensual pleasures and renouncing it; Bhishma’s possessing a boon to summon death at his command are other notable references. In the legend of Vishnu’s birth as Vamana (as the son of Kashyap and Aditi), Kashyapa seeks comfort in hour of grief when Vamana leaves them to destroy the asuras by prayer:

*“For Jatavedas, let us press the Soma
May he consume the wealth of the malignant,
May agni carry us through all our troubles
Through grief as in boat across the river”¹⁰*

(Rig Veda. 1:99)

Bhishma gave a long discourse on longevity in Anusasanaparva and Anugeetha of Mahabharata. The discourse pertained to the code of conduct that would extend an individual human being’s life. It refers to the behaviours that prolong life or diminish longevity. The latter alludes to such negative features like atheism, licentious living, negative emotions, and lack of fine art skill; on the other hand periodical dwelling in the forest, consuming of milk, ‘Godaan’, sleeping habits, diet, bathing, and performance of holy rituals, healthy sexual and excretory habits and cleanliness of body and clothes help to prolong life.¹¹

Care and Management

"Pitruyagna" (services to parents and ancestors) is one of the five mahayagnas imploring service to the elders, which is an ethical and moral duty. These have relevance to the care of the elderly in the modern context of breakup of family structure and changing values and attitudes. That old people are a benefit and not a burden, society should recognize and respect their wisdom, skills and history is brought out in Mahabharata. During Duryodhana's conference with his comrades, when Karna is insolent to Bhishma and Drona, Vidura advises Dhritarashtra not to allow youngsters to be so impolite to the grand old men who were wise and venerable like the ancient kings Rama and Gaya. Vidura said: "These two men are venerable for their age, intelligence and experience; and they are, O king, impartial to your son and to the sons of Pandu. As followers of Law and Truth, these two, O Bharata king, undoubtedly are not second to Rama, the son of Dasartha or to Gaya".

The parables of Pundalik and Sravana Kumar illustrate the children's tender care of their aged parents.¹² Pundalik and his wife Roopavathi were ill-treating the aged parents Janudeva and Satyavathi and exhausting them with menial work. A great transformation occurred in them, when they met Ganga and her other sister rivers of India, whereupon they dedicated themselves to the care of the aged couple. Lord Krishna with his consort visited Pundalik to witness the latter's devoted attention to his parents. Pundalik, busy nursing them and not free to receive the divine visitors requested them to rest on a brick at the door step. The site, where the Lord and his consort stood became consecrated as the temple of Vithoba. The anecdote illustrates the practice of the teaching of lord himself in Gita that parents rank higher than God and service to them is the highest form of duty.

Related to this theme of caring for elders is the story of Sravana, a young boy who was known to carry his old and blind parents, himself forgoing the joys of childhood and adolescence. Nachiketha in Kathopanishad asks the God of Death to grant as the first of the three boons that "my father be pacified, be kind and free from anger towards me and that he may know me and greet me, when I am sent away by thee". The Lord grants Nachiketha "your father will recognize you as before. He will sleep peacefully at

night and when he sees you released from the mouth of death, will lose his anger." This shows the concern of the son for his father – a clear restatement of filial duties. These and such other stories should be narrated to children inculcating in them an attitude of caring for the elders.

The 'triad' of suffering common to mankind and which becomes aggravated during the old age are: the fear of death, the despair of the absurd and not knowing the life's meaning ('apivarga' in Ayurveda) and the sadness of loneliness.¹³ The manner of resolution of some of these are offered by the instances of a cheerful acceptance of death by king Parikshit, summoning death voluntarily by Bhishma (Ichhamruthya) after accomplishing the purpose of his life.

The acceptance of death becomes possible through clear understanding of the verses in Gita: 'As a man casting off worn-out garments puts on new ones, so the embodied casting off worn-out bodies enters into the other that are new' (2.22); 'As the indweller of the body experiences childhood, youth and old age he also passes on the other body revealing that one is not affected thereby'(12.3).¹⁴ In the same context Sankara says: 'A little study of the Bhagavad Gita, drinking a drop of Ganga water, a causal worship of Murari – these will save you from debate with death'.⁸

That the anxiety and distress of old age arise from unending and unabated desires and difficulties of adjustment are described by Sankara: "The body has worn-out; the head has turned all grey; the mouth has lost all its teeth. The old man goes about leaning on stick; yet he hugs to himself a bundle of desires".⁸ Sankara has also given an advice to the elderly regarding feeling lonely and rejected: 'As long you are able to earn so long your kinsfolk be attached to you; after that when your body has become infirm, not one will speak to you even lent your own home'.⁸

There is a spiritual dimension in the management of the terminally ill. The knowledge of self is the highest of all vidhyas which implies the perception of 'oneness in all and all in one'. This knowledge once gained, frees one from pain and sorrow: 'tarati sokam atmavit' declared Upanishad. All the above references have relevance to psychotherapy for the aged and especially in the context of the modern debate on euthanasia.

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