

Aging with Wisdom and Compassion Session 2 Home Practice 10/6/2026

Remember – No session this coming Monday, 10/12/2026

The purpose of the Five Remembrances is to create a practice that keeps bringing us back to certain Dharma truths, which we'd rather not investigate too deeply. We'd prefer not to contemplate or draw too closely to these uncomfortable truths, because of our fear about the future. How will aging appear in our lives? When will we lose our strength and energy?

In *Living in the Light of Death*, Larry Rosenberg tells the story of the first time that a younger person on the subway got up to offer him a seat. What a blow to the ego! "...I, it seems, looked like a man who needed to sit down!"

(pg. 22).

Personality View

Self- image, called the fetter of "personality view" in the Buddha's teachings, is a source of suffering when we attach to a fixed view of ourselves in a world where everything is changing. Including ourselves. It's a form of both greed (we all like the pleasure of feeling good about ourselves) and delusion (our self-image is not necessarily 100% accurate).

In our last session, I mentioned a few times in my life when I needed to adjust my self-image to align with the reality of the physical changes of aging, or acknowledge that I was being viewed differently because I was aging.

Reflection:

Was there a time where the reality of aging became more real for you, and caused you to see that your old self-image had to change?

Asubha practices

Asubha can be translated as “unattractiveness” and appears in practices on the “unattractiveness of the body”. This has nothing to do with conventional societal notions of what’s attractive or not. These practices are designed to help us loosen attachments to physical attractiveness and even out our views of the body. The body is certainly miraculous. Even the simple actions of metabolizing energy, breathing, and circulating blood are miraculous. And it’s also true that the attractive plate of food we just enjoyed is less attractive as it becomes partially and then fully digested in the body. You will get a little of the flavor of this attitude in the Dhammapada reading below.

Reflection:

The Five Recollections state that “Aging is unavoidable”. Does knowing that help you appreciate your current abilities, whether physical, such as running or biking, or mental, such as having a good memory? Does it encourage you to feel gratitude for life at this stage?

Practice:

Continue a formal sitting practice from 10-40 minutes each day.

Continue to read or recite the Five Recollections in English and/or in Pali as part of your daily practice. In the readings, I have added intonation marks for the English and Pali versions of one of the chants that we handed out last time

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back together. Make it pretty again." Because that is also true. The body is a miracle. So I would do that, and then he'd have me deconstruct it again. I got very good at going back and forth.

The point is to develop a middle way. Not to worship the body, becoming attached to it; and also not to reject it, ignoring it altogether. That spiritual tradition exists also, total rejection of the body, seeing it as something that is in the way and that we need to overcome. The Buddha studied in that ascetic tradition for a while, but he eventually rejected it quite pointedly. He practiced moderation in taking care of the body in order to make proper use of it. But he also didn't get attached to it, because it is constantly changing and eventually gives out altogether.

So we're moving toward a balanced view. There is this body. No one denies it exists. It just doesn't have the existence we think it does. It is an impermanent changing phenomenon. Above all, we don't identify it as me or mine. At first when we say that, it is an ideology. But if we meditate long enough, we see it as a reality. The body is definitely here. (It also definitely ages.) But no one owns it.

We can also read the section on aging in the *Dhammapada*,¹ an ancient crystallization of the Buddha's teaching into verse form, in the light of what we've said about *asubha* meditation. The first stanza makes reference to some women followers of the Buddha who were frivolous and lighthearted

1. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "*Dhammapada*," a Translation (Barre, Mass.: Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Dhamma Dana Publications, 1998).

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and would come to his talks in a festive mood after they had been drinking. He is speaking directly to them.

What laughter, why joy,
when constantly aflame?
Enveloped in darkness,
don't you look for a lamp?

The flame referred to in the second line is that of desire, of craving, the same flame the Buddha spoke of in his famous fire sermon, where he declared that the whole world is on fire with greed, hatred, and delusion. The women are festive but don't see how enslaved they are to their craving. The darkness that envelops them is that of ignorance. They should be looking for a light.

The second stanza makes reference to a renowned courtesan who had recently died. It seems to see her simultaneously at various moments in her life, so that even her beautiful image – apparently enhanced by cosmetics – is concealing a grim future.

Look at the beautified image,
a heap of festering wounds, shored up:
ill, but the object of many resolves,
where there is nothing lasting or sure.

The "many resolves" that the body is the "object" of are the desires of many men to sleep with her. This stanza seems to refer to the two views of the body we've mentioned, the beautified self-image and the body within the body, which is decaying all the time. It's as if the stanza says: If you could see

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what this body will eventually become, you would not be so attached to it.

The third stanza continues the same kind of imagery. It resembles *asubha* meditation itself, arousing fear and aversion as a corrective to the idealization of the body.

Worn out is this body,
a nest of diseases, dissolving.
This putrid conglomeration
is bound to break up,
for life is hemmed in with death.

The fourth refers to another kind of Buddhist meditation. Monks would visit the charnel grounds to contemplate bodies in various states of decomposition. They would contemplate skeletons, then the isolated bones that were left when the skeletons broke up. Over time the bones would decompose into dust, and the monks would contemplate that. Then the dust would blow away, and literally nothing would be left of what had once been a human being.

On seeing these bones
discarded
like gourds in the fall,
pigeon-gray:
what delight?

The story behind this stanza is that there was a group of young monks who believed they had achieved enlightenment, when really they had just attained a degree of concentration. The Buddha took them to the charnel grounds, to see what

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equanimity they could exhibit there. They realized they needed to continue practicing.

The fifth stanza makes reference to a beautiful queen who had little interest in the Buddha's teaching but was much enamored of her own form. The Buddha showed her an image of it, then caused it to age as she watched, just showing her a more rapid version of the inevitable change that was already happening.

A city made of bones,
plastered over with flesh & blood,
whose hidden treasures are:
pride & contempt
aging & death.

The sixth stanza lets us know that this law of impermanence is no respecter of wealth, that royal families are just as subject to it as anyone else. It also refers to a part of us that doesn't age.

Even royal chariots
well-embellished
get run down,
and so does the body
succumb to old age.
But the Dhamma of the good
doesn't succumb to old age:
the good let the civilized know.

The "good" are the people in touch with this deep truth, the "civilized" are those readily available to be trained, people

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like ourselves directly penetrating aging on their way to that which is timeless.

The seventh stanza points to the situation of people without inner development, describing someone who matures physically but not spiritually.

This unlistening man
matures like an ox.
His muscles develop,
his discernment not.

The eighth and ninth are two of the most famous in the *Dhammapada* and are known as the "Song of Victory."

Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth
again & again.

House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole destroyed,
gone to the Unformed, the mind
has come to the end of craving.

At first glance these stanzas seem to be a departure from the subject of aging and to take up death and rebirth. We in the West don't take rebirth for granted, and some don't believe in it at all. Here the speaker has achieved nirvana and will no

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longer be subject to the round of death and rebirth. Seen in another way, however, these stanzas are about the here and now. In this life the self is reborn every time we attach to something as being me or mine, to a mood, a sensation, a mind-state. This series of rebirths is quite literally exhausting; it is a full-time job to attend to the ego with its many desires and aversions, its various wounds.

This is the kind of rebirth that takes place when we feel stiffness and think, "I am an old person"; suddenly we are reborn in a new form, to a whole new world of suffering. Once we clearly see this process at work, we have the option of not participating in it. Then the "I" is not created; the house is not built. We can discover nirvana in the midst of everyday life.

The last two stanzas refer to people who are not able to choose between the life of the spirit and the life of the world. Just as it is possible to live in both at once, it is possible to live in neither, by not fully entering into life. Your days become stale and flat.

Neither living the chaste life
nor gaining wealth in their youth,
they waste away like old herons
in a dried-up lake
depleted of fish.

Neither living the chaste life
nor gaining wealth in their youth,
they lie around,
mistrifed from the bow,
sighing over old times.

Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection

(LEADER)

Handa mayam abhin̄ha-paccavekkhaṇa-pātham
bhaṇāmase:

Let us now recite the passage for frequent recollection:

(ALL)

Jarā-dhammomhi jaram anātito.

I am subject to aging. Aging is unavoidable.

Byādhi-dhammomhi byādhim anātito.

I am subject to illness. Illness is unavoidable.

Marāṇa-dhammomhi maraṇam anātito.

I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable.

Sabbehi me piyehi maṇāpehi nānā-bhāvo viṇā-bhāvo.

I will grow different, separate from all that is dear & appealing to me.

Kammassakomhi kammā-dāyādo kamma-yoni
kamma-bandhu kamma-paṭisāraṇo.

I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions.

Yam kammaṁ karissāmi kalyāṇam vā pāpakam
vā tassa dāyādo bhavissāmi.

Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.

Evam amhehi abhin̄ham paccavekkhitabbam.

We should often reflect on this.