



Aging Peacefully
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Introduction

From the moment that we are conceived, the body ages. Aging is not confined to the elderly; it is happening as you are reading this. At various times in our life, we have varying perceptions of the aging process. Early in life, we can't wait to get older so that we can drive a car, etc. Our perception of aging is immortality. We are never going to look like those "old people" and certainly even if we have witnessed it, death is far from our thoughts. This perception, of course, changes as we continue aging. We find that our bodies don't function as well and this includes the mind. Emotions arise: frustration, anger, and fear. We want life to be other than it is becoming. We try to deny the process or resist taking a closer look at it.

In our culture, the word, aging, is associated with deterioration, getting worse, rotting, useless, etc. Some things such as wine may get better with aging, but we perceive that that doesn't apply to our bodies.

How do we deal with aging? Accentuating the positive and trying to forget about the negatives doesn't seem to work. What can the Buddha teach us about dealing with aging?

The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) was born 2600 years ago in eastern India. He was a prince whose father kept him within the palace confines so as to provide him with every luxury in life and to shield him from experiencing suffering. However, once when making a trip outside of the palace, the Buddha saw suffering in the forms of birth, disease, old age, and death. Struck by this, he left his wife and son to explore the way to end suffering. Having been exposed to luxury, the Buddha tried the opposite, asceticism, and discovered that this did not end suffering either. The Buddha then discovered the "middle way," a way of ending suffering that does not go to extremes. In this regard, he became awakened to what life is. He devoted the rest of his life traveling through India teaching the practice what he had discovered. The Buddha said, "What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering."ⁱ

Aging especially, old age, is a form of suffering. How can we cease this suffering and age peacefully? In this series on mindfulness and aging, we will be exploring how to do this.

Our objectives are to:

1. Understand the Buddha's relevant teachings about aging and suffering
2. Understand how the Eightfold Path can give us insights and a practice for aging peacefully.
3. Reflect on the negative and positive aspects of aging in a different context.

4. Be able to say yes to all aspects of aging.

The Buddha on Aging

"And what is aging? Whatever aging, decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, decline of life-force, weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging."ⁱⁱ

As a cowherd with a rod
drives cows to the field,
so aging & death
drive the life
of living beings.ⁱⁱⁱ
— Dhp 135

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvattthī in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother. Now on that occasion the Blessed One, on emerging from his seclusion in the evening, sat warming his back in the western sun. Then Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, massaged the Blessed One's limbs with his hand and said, "It's amazing, lord. It's astounding, how the Blessed One's complexion is no longer so clear & bright; his limbs are flabby & wrinkled; his back, bent forward; there's a discernible change in his faculties—the faculty of the eye, the faculty of the ear, the faculty of the nose, the faculty of the tongue, the faculty of the body."

"That's the way it is, Ānanda. When young, one is subject to aging; when healthy, subject to illness; when alive, subject to death. The complexion is no longer so clear & bright; the limbs are flabby & wrinkled; the back, bent forward; there's a discernible change in the faculties—the faculty of the eye, the faculty of the ear, the faculty of the nose, the faculty of the tongue, the faculty of the body."

That is what the Blessed One said. Having said that, the One Well-Gone, the Teacher, said further:

"I spit on you, wretched old age—
old age that makes for ugliness.
The bodily image, so charming,
is trampled by old age.
Even those who live to a hundred
are headed—all—to an end in death,
which spares no one,
which tramples all."^{iv}

So the Buddha acknowledges that aging can be a tough go but he also notes that our perception doesn't have to be that way:

"What is good all the way through old age?
What is good when established?
What is the treasure of human beings?"

What can't be stolen by thieves?"

The Buddha:

"Virtue is good all the way through old age.

Conviction is good when established.

Discernment is the treasure of human beings.

Merit can't be stolen by thieves."

Contemplation Exercise on Aging

It is important to confront the perceptions (mental impressions) that we hold about aging. These perceptions arise in our mind from time to time, perhaps triggered by what we see in ourselves and others.

On a notepad, write down 5 unpleasant perceptions you have about aging. Use a complete sentence. Be honest!

Examples of unpleasant perceptions on aging

Flabby body

I look old

My skin is flabby

I don't like my sagging face droopy; I look like I'm frowning even when I'm happy

I feel an unpleasant feeling when I notice deeply wrinkled skin that falls off a person's bones

I don't like that my body now sags

Loss of appearance

Sadness/fear of advancing loneliness as friends and relatives die before I do

Deaths of friends or family as you grow older

That time will run out and I won't be able to be with those I love and enjoy

I don't like the fact that many of my loved ones (parents, older relatives) are now deceased

I'll see most of my friends die before I do

Losing people you care for at a faster rate

Fear of dying before completing legacy projects

My biggest fear of aging is losing people I love

The deep loss around "not enough time to..." or not enough time left to fulfill dreams

Dying

Difficulty interacting with others

Not being able to do things you have been used to doing

Declining strength

Aches and pains that were never present when younger

My muscle mass is dwindling

My balance is not nearly as good as it once was

My reflexes are slower

I tire more easily than I once did

I have a fear of losing my mobility

It takes longer to recover from any physical ailments

I feel discomfort when I notice difficulty with walking due to illness like arthritis

I feel sad when I'm with someone who is no longer able to move or breathe due to illness affecting their

neural system

Loss of physical ability

More pain less able to fight it

Loss of physical conditioning, muscle mass

Not being able to bounce out of bed in the morning

Feeling the aches and pains of being older

I don't like having an aching back in the morning

I don't like the fact that "things break" these days with my body

I dislike the loss of vigor and strength

I hate that my body aches and that I must work so hard at staying healthy

I will no longer be able to participate in athletic events

Losing flexibility

Fear of loss of physical function

Loss of function and not being able to physically do things that could be done when younger

Older individuals are slow, take forever counting out change in line at the grocery store

Loss of physical abilities basic ones like mobility, hearing, seeing, and ones like sexual function and sleep

Loss of physical abilities

My hearing is failing

Diminished hearing perception

The aging often can't hear, thus are poor listeners

Being Sick

More Illnesses

Increasing health issues

I will spend more and more time at medical appointments

Increasing focus on health issues, preventing a rapid deterioration

Fear of illness and pain and hospitals

Illness

Not being listened to when around younger people.

The "invisible "menopausal woman

I know I'm in the autumn of my years

I'm not the dashing young man I once was

Aged people are ineffectual or devalued

Aged people are child-like

Needy

Obstructive

The aged and aging are often narrow minded and self-centered

Aging folks often like to take out their aggravation with aging on others

Aging folks who are proud can be very cruel

Seeing an older person and not accepting that I will be that person in the future

I hate the loss of the optimism of youth, the sense of promise that each day offers

I dislike the loss of beauty

Becoming anonymous

Becoming unseen and unimportant then society

Remembering youth

Fear of not being useful
As everything becomes more difficult , i fear I am defaulting to Cranky Old Man Syndrome.
Being confined to a wheel chair
Losing independence
Fear of losing independence
Fear of being a burden on someone else
Losing independence
I'll be alone in a long-term care facility
Fear of winding up in a nursing home
Ending up alone
Running out of money
Not having a purpose in life when retired
Knowing that our children will be aging also
Extra worry and anxiety
Losing vision
Looking in the mirror and seeing an old face and hair
I don't like having to wear glasses to see well
Diminished eyesight
Aging can be smelly
I remember when I was in my 30s my mother-in-law had a smell, the smell of old age
Being afraid of dementia & losing my mind
Thinking getting slower
Memory getting weaker and less reliable
Not liking yellow pads (!)
I have trouble remembering facts and people's names
I am very concerned about my memory especially short-term loss
I feel sad when talking with someone with memory loss
Loss of cognitive ability
Loss of acute memory
State of mind; I am more light hearted
I don't like that I now forget things more than I used to such as names of people whom I don't know well
or descriptions of things
I fear the loss of mental acuity
My thinking will become increasingly rigid and negative
Fear of loss of cognitive function
Mental decline into dementia and deep fog losing myself
No memory, forgetfulness

Reflection on the Contemplation Exercise on Aging

What do the examples of the unpleasant perceptions on aging have in common?

They are:

1. They are all thoughts.
2. They are all unpleasant.
3. We wish that they would not occur.
4. When these thoughts come up, we don't know how to deal with them.
5. We would rather not discuss them.
6. They represent change.
7. They remind us that we have no control.
8. These are judgments, not discernments (discernment is perception in the absence of judgement). We can't look at them objectively.
9. They bring up emotions such as anger and fear.
10. We have a strong preference for life to be other than it is.

Dealing with thoughts

When we created a list of unpleasant perceptions, we created a list of thoughts that we have experienced. What are thoughts? Thoughts are just phenomena that arise in the mind, just like sensations, memories and perceptions. All phenomena share the same three characteristics of impermanence, inability to create lasting satisfaction, and are of selfless nature. It is important to understand and experience these three characteristics. Otherwise, we remain deluded and confused.

So why did these cause unpleasant emotions (mental formations) to arise that then create suffering? The Buddha addressed this question in his teachings. The Buddha's teachings on suffering and the cessation of suffering are best exemplified by his discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta.^{vi} His approach was similar that of a medical physician dealing with physical illnesses. Suffering is a disease (dis ease) which has symptoms, a cause and thanks to the Buddha, a cure and a prescription for its cessation. The Buddha outlined these principles as the Four Principles of Suffering. When we view suffering about aging as a disease, it is easier to address because we can more easily understand it and we also can realize that the disease of suffering affects everyone. Just like flu or cancer, we are all at risk.

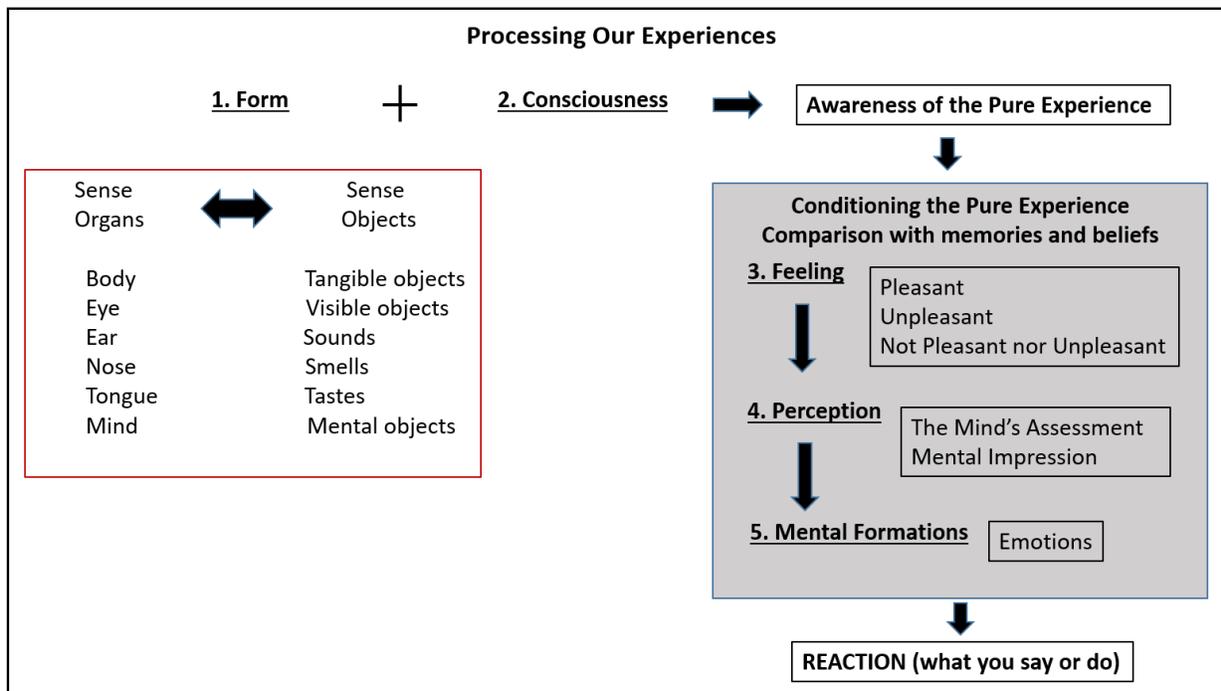
The first principle of suffering states that suffering exists and that the symptoms which apply to our unpleasant perceptions about aging include dissatisfaction, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, mental pain, etc. All of our suffering comes clinging to our perceptions of aging such as those on the list. **How are these perceptions formed?**

When a thought arises in the mind or we have another sensory experience regarding aging via our eyes (looking at ourselves in the mirror, our ears (noting that we don't hear as well), our nose (noting that we don't smell odors as well), our tongue (noting that food doesn't taste as well), our body (noting that it has increasing aches and pains) and our minds (thoughts), that is a pure experience without perception or judgment. We are just experiencing what comes in via the six senses of eyes, ears, nose, tongue,

body and mind. None of these sensations at this point causes suffering. We need to understand that our mind then processes these pure experiences into perceptions through conditioning involving our memories and beliefs which may cause suffering. **When we cling to these perceptions, we suffer.**

For example, if we look at our self in the mirror and see wrinkles and discoloration, we are, at first, just discerning an image. However, because of our stored memories and beliefs about wrinkles, an unpleasant feeling arises, and our perception is an unpleasant mental impression that wrinkles and discoloration are bad. This causes unpleasant mental formations to arise such fear that this is only the start and more wrinkles and discoloration will appear. Our reaction to this is anxiety. **We are clinging to this perception.** So just the sight of our face leads to mental anguish!

The diagram below shows this process starting from when we are conscious of form such as seeing our wrinkles and how that awareness is conditioned through the mind leading to suffering.



The problem is that our perceptions of aging are made up by our mind based on beliefs and stored memories. Understanding how this process works is important because once we know that how our mind creates our suffering, we can do something about it.

Let's look again at our list of unpleasant perceptions and go deeper. It is useful to categorize these specific perceptions by general areas of belief.

These include:

- Appearance
- Death
- Function

Hearing
 Illness
 Image
 Independence
 Loss
 Purpose
 Restlessness
 Seeing
 Smelling
 Thinking

We have beliefs (judgments) about each one of these areas. For example, with appearance, we have beliefs about how we should look and we don't like the following: flabby body, I look old, my skin is flabby, I don't like my sagging face droopy; I look like I'm frowning even when I'm happy, I feel an unpleasant feeling when I notice deeply wrinkled skin that falls off a person's bones, I don't like that my body now sags, loss of appearance.

Here is the list of unpleasant perceptions sorted by areas of belief:

Appearance	Flabby body
Appearance	I look old
Appearance	My skin is flabby
Appearance	I don't like my sagging face droopy; I look like I'm frowning even when I'm happy
Appearance	I feel an unpleasant feeling when I notice deeply wrinkled skin that falls off a person's bones
Appearance	I don't like that my body now sags
Appearance	Loss of appearance
Death	Sadness/fear of advancing loneliness as friends and relatives die before I do
Death	Deaths of friends or family as you grow older
Death	That time will run out and I won't be able to be with those I love and enjoy
Death	I don't like the fact that many of my loved ones (parents, older relatives) are now deceased
Death	I'll see most of my friends die before I do
Death	Losing people you care for at a faster rate
Death	Fear of dying before completing legacy projects
Death	My biggest fear of aging is losing people I love
Death	The deep loss around "not enough time to..." or not enough time left to fulfill dreams
Death	Dying
Function	Difficulty interacting with others

Function	Not being able to do things you have been used to doing
Function	Declining strength
Function	Aches and pains that were never present when younger
Function	My muscle mass is dwindling
Function	My balance is not nearly as good as it once was
Function	My reflexes are slower
Function	I tire more easily than I once did
Function	I have a fear of losing my mobility
Function	It takes longer to recover from any physical ailments
Function	I feel discomfort when I notice difficulty with walking due to illness like arthritis
Function	I feel sad when I'm with someone who is no longer able to move or breathe due to illness affecting their neural system
Function	Loss of physical ability
Function	More pain less able to fight it
Function	Loss of physical conditioning, muscle mass
Function	Not being able to bounce out of bed in the morning
Function	Feeling the aches and pains of being older
Function	I don't like having an aching back in the morning
Function	I don't like the fact that "things break" these days with my body
Function	I dislike the loss of vigor and strength
Function	I hate that my body aches and that I must work so hard at staying healthy
Function	I will no longer be able to participate in athletic events
Function	Losing flexibility
Function	Fear of loss of physical function
Function	Loss of function and not being able to physically do things that could be done when younger
Function	Older individuals are slow, take forever counting out change in line at the grocery store
Function	Loss of physical abilities basic ones like mobility, hearing, seeing, and ones like sexual function and sleep
Function	Loss of physical abilities
Hearing	My hearing is failing
Hearing	Diminished hearing perception
Hearing	The aging often can't hear, thus are poor listeners
Illness	Being Sick
Illness	More illnesses
Illness	Increasing health issues
Illness	I will spend more and more time at medical appointments
Illness	Increasing focus on health issues, preventing a rapid deterioration
Illness	Fear of illness and pain and hospitals
Illness	Illness
Image	Not being listened to when around younger people.
Image	The "invisible" menopausal woman

image	I know I'm in the autumn of my years
Image	I'm not the dashing young man I once was
Image	Aged people are ineffectual or devalued
Image	Aged people are child-like
Image	Needy
Image	Obstructive
Image	The aged and aging are often narrow minded and self-centered
Image	Aging folks often like to take out their aggravation with aging on others
Image	Aging folks who are proud can be very cruel
Image	Seeing an older person and not accepting that I will be that person in the future
Image	I hate the loss of the optimism of youth, the sense of promise that each day offers
Image	I dislike the loss of beauty
Image	Becoming anonymous
Image	Becoming unseen and unimportant then society
Image	Remembering youth
Image	Fear of not being useful
Image	As everything becomes more difficult , i fear I am defaulting to Cranky Old Man Syndrome.
Independence	Being confined to a wheel chair
Independence	Losing independence
Independence	Fear of losing independence
Independence	Fear of being a burden on someone else
Independence	Losing independence
Independence	I'll be alone in a long-term care facility
Independence	Fear of winding up in a nursing home
Independence	Ending up alone
Loss	Running out of money
Purpose	Not having a purpose in life when retired
Restlessness	Knowing that our children will be aging also
Restlessness	Extra worry and anxiety
Seeing	Losing vision
Seeing	Looking in the mirror and seeing an old face and hair
Seeing	I don't like having to wear glasses to see well
Seeing	Diminished eyesight
Smelling	Aging can be smelly
Smelling	I remember when I was in my 30s my mother-in-law had a smell, the smell of old age
Thinking	Being afraid of dementia & losing my mind
Thinking	Thinking getting slower
Thinking	Memory getting weaker and less reliable
Thinking	Not liking yellow pads (!)
Thinking	I have trouble remembering facts and people's names

Thinking	I am very concerned about my memory especially short-term loss
Thinking	I feel sad when talking with someone with memory loss
Thinking	Loss of cognitive ability
Thinking	Loss of acute memory
Thinking	State of mind; I am more light hearted
Thinking	I don't like that I now forget things more than I used to such as names of people whom I don't know well or descriptions of things
Thinking	I fear the loss of mental acuity
Thinking	My thinking will become increasingly rigid and negative
Thinking	Fear of loss of cognitive function
Thinking	Mental decline into dementia and deep fog losing myself
Thinking	No memory, forgetfulness
Thinking	Not being able to manage own affairs

Now that we understand how our perceptions are created in the mind, we have taken the first step in addressing our suffering. By merely being aware of this process, we can proceed to question the validity of these perceptions. As Krishnamurti said, "The seeing is the doing."^{vii} However, further steps are needed. The next step is investigating and letting go of our perceptions.

Letting go of our perceptions on aging.

We have seen in the last session that our unpleasant perceptions about aging started as thoughts or sensations that are processed by mind into these perceptions which are really judgments from beliefs and stored memories. We suffer because we cling to these perceptions without investigating their nature. These thoughts will arise; we can't stop them but we can see them for what they are and let go.

The Buddha noted in one of his teachings, the Lokavipatti Sutta^{viii}, that there are eight conditions that we are all subject to in this world. The Buddha called these the eight worldly winds. These are stated in opposite pairs: gain/loss, pleasure/pain, praise/criticism, and repute/disrepute. We strive for the positive winds, gain, pleasure, praise and repute and resist the opposites of loss, pain, criticism and repute. So we can go even deeper in examining our unpleasant perceptions to see that each one of the areas of belief contains a fear of one or more of these negative elements. Some examples are shown in the diagram below.

Area of Belief	Fear of Loss	Fear of Pain	Fear of Criticism	Fear of Disrepute
Appearance	X			X
Death	X	X		
Function	X	X	X	X
Hearing	X			
Illness	X	X		

Image				X
Independence	X		X	X
Loss	X			
Purpose	X			X
Restlessness	X	X		
Seeing	X			
Smelling	X			
Thinking	X			

Consider your area of belief and look to see what fears you have.

The point is that when we investigate deeper, we can see that our suffering stems from the fear of one or more of these negative winds happening to us. And we cling to our belief that this shouldn't be happening to us.

How do we let go of these beliefs?

Below is a practice based on the Buddha's teachings:

1. Develop through **mindfulness** the ability to recognize suffering through your bodily feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant). When a feeling occurs, go to step 2.
2. **Pause** and practice **mindfulness of breathing** to calm the mind and gain perspective.
3. **Investigate** in a non-judgmental manner
 - a. Identify the perception?
 - b. What belief does it stem from?
 - c. What is the fear associated with the belief? (loss, pain, criticism, or disrepute?)
 - d. Can you realize that the fear is not real? It is impermanent, unable to lasting dissatisfaction and is not you. It is nothing.
4. Be **persistent** and keep investigating each time this perception arises.
5. Rest in the joy, tranquility and equanimity that follows.

Below is an example and a worksheet for your reflection and practice.

Pure Experience: I look in the mirror and I see new wrinkles.

An unpleasant restlessness arises in my body.

I am mindful of this feeling and I pause to observe my breathing (I am breathing in, I am breathing out).

I investigate with persistence:

What is my **perception**? A wrinkle is the sign of growing older and I don't like that.

What is the **general area of belief**? Appearance

What is my **fear** – that I will continue to lose my appearance or that I won't be respected.

What am I **clinging** to: I am attached to my body not changing; I want life to be different than it is.

What do I **realize**? – my appearance is impermanent, it is unable to give lasting satisfaction, it is not who I am.

I rest in the joy, tranquility and equanimity that follows.

Transforming our Perceptions on Aging

In the previous sessions, we have been examining our unpleasant perceptions about aging to understand their origin from our beliefs and stored memories. These perceptions invite fear, particularly the fear that our aging will eventually culminate in death. As long as we cling to the belief of either an eternal soul or annihilation, we continue to suffer with uncertainty.

Eternal life or oblivion?

From Pritam Singh in the introduction to *No Death, No Fear* by Thich Nhat Hanh: “The first funeral I ever attended was in 1968. It was for my mother’s father, my grandfather, Sam Rameau. Since then, more than two dozen times, I have stood at the edge of a freshly dug grave, confused, lost and wondering what to think and what to feel about death, asking myself, “Are there really only two options to consider, the belief in an eternal soul, or annihilation?”

Doubting the belief in an eternal life and dreading the idea of oblivion, I have lived with a dull fear, a kind of cosmic background noise, throughout my life. Which one is true, forever remaining as me or nothingness? Is there an eternal soul and, if there is, will I be in heaven or in hell? Bored forever or in bliss? Alone or with God?

During the Buddha’s life, he was questioned many times by scholars and theologians about the opposite philosophies of eternalism and nihilism. When asked if there was an eternal soul, the Buddha replied that there is no permanent self. When asked if we were extinguished into oblivion upon our death, the Buddha said that we are not annihilated. **He rejected both of these ideas.**^{ix}

I have a dear friend who is a famous marine biologist. Like many people he believes that when we die, we are extinguished forever. He believes this not from a loss of faith or from despair but because of his trust in science. His faith is in the natural world, in the beauty of the unfolding universe around him and in the ability of humans to understand and gain knowledge of that universe.”

What is the alternative to eternal life or oblivion?

“Thich Nhat Hanh also has an abiding faith in the ability of humans to gain understanding. But his goal is more than the accumulation of scientific knowledge; it is the attainment of liberation and deep personal wisdom based on pure inquiry. Writing in these pages from his own experience, Thich Nhat Hanh proposes a stunning alternative to the opposing philosophies of an eternal soul and nihilism. He tells us: “Since before time you have been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide-and-seek. You have never been born and you can never die” and “Our greatest pain is caused by our notions of coming and going.” Over and over again, he invites us to practice looking deeply so we can know for ourselves the freedom and joy of the middle way between a permanent self and oblivion. As a poet, he explores the paradoxes of life and gently lifts the veil of illusion, allowing us, maybe for the first time in our lives, **to see that our dread of dying is caused by our own misperceptions and misunderstandings.**”^x

Manifestation

Thich Naht Hanh in *No Death, No Fear* presents the insight of manifestation. **What we call aging is really the process of manifestation**, the changing of one form into another. Nothing is destroyed; it is simply emerging into a different form. For example, look at a cloud. When was it born? Before it was a cloud it was water and when the cloud dies, it becomes rain. There is no real date of birth. In our limited perspective, we perceive the cloud to have been born and died when actually the cloud is just a remanifestation of the form of water.

“Look deeply at a box of matches. Do you see a flame in it? If you do, you are already enlightened. When we look deeply at a box of matches, we see that the flame is there. It needs only the movement of someone’s fingers to manifest. We say: “Dear flame, I know you are there. Now I shall help you express yourself.”” In the mind, the stored memories have boundaries, we see the match but not the flame and vice versa.

“I have a photograph of myself when I was a boy of sixteen. Is it a photograph of me? I am not really sure. Who is this boy in the photograph? Is it the same person as me or is it another person? Look deeply before you reply. There are many people who say that the boy in the photograph and I are the same. If that boy is the same as I am, why does he look so different? Is that boy still alive or has he died? He is not the same as I am and he is also not different. Some people look at that photograph and think the young boy there is no longer around. A person is made of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, and all of these have changed in me since that photograph was taken. The body of the boy in the photograph is not the same as my body, now that I am in my seventies. The feelings are different, and the perceptions are very different. It is just as if I am a completely different person from that boy, but if the boy in the photograph did not exist, then I would not exist either. I am a continuation like the rain is the continuation of the cloud. When you look deeply into the photograph, you can see me already as an old man. You do not have to wait fifty-five years.”^{xi}

“A teacher can help you be in touch with the awakened nature, the great understanding and compassion in you. The Buddha invites you to be in touch with the wisdom that is already in you. Many of us ask: “Where do you go when you die? What happens when you die?” We have friends who have lost someone they love and they ask: “Where is my beloved one now? Where has she gone now?” Philosophers ask: “Where does man come from? Where does the cosmos or the world come from?” When we look deeply, we see that when all the conditions are sufficient, something will manifest. What manifests does not come from anywhere. And when a manifestation ceases, it does not go anywhere.”^{xii}

“Our greatest fear is that when we die we will become nothing. Many of us believe that our entire existence is only a life span beginning the moment we are born or conceived and ending the moment we die. We believe that we are born from nothing and that when we die we become nothing. And so we are filled with fear of annihilation. **The Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real.** The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering. The Buddha taught that there is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no same, there is no different; there is no

permanent self, there is no annihilation. . . . When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear. It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way.”^{xiii}

“We are scared because of our notions of birth and death, increasing and decreasing, being and non-being. Nirvana means extinction of all notions and ideas. If we can become free from these notions, we can touch the peace of our true nature. There are eight basic concepts that serve to fuel our fear. They are the notions of birth and death, coming and going, the same and different, being and non-being. These notions keep us from being happy. The teaching given to counteract these notions is called “the eight no’s,” which are no birth, no death, no coming, no going, not the same, not different, no being, no non-being.”

The true nature of all things is not to be born, not to die, not to arrive and not to depart. My true nature is the nature of no coming and no going. When there are sufficient conditions, I manifest, and when the conditions are no longer sufficient, I hide. I do not go anywhere. Where would I go? I simply hide.

If your dear one has just died, you may have a difficult time overcoming your loss. You may be crying all the time. But look deeply. There is a divine medicine to help you overcome your pain, to see that your dear one is not born and does not die, does not come and does not go.

It is only because of our misunderstanding that we think the person we love no longer exists after they “pass away.” This is because we are attached to one of the forms, one of the many manifestations of that person. When that form is gone, we suffer and feel sad.”^{xiv}

In summary, our fears derive from our beliefs that have originated from inherited concepts stored in our memory. We simply believe them without questioning whether or not they are true for us.

When fear arises from an unpleasant feeling and perception, we need to investigate and see if this is really true for us or whether we really don’t know.

“Remember, in death awareness practice, as in vipassana, we are trying to understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self, only now it’s through a kind of disciplined use of thought. It’s a focused use of thought so that thought becomes an ally, rather than an enemy, of dharma.”^{xv}

Summary

Our objectives for this series were to:

1. Understand the Buddha’s relevant teachings about aging and suffering
Seven of the Buddha’s suttas (teachings) were referenced. The links are in the footnotes.
2. Understand how the Eightfold Path can give us insights and a practice for aging peacefully.
The Eightfold path consists of 3 components: wisdom, virtue, and practice. All of these were integrated into this series.
3. Reflect on the negative and positive aspects of aging in a different context.
The process of manifestation was explained.

4. Be able to say yes to all aspects of aging.
This is the bottom line. Are you able to realize this?

Although a lot of content has been presented, here are three main takeaways for reflection and practice.

The first takeaway is that our suffering with aging is due to our misperceptions of our experience.

1. Our misperceptions are based on our beliefs and stored memories.
2. They are judgments, not discernments.
3. Our judgements are based on our fears or anticipation of loss, pain, criticism and/or disrepute.

The second takeaway is that what we call aging is really the process of manifestation.

1. Manifestation is the changing of one form into another. Nothing is destroyed; it is simply emerging into a different form.
2. There is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no same, there is no different; there is no permanent self, there is no annihilation. When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear. It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way.^{”xvi}

The third point is that when fear arises from an unpleasant feeling and perception, we need to investigate to see it for what is really is. Nothing.

The process is as follows:

1. Develop through **mindfulness** the ability to recognize suffering through your bodily feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant). When a feeling occurs, go to step 2.
2. **Pause** and practice **mindfulness of breathing** to calm the mind and gain perspective.
3. **Investigate** in a non-judgmental manner
 - a. Identify the perception?
 - b. What belief does it stem from?
 - c. What is the fear associated with the belief? (loss, pain, criticism, or disrepute?)
 - d. Can you realize that the fear is not real? It is impermanent, unable to lasting dissatisfaction and is not you. It is nothing.
4. Be **persistent** and keep investigating each time this perception arises.
5. Rest in the joy, tranquility and equanimity that follows.

Phyllis Gardner notes, “I have sat in silence to consider your request to have me speak about why I have chosen to enjoy aging, and it seems simple now. It’s about accepting this moment as it occurs. Life has brought many challenges and acceptance has not always been my strong suit. After much inward exploration, I have learned that most suffering comes from wishing this moment would be different. Without mental storytelling, pain is just pain, loss is just loss, and joy is just joy. Joy is a state of being that comes with this choice to be present over and over again. Love as a state of being, I believe, creates a purposeful Life.”

Rumi on Aging

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

— Jellaludin Rumi (translated by Coleman Banks)

In conclusion, the Buddha said in the Jara Sutta (Old Age)

“What is good all the way through old age?
What is good when established?
What is the treasure of human beings?
What can’t be stolen by thieves?”

The Buddha:

“Virtue is good all the way through old age.
Conviction is good when established.
Discernment is the treasure of human beings.
Merit can’t be stolen by thieves.”^{xvii}

Virtue is practicing a skillful life.

Conviction is knowing that following the Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of suffering and freedom.

Discernment is free of judgement.

Merit is what you have contributed to yourself and others in generosity, loving-kindness and compassion.

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,

I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft star-shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die.

Mary Frye 1932

Can we say yes all aspects of aging?

ⁱ [Alagaddupama Sutta: The Snake Simile](#) translated from the Pali by Nyanaponika Thera

ⁱⁱ [Maha-satipatthana Sutta: The Great Frames of Reference](#) DN 22 PTS: D ii 290

ⁱⁱⁱ [Dandavagga: The Rod](#) DhP 129-145

^{iv} [Jarā Sutta Old Age](#) (SN 48:41)

^v [Jarā Sutta Old Age](#) (SN 1:51)

^{vi} [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta](#)

^{vii} [Beginnings of Learning](#)

^{viii} The Failings of the World [Lokavipatti Sutta](#) (AN 8:6)

^{ix} Here is one excerpt of a teaching of the Buddha that notes this: The Shorter Exhortation to Māluṅkya: [Cūla Māluṅkyovāda Sutta](#) (MN 63) "So, Māluṅkyaputta, remember what is undisclosed by me as undisclosed, and what is disclosed by me as disclosed. And what is undisclosed by me? 'The cosmos is eternal,' is undisclosed by me. 'The cosmos is not eternal,' is undisclosed by me. 'The cosmos is finite' ... 'The cosmos is infinite' ... 'The soul & the body are the same' ... 'The soul is one thing and the body another' ... 'After death a Tathāgata exists' ... 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist' ... 'After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist' ... 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,' is undisclosed by me.

"And why are they undisclosed by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. That's why they are undisclosed by me.

"And what is disclosed by me? 'This is stress,' is disclosed by me. 'This is the origination of stress,' is disclosed by me. 'This is the cessation of stress,' is disclosed by me. 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,' is disclosed by me. And why are they disclosed by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding. That's why they are disclosed by me.

"So, Māluṅkyaputta, remember what is undisclosed by me as undisclosed, and what is disclosed by me as disclosed."

^x Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (p. 2). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{xi} Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (pp. 27-28)

^{xii} Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (pp. 31-32). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{xiii} Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (pp. 4-5). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{xiv} Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (p. 64). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{xv} [Death Awareness](#) by Larry Rosenberg

^{xvi} Hanh, Thich Nhat. No Death, No Fear (pp. 4-5). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{xvii} [Jarā Sutta Old Age](#) (SN 1:51)