

# Perfect Ageing: Meditation and Pragmatic Hindu View

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## **Abstract**

*In dealing with any social organization, we must inquire into the essential ideas, on which it is founded, the conception of life which inspired it, and the forms which these ideas of life assume. The inspiring ideas are always larger than the historical forms which embody them. The Hindu view of the individual and his relation to society can be best brought out by a reference to the synthesis and gradation of (1) the fourfold object of (parusartha): desire and enjoyment (kama), interest (artha), ethical living (dharma), and spiritual freedom (moksa); (2) the fourfold order of society (varna): the man of learning (brahmin), of power (kshatriya), of skilled productivity (vaishya), and of service (sudra); and (3) the fourfold succession of the stages of life (ashrama): student (brahmachari), householder (grihastha), forest recluse (vanprastha), and the free supersocial man (sannyasin). By means of this threefold discipline the Hindu strives to reach his destiny, which is to change body into soul, to discover the world's potentiality for virtue, and derive happiness from it. It used to be said that God created the universe in order that He might apprehend Himself. Whatever we may feel about it, it is beyond question that the world exists in order that we may apprehend ourselves, attaining our full selfhood through response to whatever in it corresponds to the developing personality. The approach to this goal must not be too sudden and immediate for all individuals. It has to be reached through a progressive training, a gradual enlarging of the natural life accompanied by an uplifting of all its motives, The rule, the training, and the result differ with the type of the individual, his bent of life and degree of development. Life is just too complex for an ideal simplicity. (Radhakrishnan, 1988)*

**Key Words:** *Meditation, Hindu View, Perfect Ageing, Stages of life*

## **I. Introduction**

In the present Indian sociological view, the word retirement conjures a vision of being useless or of spending one's limited remaining days on a porch in a rocking chair. Too often we feel all used up; like we can no longer contribute to the very society that has labeled us 'old'. But one shouldn't lose heart. Experiencing and living life should become limitless when we age. Ageing should be liberating. Life can begin at 60. Timeless joys of ageing includes: deepening connection with our own Being, realizing our oneness with all creation, seeing the light in all people, blessing and encouraging others, loving our body more fully, dare to think

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of immortality, dare to be fit. We need to define our lives, our spirituality. Naturally, the older we get, the more we understand our vulnerabilities, and the more we want to discover our attachment to the Divine. Many don't even begin a spiritual search until they have raised a family, conquered the business world and finally found the time to do some inner exploration.

Ageing is the single greatest challenge facing our society today. Recent breakthroughs have demonstrated that it is possible to combine a long life with the absence of age-related disease. Scientists at the forefront of this research will explain the science of slower ageing and will consider the ethical issues surrounding the field and the challenge of developing a true preventative approach for age-related disease and degeneration. Recent European research indicates that the physical body can have a long, productive, and relatively healthy existence. That isn't really surprising. What is surprising is that the studies show that longevity requires a strong cohesiveness between the body, the mind, and most importantly, the spirit. (Kaehr, 2010)

The spirit, being a direct connection to God's energy, is an ever-present source of vitality. The body is a tool that enables us to interact on this physical plane of existence. The mind permits to learn and better ourselves which is a tremendous aid in connecting the spiritual and the physical sides of ourselves. Everyone has a different symbolic picture that comes to their mind's eye when they hear the word. The variance of these individualistic references is based on the belief process we were taught as children and our life experiences. Sometimes a new reference may be stronger than an older reference and the belief structure and the identification changes. Sometimes the identification with the word spiritual remains throughout life. (Walker, 2002)

### **The Four Stages of life**

The Hindu scheme does not leave the growth of the individual entirely to his unaided initiative but gives him a framework for guidance. Human life is represented as consisting of four consecutive stages, of which the last two fall within the jurisdiction of ageing.

1. **The Student.** Human offspring are the most helpless of all living creatures. In the absence of parental care, their chances of survival are little. The tending will have to be continued for a long period, till the child reaches the status of man. The higher the cultural level the longer is the period required for education. The aim of education is not to pour knowledge into the resisting brain and impose a stereotyped rule of conduct on his struggling impulses; it is to help the child to develop his nature, to change him from within rather than crush him from without. The education imparted not only fits man for his role in life but gives him a general idea of the conditions of spiritual life.

2. **The Householder.** By filling his place in social life, by helping its maintenance and continuity, the individual not only fulfils the law of his own being but makes his contribution to society. Man attains his full being only by living in harmonious social relationships. The wife has an equal position with the husband in all domestic and religious concerns. Every woman has a right to marry and have a home. The physical and the economic, though they may not be important in themselves, are important as means to the life of spirit. One must learn the social and spiritual lessons of the earlier stages before one can pass on the later. One must learn to be sober before striving to become a saint. He who does not know what it is to love as a child or a husband or a parent cannot pretend to the love

which contains them all. The state of the householder is the mainstay of social life. Hinduism does not demand withdrawal from life into mountain tops or gloomy caves as an essential condition for spiritual life. The way to a higher life is normally through the world.

3. **The Forest Dweller.** To be, for man, is not merely to be born, to grow up, marry, earn his livelihood, found a family, and support it and pass away. That would be a human edition of the animal life. It is rather to grow upward exceeding his animal beginnings. By fulfilling his function in society, the individual begins to feel the greatness of the soul which is behind the veils of nature and longs to reach his true universality. When the children get settled and no more want his attention, he retires probably with his wife to a quiet place in the country to lead a life of inquiry and meditation and work out within himself the truth of his being, in an atmosphere of freedom from the strife of social bonds. The mystery of life, as of death, each one has to discover for himself. We can sing and taste with no tongues but our own. Though each one has to attain his purpose by his separate encounter, the result is of universal significance.

4. **The Monk.** A *sannyasin* renounces all possessions, distinctions of caste, and practices of religion. As he has perfected himself, he is able to give his soul the largest scope, throw all his powers into the free movement of the world and compel its transfiguration. He does not merely formulate the conception of high living but lives it, adhering to the famous rule, the world is my country; to do good is my religion. „Regarding all with an equal eye he must be friendly to all living beings. And being devoted, he must not injure any living creature, human or animal, either in act, word, or thought, and renounce all attachments. A freedom and fearlessness of spirit, an immensity of courage, which no defeat or obstacle can touch, a faith in the power that works in the universe, a love that lavishes itself without demand of return and makes life a free servitude to the universal spirit, are the signs of the perfected man. The *sannyasin* is a super social man, a *parivrajaka*, a wandering teacher who influences spiritual standards though he may live apart from society. The difference between a *brahmin* and a *sannyasin* is that while the former is a full member of society, living with wife and children in a well-regulated but simple home, and performing religious rites, the latter is a celibate, homeless and wandering, if he does not live in a monastery, who has renounced all rites and ceremonies. He belongs neither to his language nor to his race but only to himself and therefore to the whole world. This order is recruited from members of all castes and both sexes. As the life of the *sannyasin* in the goal of man, those who live it obtain the allegiance of society. Kalidasa, the great Indian poet, describes this supreme ideal of life as owning the whole world while disowning oneself. (Radhakrishnan, 1988)

### **Indian philosophies are pragmatic**

The scheme of the ends of life, classes and stages has for its aim the development of the individual. It helps him to order and organize his life instead of leaving it as a bundle of incompatible desires. It looks upon him not as a mere specimen of a zoological species but as a member of a social group which reflects in its organization the scheme of values for the realization of which the group exists. By education and social

discipline the individual is helped to develop the inner conviction essential for social stability. But throughout there is insistence on the fact that the highest values are super-national and truly universal. The activities and achievements of art and science, of morality and religion, are the highest manifestations of the human spirit assimilating and communicable across barriers of blood and race. This is not to deny or underrate the importance of the group life, but the higher values of art and literature, science and philosophy, have, in principle, a universal appeal. The higher the individual, the more free is he of the social order. The highest is the most universal, having transcended the need for discipline by the social scheme. He is a king among men, being a king over himself. He is a citizen of the world and speaks a language that can be understood by all who call themselves men. Of the four ends the highest is spiritual freedom; of the four classes, the *Brahmin* engaged in spiritual pursuits is the highest; of the four stages, that of *sannyasa* is the most exalted. The meaning of human existence is in a larger consciousness which man does not enter so long as he remains confined in his individuality. The limitations of family life and social obedience embarrass the spirit in its main purpose of advancing into a life of unity with all being. The negative method of asceticism by which the individual mortifies his body, gives up all possessions, and breaks all social connections is not the Hindu view, which requires us to grow into the larger freedom of spirit, the super-individuality, by developing each side of our life until it transcends its limits. In this total hour of twilight, of tragic conflict between light and darkness, it is the duty of the free men of the spirit, who have seen the real beyond the clouds, to do their best to ward off the darkness, and if that is not possible to light lamps and get ready to help us to see when the night fails.

In a very real sense, Indian philosophies are pragmatic because of their strong practical bent. That is to say, according to Indian thinkers the aim of philosophy is not just the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity or the pursuit of theoretical truths, the more important aim is that philosophy should make a difference to the style and quality of life. If a philosophy, no matter how sophisticated and intellectually satisfying it may be, has no bearing on our life, it is deemed an empty and irrelevant sophistry. The character and life of a philosophical idealist must differ from that of a philosophical realist in some significant sense. Similarly, the disposition and life-style of a man who accepts a philosophy according to which God exists should differ from that of one whose philosophy rejects the notion of God. The point then is that for the Indians philosophical wisdom does not consist in intellectual inquiry for its own sake; rather, one should go beyond to assimilating the intellectually discerned and established truths into one's own personality and leading a life of freedom and enlightenment. The philosopher in the Indian society is thus not just a man of intellectual virtues, but one who is a living example of knowledge, peace, freedom, and wisdom. For this reason, philosophers are revered and admired in the Indian culture. A philosopher is not respected merely for his subtle dialectical powers and vast theoretical knowledge; he is respected and looked up to as an inspiration because of the wisdom his life reflects. No man, however great his learning and scholarship will be considered a philosopher in the Indian culture unless he is also free from egoism, greed, and pettiness and has the positive virtues of a noble disposition, a tranquil mind, and a universal outlook. (Chinmayananda, 2006)

### **Mediation in Indian Way**

Mediation is the final gateway which leads to the Supreme Self within. Before the Self, the core of the human personality, can be reached our attention must first be withdrawn from the world of sensual activities and

then from the five layers of matter enveloping it (the five *Koshas*). The mind of man attracted by the sense-organs constantly dwells in the sense-objects around him. His attention being extrovert, the world of beings and things create desires and agitations in his bosom thereby rendering him unfit for any concentrated activity. To subdue these activities the first step in the process of mediation would necessarily be to disengage his attention from the world. This is achieved by practicing selfless service, by cultivating devotion to the Lord and/or by studying and reflecting upon the scriptural indications of the Truth.

Having thus achieved a certain amount of withdrawal from the world, the mediator chooses a quiet place for his meditation so as to be physically away from the disturbances of the external world. It has been the common experience of seekers particularly in larger cities not to be able to procure a quiet place for the purpose amidst the noises both outside and inside the house. Whenever such a situation arises the solution would be to choose a quiet time, say, an early hour in the morning when everything is silent and peaceful. One should bear in mind that an absolute quietitude is not found even in the severe atmosphere of the Himalayas and what we are seeking is a relatively peaceful place. In fact, real tranquility is found within one's self and not in the environment.

After having thus detached from the gross external world the next step in the process of mediation is to withdraw one's attention from the physical body. The mind which has been pulled back from the world may still think of the body and continue to dissipate itself. To avoid this, the mediator, (*Sadhak*) is advised to maintain proper health and take precautions to ensure that the body does not cause any disturbance during the practice of meditation. Again, at the seat of meditation the strain in the limbs of the tension in the muscles may disturb one's concentration. To get over these disturbances the meditator is asked to is the correct posture using a thin flat cushion, not too soft – a blanket folded twice should serve the purpose. The correct posture for mediation is to sit with eyes closed, having a maximum base, vertebral column erect with left hand placed on the left thigh and the right hand with the *Mala* on the right calf muscle. The eyes are kept closed and looking nowhere, in particular, in the within.

The more successfully the mediator can relax, the more he can easily withdraw all his extra attention from his physical structure. Even when the relaxation is to a degree successful, one can experience an embracing joy and peace within oneself as a cool arbor against the blasts blowing from the deserts of agitated mind. (Chinmayananda, 2006)

### **Benefits of Meditation**

The benefits of meditation are endless and certainly deserve your contemplation and consideration. Many successful business people, celebrities and sports professionals practice and enjoy the benefits of meditation. Numerous businesses promote and provide help and assistance to their staff with the benefits of meditation courses and because of this they gain an advantage over their competitors and create more profit.

Research has scientifically proven that meditation is a safe and simple way to balance your physical, emotional, and mental state and its countless values have been known and practiced for thousands of years. More and more doctors promote the benefits of meditation to cure many stress related illnesses. Everyday most of us experience stress in many different ways and I believe many people are simply not aware of the benefits of

meditation or of how much stress we actually hold on to. Normally life threatening situations trigger off the stress response which enables us to act without contemplation and deliberation and survive intense situations using fast reflexes. When our bodies are exposed to a sudden threat we respond with the characteristic fight or flight reaction which is known as an adrenaline rush. When adrenaline and other hormones are released from the adrenal glands the pulse races, blood pressure increases, our breathing becomes faster and the blood flow to the muscles increases. If we are in extreme danger these reactions are of great assistance and gain to us. We have inherited this survival response from our ancestors who faced many life threatening situations every day. The same response is now triggered in our daily lives when we are in a traffic hold up or someone irritates us at work or we simply break a cup. If we do not confront the situation (and many are beyond our control) we end up being in a permanent state of stress.

1. **Happiness.** Meditation can help us to cultivate a real abiding happiness. Meditation allows us to be in tune with our inner self. When we live in the heart we can experience a sense of oneness with others, this brings a happiness that does not depend upon outer events.

2. **Inner Peace.** Most people would like to experience more inner peace in their lives; at times peace feels an elusive quality because our lives are so hectic. Meditation teaches us how to switch off from the noise of the mind; we no longer give importance to the teeming thoughts which fly through our mind. Through meditation we can gain a clear state of mind; this is the secret of feeling a real inner peace.

3. **Health Benefits.** There have been numerous studies showing a link between meditation and improved physical health. Meditation is a practical solution to relieve stress. When we relieve stress we help to reduce our blood pressure and heart related diseases.

4. **Simplicity.** Meditation helps to simplify our lives. When we live in the mind we can feel life is nothing but teeming problems and worries. Through learning to meditate we find we can get joy from appreciating the simplicity of life. "Meditation simplifies our outer life and energizes our inner life. Meditation gives us a natural and spontaneous life, a life that becomes so natural and spontaneous that we cannot breathe without being conscious of our own divinity." --- Swami Chinmyananda

5. **Living in the Present.** When we analyze the thoughts that go through our mind we find that many of them are dealing with the past or present. We are either fearful of the future or ruminating on the past. However by dwelling on the past or future, it means we are unable to live in the present moment. When we meditate we are completely in the here and now. Meditation teaches us to appreciate life as it is; we learn to value our present circumstances.

6. **Better Relations with Others.** Often we can have minor conflicts with other people because we dwell on minor faults of the other person, whether it is justified or not, it is a common source of unhappiness and division.

Meditation teaches us to give no importance to minor thoughts. When we meditate powerfully we develop a sense of oneness with other people; we naturally look to their good qualities. Their minor faults seem unimportant.

**7. To discover a real sense of who we are.** Our intellectual mind can seek to discover the answer to many questions, but the one question of who am I? Always remains unanswered. To discover our real self; to be aware of our own soul we have to go beyond the mind. It is in meditation that we can become aware of a living spiritual presence. When we find this we feel a new purpose in life. (Morrison & Radtke, 1999)

### **Relaxation and Contemplation**

One of the most important benefits of meditation is how it releases stress from our bodies. Meditation practiced regularly will lead you to a deeper level of relaxation and contemplation. If you want to be free of constant worry, pressure and stress the benefits of meditation can give you a life that is calm, peaceful, happy and relaxed. Even ten minutes of meditation a day will help alleviate stress. Some of the benefits of meditation are:

1. Reduces anxiety attacks as it lowers the levels of blood lactate.
2. Builds self confidence.
3. Increases serotonin which influences moods and behaviour. Low levels of serotonin are associated with depression, headaches and insomnia.
4. Enhances energy, strength and vigor.
5. Helps keep blood pressure normal.
6. Reduces stress and tension.
7. Creates a state of deep relaxation and general feeling of wellbeing.
8. Helps with P.M.T.
9. Increases concentration and strengthens the mind.
10. Helps reduce heart disease.
11. Helps with weight loss.

If you practice regularly, the benefits of meditation will promote a sense of calm and control, you'll feel far more relaxed and happy. Your ability to concentrate will be greater. You won't become stressed about things and you'll feel more peaceful and relaxed about everything. One of the greatest benefits of meditation is learning to go with the flow and things that used to irritate you before simply become insignificant.

(Gulati & Sudhir, 2012)

## **The Final Years**

Few of us want to think about the final years of our lives. We want to believe we will live forever. Often this is true even of people whose lives have been difficult or who are in great distress. Despite our strong will to live, we cannot escape the final stages of our lives. We have identified three stages of ageing:

- Early ageing: a period of renewed energy.
- Middle ageing: our world of renewed energy.
- Elder ageing: increased dependency.

Many people find it easy to live happily in the years of early ageing. This paper offers help for those in middle and elder ageing so that these stages may also have meaning and joy. Commenting on middle ageing, the period from retirement to mid or late seventies, we hear many people say, "I've never had it so good!" Job responsibilities are over and children are grown. For many people this is a time for travel, for studying in adult programs at universities or Elderhostel, for reviewing life, for saying goodbye to self-destructive behavior, and for enjoying what is called "golden age". If there is no devastating illness during this time, if finances allow us to meet daily expenses and still have something left over for fun and travel, if we have lived our earlier years with a fair degree of insight and honesty, if we love the past, enjoy the present, and are courageous about tomorrow, then this will be a wonderful segment of our life.

This period of the middle ageing years comes to a close usually in our late seventies, sometimes in the mid-eighties. We have lived in the ten to fifteen year period immediately following our retirement or mid-sixties; now another change takes place. Travel is less frequent and some of us seem not interested in traveling at all unless it is absolutely essential. We have the feeling of having been everywhere, or if we have never been anywhere we feel that going is just too much effort. Organized activities hold less interest than they did, although we may occasionally be part of a class, or activity group. At this time some of us move from our own homes into retirement communities or into homes of family members or even into group homes with surrogate families. Our world grows a little smaller.

Given these inner changes of mind and heart which have led to changes in outer activity, the period of the late seventies to late eighties can still be one of rich meaning and joy. Riding bicycle, singing old songs in tenor voice, walking, making friends, creative writing, gardening, laughter, comedy movies etc are healthy outer activities. (Morrison & Radtke, 1999)

## **II. Conclusion**

Indian thought conceives of life in four normative stages: of student, householder, forest-dweller and renouncer. A metaphysical theory related to the conception of life-stages is that of the ends or purposes of life: appropriate conduct, material well-being, physical satisfaction and liberation. The theory of the ends of life is reconstructed here in the light of contemporary philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. The first three ends are part of a world-oriented attitude; the last end, of world-transcending contemplation. Among age-



neutral and age-specific ways of relating life stages and life ends, that of taking old age as the time for the renunciatory stage is important and is examined in the context of the two main theories of meaning: world-oriented and world-transcending. Old age is secondary to earlier stages in a world-oriented theory, more significant in the world-transcendent one. However, both theories, seen independently, are paradoxical. In a synthesis, the world-transcendence of renunciation in old age is paramount in Indian thought, but worldly action is significant because renunciation depends on the richness of the life renounced. This reconstruction of an ancient ideal is offered as a philosophical paradigm for transculturally relevant attitudes to life in old age.

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