

Losing “my” mind: Ageing, mental degradation and the natural dropping away of the conceptual “self”

“They say that you'll lose your mind when you get older. What they don't tell you is that you won't miss it very much.”

- Malcolm Cowley

It is common for people to suggest that keeping one's mind active is a good way to “keep going” in order to have a mentally healthy old age. However ageing often brings with it not necessarily an attempt to be “young” but a natural process of becoming more and more efficient with the energy as there is naturally less. The youth is about surplus energy, about expressing and expansion, but when this is no longer happening then it is just simply about living and feeling what there is.

In many ways there is an unburdening process in ageing. In youth there is a burden of expression which needs to happen, which is of the egoic self. This is an add-on to the child-like nature which needs constant maintenance and energetic powering. During youth there is considerable focus on what “I will be”, what “I could be” and what “could happen later”. This is all about expansion of energy. When we get older there is a realisation of the insignificance of this “self” with its insatiable demands, which will ultimately lead to its dissolution.

Of course this doesn't necessarily have to occur during old age, there are several stages in life when disillusionment occurs, when things jolt the social processes such as dis-ease, disaster and death. These will quickly engage the process of reflection upon the true nature of what is, rather than what we think “I” is. Also when moments of total wonderment and Oneness occur, this too is a collapsing away of “self”. In any case ageing is just a physical manifestation of the body, but in its wake the process of losing the “self” is actually definite.

In most natural ageing processes the focus concentrates on the vital functions of the body and then those which are less necessary for the functioning of the human-animal start to decline. Memory is one of the most commonly affected faculties, our ability to remember short and long term events diminishes. Interestingly, the mind then returns to an increasingly child-like state and functions in less and less of an “adult” way.

Often we hear that a person has “lost their marbles” and is now just doing “weird” anti-social things with abandon wherein totally uncompromising expressions of pent-up rage or other hitherto concealed expressions can burst forth. Often society shuns a person who is “mentally disabled” because they are simply expressing out loud everything that is going on in their head, whereas everyone else actually has the same insanity but just on the inside!

The constant dispute over what defines mental “health” or mental “illness” still rages. When a person cannot use the cognitive functions and is rendered completely

dysfunctional within society, are they actually suffering as much as the people who imprison them? If we look into the eyes of a caged chimpanzee we see its dis-comfort at being in a cage but we then add on to this the notion that it is “suffering” this issue, which it isn’t. In fact the chimpanzee is looking out from the freedom of its cage and into the prison of the human’s trapped-ness.

The definition of “self” is all about keeping alive that thing we call memory and those ideas we have of who “I am”. When this starts to disintegrate of its own volition is this actually a real problem? As pointed out in the statement above by Malcolm Cowley, can we really miss a dissolving idea of “I”, for the “I” can’t miss itself as it dissolves!

So why do we deride the elderly for behaving as they do? When patterns of expression like Alzheimer’s begin, does this cause more anxiety for the person experiencing it, or is more distressing for their families and the loved-ones who are no longer “recognized” by “their own” father or mother etc. The wonderful thing is that as the “self” and the memory dissolve, interaction becomes increasingly direct, there’s no requirement to know a person or to remember who you are or what you are doing “here”, this facilitates a freedom whereby things simply happen without intention and are done for no reason. It can be very upsetting for relatives or onlookers when they are no longer recognised. However this suffering is that of the egoic expression of the relative or friend who feels undermined by the lack of response from this person who no longer recognises them and is inaccessible to them, seemingly in a world of their own thoughts and dreams as their circuits have burnt out through a lifetime of stress and tension. However, even without the ability to memorize and have a self-identity this does not wipe the process of seeking for it. The process of the so-called “higher order functions” of the human are deeply entrenched in memory and past, holding onto this as identity and forming a “Self” separate from everything else which therefore will always seek to find its other “half”.

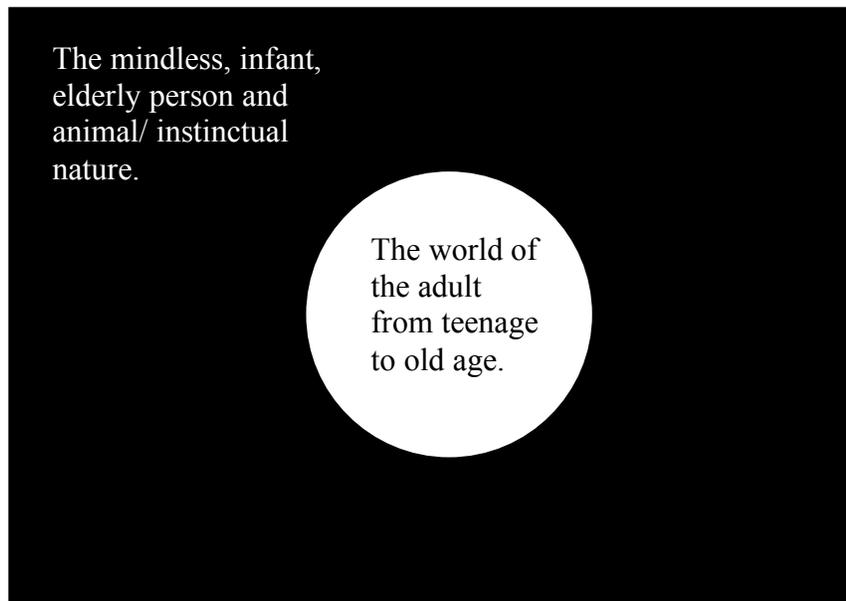
When the mind ages and starts to decline the memories and structures of who “we thought we were” start to disintegrate. Eventually, either just before or at the point of death, all there is is what is happening now. The body has finally become unable to power the “self” and so letting-go occurs spontaneously. Of course, the mind does not have to degrade in order for “self” to be let go, but certainly the process of energetically powering the “self” naturally has to decline for a sense of Oneness, akin to the infant experience, to occur.

Elderly people may be very angry, expressing massive tension from years of contraction and holding back. When there is no longer a “self” in *seeming full command* and the person “doesn’t know what they are doing” this is simply a situation when the unknown, the natural expression of life and resistance to what *is* can no longer be held onto and this expression is truth.

The social stigmas associated with the elderly and mentally “disabled” are very much the same difficulties people have with children (or animals) because they don’t fit into the teenage to sixty/seventy year-old bracket of “normality”. The infant and the elderly are less involved with cognitive processing, less interested in how the world appears to be

and are more interested in the basic senses. There is an unbroken circle as humans return to their primal heritage at the very beginning and towards the very end of life.

Whenever we are looking into the true nature of dis-ease it is always important to see who really is suffering. Instead of projecting that dribbling, incontinence and mindlessness is absolutely terrible, it is only if “you” are actively remembering what it was like before this happened, otherwise there is blissful disinterest in what there was or what there could be. Instead there is simply what’s going on now, be it pain or pleasure, heat or cold, it is as it is, all is held within peaceful unconditional acceptance. As there is a stripping away to the base layer of “self” the burden gets lighter.



For an expression of how close the elderly is in relation to the infant please see the poetically brilliant film “The Curious case of Benjamin Button”, <http://www.benjaminbutton.com/>

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