The Heavenly Messengers medical guide to Aging and Growing Old(er)

I have spent as many years (4 decades) practicing medicine as I have practicing meditation. I am certainly not a Heavenly messenger but can bring the two practices together providing a practical approach to dealing with aging, illness and death. These essays will not answer all of your questions. They are meant to look at our cultural and personal beliefs. We can use the Heavenly Messengers as the Buddha did, to guide us on our path to awakening.

Happy Birthday to you. When we were 10 years old this was a joyous occasion, with birthday cake, ice cream and presents. We looked forward to our birthdays, glad to get older and to become a grown-up. Grown-ups got to do so many cool things. The phrase *3 score and 10* formerly was used to describe a full, long life span. Now life spans become 3 digit numbers and more of us live over 100 years to *5 score and some.* This can redefine the word *grown up* to note that when we *get up in the morning we begin to groan.*

Aging starts in the embryo after only a few cell divisions and continues until we die. Biologically our cells are programmed to die. This is called *apoptosis,* from the Greek word meaning to *fall off,* or programmed cell death. After cell divisions little bits at the end of chromosomes (*telomeres*) literally fall off. When there are no more telomeres the cell dies.

This kind of cellular aging is natural. There is no judgment about losing *telomeres.* The word *old* immediately brings up images of losing youth, something highly valued in our culture, not just little bits of DNA. We may have lots of judgment about that. Looking or feeling old implies things we don’t like, things we may fear. Consider what comes to mind when we think about an old person. In some cultures this may have positive aspects. In the US most of the associations are negative, often very negative.

Biologically, aging is a result of cells dying and not being replenished. Sense organs lose function and we don’t hear, see, smell, taste or think as well as did when we were younger. Parts wear out and muscles, bones, tendons, hearts, lungs, kidneys, livers, reproductive organs don’t work as they used to. This may happen at different rates for different individuals but it happens to everyone if they don’t die when they’re young.

We don’t heal as quickly as we did. There is a general deterioration in the mechanisms that repair cell damage. As chronic sun exposure creates cumulative damage to skin cells, wrinkles and “old age spots” (flat, slightly darker areas on sun exposed areas) appear. Chronic damage to cells from diet, lifestyle and time allows cancers to develop. When asked about the causes of cancer I sometimes reply, “Birthdays” since the immune system and cellular repair processes weaken.

Socially we lose friends, jobs, roles, activities, mental capacities including memory. They seem to “fall off” from us. Familiar roles and activities are lost as we go thru rites of passage including retirement from work, children leaving an empty nest, downsizing your home or entering “senior communities” or moving to be closer to where children now live.

One of the most difficult challenges of aging is losing independence. All our lives we were taught to be self-reliant, to do things for ourselves. We create an identity of being *an independent adult,* and having to move to *assisted living* becomes humiliating. Being forced to give up a driver’s license is resisted strongly because we can no longer choose when and where to go, having to call for help to go shopping, run errands, or have a haircut. We define *autonomy* as independence in our culture. In other cultures (Mediterranean and parts of Asia) autonomy is seen as isolation, being separate from the group and its support.

Going thru aging is a complete course in Buddhist principles. Is there Dukkha? Check. Do things keep changing? Check. Is our identity or our *self* insubstantial and ephemeral? Check. We can say the same things about illness or death. There is a 4th messenger however. That messenger brings the possibility of awakening. How can we age listening to and learning from that message?

The medical approach to aging is not plastic surgery, taking tons of vitamins or even exercise though appropriate exercise can help maintain physical and cognitive function. The medical approach to aging focuses on how we perceive events and how we respond to them. The way we describe ourselves makes a difference.

Are you elderly or an elder? An elder is a respected member of a community. An elder shares accumulated wisdom with younger individuals. Are you a mentor or a debtor? Do you provide something of value—like kindness or simply being present with someone who needs you—or do you see yourself as a disempowered beggar, in debt for anything you ask for?

What is the opposite of *Independence?* Is it being *in dependence* or is it *inter dependence?* Are you *getting old* or *growing old?*

The psychiatrist Erik Erikson is known for his model of aging, dividing life into stages where we acquire knowledge and skills that keep us healthy. An infant learns basic trust and develops hope. In young adulthood we learn about intimacy vs isolation and develops the capacity to love.

In the stage Erikson calls Old Age (not numerically defined but roughly pre-retirement stage and into retirement) we learn about *Integrity* vs *Despair* and develop *Wisdom.* He says, *Integrity is based on touching and promotes contact with the word, with things, and with people. It offers a sense of coherence and wholeness, at risk because of loss of connection with social, interpersonal and worldly relationships.*

The word *wisdom* comes from the Sanskrit verb to see or to know. *The role of wisdom is to guide our investment in sight and sound and to focus our capacities on what is relevant, enduring, and nourishing, both for us individually and for the society in which we live.*

Read also the article posted in the resource section at www.karunabv.org. *Growing Older Gracefully. Growing Older Gratefully.*

If we choose to *grow older* then we see and touch the world as an opportunity to develop in healthy rather than unhealthy ways. This approach maintains a sense of meaning in life rather than despair at the loss of things we have previously valued.

Another psycho-philosophical approach is to actively use our behavior to *create a bank account of virtuous actions to pay for future needs.* Wendy von Lustbader, a geriatric social worker, wrote a book called *Counting on Kindness*. She looked at nursing homes and observed both the residents and the caregivers. Certain patients seemed to receive better care than others. The nurses’ aids answered call lights quicker, stopped in to see the patients more often and in general paid more attention. As she looked further into the causes for this behavior she noted that these patients paid more personal attention to their care givers. They asked about the aids’ families, remembered their children’s birthdays. They *witnessed and acknowledged their caregivers’ lives.* They paid kindness with kindness. They paid attention to the persons caring for them as their caregivers paid attention to the patient. They did more than *pay attention*, they *invested attention* in other people. This wasn’t premeditated kindness; it came from the character of a person who was genuinely kind.

More simply put, *What goes around comes around.* This is the law of Karma: virtue begets virtue. When we cultivate kindness, forgiveness, generosity, it comes back to us both immediately and possibly at some future time.