Old and Grey and in the Way?
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Old and Grey and in the Way?

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Growing old. Let's talk about it. There is a false concept out there that stops people from living the long, full life described in the Vedas. Old age is as much a state of mind as of body. Young people are taught that when you become "old and grey you are in their way." Not a nice thought! It is the older folk, the wiser folk and the experienced people who have lived longer and therefore can see further who youth should be listening to. But in Western thought, young people are allowed to learn by their own mistakes. What a perverted way to learn. They should be learning, if they ever become open to it, from the mistakes of their elders, that is if elders are willing to admit them. There is no excuse for ignorance. Yet looking around we find it to be all-pervasive-like the Hindu God-all over the world.

We are not getting old. True, the physical body does change. It has done so from birth, but it has a future, it really does. We live in it like we walk in our shoes. My satguru said, "Live in your body as loosely as your wear your sandals." It is not wise to accept the statements that we are headed toward a doomsday, end of the world, end of the physical body, and that is that, think no more about it.

When we look at aged people, we look at a mind that has been developed year after year after year. We look at souls that have matured because of their sojourn on Earth. We see them having gone through birth karmas (those we have to live through and can't do much about, the prarabdha karmas) and prevailed. We look upon their situation as wonderful and enlightening, their wisdom as useful and worthy to become part of our lives. After all, if we hear from them, it is in our prarabdha karmas to have had that knowledge passed on to us. Only the ignorant would object. And they usually do.

The mind never gets old. The mind never deteriorates. Consciousness was never born and never dies. Age is not an obstacle, it is a legacy.

When I met satguru Yogaswami, king of Jaffna, he was 77, still walking 20 miles a day, still meditating hours a day, and he would go on dynamically for another 15 years. Some die young, of course. Sankara was just 32 and Vivekananda 39. Others die old. Shri Chandrasekhrendra passed in his 100th year, and we just recently lost a 116-year-old yogi.

The most senior among us should have faith in the future, not be led to think that turning 50 or 60 or 80 is some morbid milestone. It's not. Take heart. There is no requirement to die at any established time, even if your doctor tells you that you have only two years to live, even if your astrologer predicts it, even if your enemies hope for an early departure. I was told that in Africa if a powerful medicine man tells a person he is going to die, the fear and belief are so strong that within hours they succumb. Mind over matter? It's not much different when everyone around us is chanting the senility mantra. You know, when your mom, kids, friends and boss keep saying, "You're not getting any younger, you know." There are high laws to invoke in such cases to sustain the pranas, strengthen the force of life within.

Those who know wisdom's ways have overcome the "I'm getting old" syndrome, a mantram no one should ever repeat even once. They know how the mind works, and by applying the laws they have lived long, useful, happy and healthy lives. The psychological secret is to have a goal, actually many goals, a service to humanity to accomplish. People helping people, people serving people: that is what the Hindu dharma is and has been proclaiming for some 8,000 years or more. Good goals and a will to live prolong life. It is life-giving when the goal of human existence in helping people to fulfill dharma is strengthened by daily sadhana. When pre-dawn morning pujas, scriptural reading, devotionals to the guru and meditation before sunrise are performed without fail, the deeper side of ourselves is cultivated and that, in itself, softens the karmas and prolongs life.

Life is eternal on the inner planes in the refined bodies of the soul. But a physical body these days is hard to obtain, and then we have to go though the embarrassment of birth, being slapped on the bottom, talked to in baby talk, learning to walk, read and write all over again. It takes years and years and years before we get back to, if we ever do in the new life, the wisdom years that we have now attained in this life.

So take care of your physical body. No need to know about it too much, for it knows what it needs. Listen to its messages, respond quickly, find an ayurvedic doctor who can help you through the many changes the body will naturally go through, and face each one positively. This body is impermanent, true, but it is the only one you have, so good to make the best use of it. You have good work to do, knowledge, born of experience, to pass along to the coming generation.

The older you get the more disciplined you should get, the more sadhana you perform as you drop off the extraneous things of the world. If your children leave home, cultivate other interests, find new, eager children to teach, new ways to serve. Be useful to others. Keep planting the seeds of dharma. Maybe they will be annuals instead of perennials, but keep planting for the future.

Others might be saying old and grey and in the way, we say old and grey and here to stay.