

OLD AGE - NEW LIFE by Swami Yogaratna (Bihar School of Yoga)

Many people think that once they become 'old' their life is over.

This is far from true!

According to our traditions life is divided into four stages: Brahmachary ashram, the stage of growing up and studying; grihasth ashram, the stage of earning and rearing a family; vanaprasth ashram the stage of retiring to a peaceful place of nature; and sannyasa ashram, renouncing worldly life to explore the inner life. In modern terms we could say these stages are student life, rat-race life, early retirement and finally, inner development.

When we have had our fill of enjoying what life has to offer and have realized that there is more to life than success and pleasure, then we are ready to look elsewhere. This is the time to start to look within. Looking within is ideal to do when the outer world holds no more fascination for us. By the time we are older and we have made and settled the family our physical bodies are not so suitable for a fast and stressful life. We find we need to slow down and pay more attention to our health. We find we are not so interested any more in achievement and success. We may find that we can enjoy sitting quietly and observing.

This is the ideal time to take up simple easy yogas to maintain our health and to explore and develop our inner mental world. Life is not over when your job is over and the children have grown up and left home. This is a time to make a new beginning, just as we made a new beginning when we completed our education and started working or earning, just as we started a new stage of life when we got married and started our family; so when we retire we can start a new stage of life, the inner exploration, the preparation for later life. When we can't move around so much is the ideal time to sit still and contemplate, to explore the mind and discover the inner world. As vast as the outer world is, so vast is the inner world and old age is the ideal time to explore it. This is the time when we have time to sit and look within. This is the time when we have the wisdom, and the patience to do so. This is the time when we get closer to God.

It is important not to let negativity get you down in old age. Younger people telling you that you mustn't do this or that, that now your life is over. At this stage of life we must be positive, look forward to what is ahead, what kind of experiences can we have now? Meditation is the ideal way to do this. Meditation is not difficult. We can start with easy steps and have great benefit. By sitting for meditation we can find many interesting and beautiful things inside ourselves and this will lead us on to further joys of life that can be experienced better by the old and wise than the young and restless.

So make a commitment now to start your new life of a fulfilling old age. You can do this by yourself or with your partner or with a group of people. There are many groups for the elderly people who are already on the path of enjoying and relishing their 'golden years'. If you prefer company, find and join such a group or join a class or club. Or attend a course such as yoga and meditation or a centre for wellness or a yogashram, and learn how to develop your life in a new, useful, meaningful way. There are many such places where you can learn simple easy asanas (postures) to keep your body healthy, active and comfortable. There you can learn pranayamas, energy breathing practices that increase your vital energy, and calm and concentrate the mind.

Until then, take up walking (taking care if you have knee pain or some other condition aggravated by walking). At first walk at a comfortable pace for a comfortable distance and gradually increase the pace and the distance until you feel yourself invigorated and rejuvenating. While you are walking lengthen and deepen your breathing slowly and gradually without holding your breath (which is contra indicated for high blood pressure and heart conditions). This will be your pranayama.

When you return to your house, or even outside if appropriate, sit down, close your eyes and keeping the body very still, comfortable and relaxed and simply focus on the feeling of stillness in your body. Or focus on exploring how you feel after your walk. Or focus on the movement and rhythm of your breath. Gradually your awareness will deepen and you will realize by yourself what to do next in your meditation practice. Or if you prefer you can read and follow the instructions in a book or cassette on meditation, or again, join a group or class on meditation. These practices will enhance your life, enabling you to live to the full right up till the end, and also to prepare for the end.

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