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Ajahn Sundara's Presentation Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Ajahn Sundara

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Mary Margaret Funk: For those who may have somehow not got the gist of it this morning, I might recapitulate that there is a 100 percent mortality rate in this lifetime. That's one thing we have got in common! It's my privilege this afternoon to offer a fresh view for our group, and we are very excited to have with us, Ven. Ajahn Sundara. She was born in France and was one of the first four women ordained in England by Ajahn Sumedho in 1979 in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah. Since then she has been involved in the establishment and training of nuns community at Chithurst and Amaravati Buddhist monasteries in England. In the mid-1990s, she spent over two years in Thailand, mostly on retreat in forest monasteries. For the last fifteen years she has taught and led retreats in Europe and the United States and is interested in exploring ways of practicing, sustaining, and integrating Buddhist teachings in Western culture. She and her nuns have put together some writings that are not in the public domain in publication, but they are available through her, if indeed she can't say everything in twelve minutes.

Ajahn Sundara: I've been invited to speak on the theme of suffering in the context of aging and sickness. This is my first time addressing a subject like this one, and what struck me this morning particularly, was how even though the theme was suffering in sickness and aging, we human beings have an extraordinary way of focusing instead our attention on the extremes of life such as birth and death. However, what happens in between those two points I think matters even more, because they are much more confusing than even death. This is

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because there is a whole range of hopes, fears, and proliferations that our mind can conjure up as we get sick or old, which once we are faced with death, realizing that there are no options, don't have much room and things become a lot clearer.

I would like to ask all of you to just close your eyes gently, sit quietly, and bring into your heart a time in your life when you were either sick or experiencing the beginning of losing your identity as a vigorous, useful human being with a great sense of belonging to life, to your community, to everything. What happened? Can you remember the feeling that came up at the time when you suddenly felt those changes taking place in you as you became limited physically or mentally or as your body was not responding in the way it used to-as your vigor and mind weren't so powerful? Remember, also, how you were affected by the way people saw you as you were getting older, or you were suddenly stricken by an illness of some kind. What did you feel like in your heart? What was the kind of thinking connected with that experience? What was the kind of feeling that came up? If you let your mind rest for another minute just on the effect of this experience, what kind of emotion was predominant? Doubt? Fear? What did your mind project onto the future? How was the future seen from the experience of illness and aging? What did life look like?

As a monastic, I can't set up institutions or old peoples' homes or hospitals. We would have a hard time doing that as we are penniless. Our training forbids us to receive or control money and even the Trust that supports the community has a policy of not fundraising. But as a human being, what is important to me is how each one of us deals with the experiences of sickness and aging. From the Buddhist perspective there is a way and practice that can free the mind from the suffering caused by aging and sickness. Doing this means allowing everything that arises in the midst of those experiences to be completely made conscious. We have to know this for ourselves, Even though somebody can tell you till you turn blue in the face that everything is okay, that you can find peace in the midst of suffering, each one of us still has to know it in our heart and realize this truth for ourselves. I've heard the teaching of my teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, for twenty years. I've read many books and I've listened to many other teachers other than mine,



Ajahn Sundara is a Theravada Buddhist nun who was ordained in England in 1979 in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajan Chah. She was a participant in Gethsemani Encounter II in 2002.

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and yet it's only when I myself experienced sickness and aging that it began to be real.

Interestingly enough, a few years after I became a nun our teacher invited two old ladies to come to our monastery and end their days there because they had been dreaming of living close to our teacher for so long. So they came to live with us. We were all very young (I am the oldest and I am fifty-five). Most of the nuns are between twenty and fifty-five. At the time I must have been thirty-five or so, and we were all extremely vigorous, healthy, and energetic. I didn't have a clue what old people were. I was trained as a dancer myself, and anybody who didn't look like a dancer looked sort of "crippled." Old people never entered my life until these old ladies turned up. Having them in the midst of our community was an extraordinary learning experience, because we had to bow down to what aging is about. They slowed us down. They made us extremely patient. They drove us absolutely crazy. And we had a lot of fun. One of them had moments of paranoia, and the other one had been a great Buddhist scholar, but even she eventually suffered from Alzheimer's.

I tell this story to give you an idea of the beginning of my experience with elderly people. I would like to come back, however, to the context in which we consider those themes. I have lived mostly in the West, and we are part of a culture that has set health, youth, physical and psychological comfort as ultimate goals of our life. These are the reasons why so many people earn and spend a lot of money. Perhaps one of the reasons why our planet might be dying is because most of the world is running on this motivation of trying to find ultimate health and comfort through many means that actually do not bring about those things. In such a context, the experience of sickness and aging is often seen as an anomaly or event that somehow should not be part of human life.

Until we are sick or getting old we don't realize the amount of resistance that is in our heart—resistance to the natural flow and unfolding of this human body. One thing that has struck me is that most traditional cultures around the world have honored and respected the cycles of human life. There are even ceremonies and particular

preparations to enter the different stages of one's life—such as in the Hindu tradition, where by the age of sixty you prepare yourself to die. Our culture has managed to blind us quite efficiently by dangling in front of us all sorts of possibilities that will enable us to turn a blind eye to experiences such as sickness and aging. Nowadays, you can have many things at your disposal and many means of continuing this illusion that somehow you'll stay young forever. Somehow, death, aging, and sickness are not supposed to happen.

Our emotional response to these experiences is quite remarkable. At some level we rationally can understand them. We can have some clarity about what is supposed to happen. But the great suffering is that we are often unprepared for those changes and feel terrified. There is a kind of terror at the possibility of being let down by our communities, our relatives, by the world. Many elderly people don't really know how they can participate in their society after a certain age. They are often considered helpless, useless, and with no way of being integrated into the system. People who may have worked for their society all through their life are considered useless human beings. It is very sad to be in a culture that has so little respect for the elderly, that rather than seeing aging as a chance to learn about impermanence and to gain wisdom, avoids or denies that opportunity. We try constantly to mask the effects of aging or sickness through drugs, distractions of all kinds, through restless activities and all sorts of gadgets and means available to us nowadays.

There is a teaching in our tradition that is a helpful reminder of aging, sickness and death, and I'd like to read it to you. It says: "I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying. All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me." Then it continues, "I am the heir of my karma; I am born of my karma. I'm related to my karma. I'm supported by my karma. And whatever karma I shall do, whether for good or for evil, I will be the heir; thus, I should frequently recollect." This recollection simply states what is. It's not embellishing anything, not making it more than it is. It's not being poetic about it. In fact, when you read it, you may say, "So what? I know that already."

But, remember, those reflections are part of a meditation practice and must be brought into our heart and contemplated.

Over a period of time, meditating on this teaching allows the mind itself to think about aging, sickness, and death as something close to us. It also catalyzes the fear and emotion that surround those particular experiences. Sickness and aging are what we probably fear most. This is what most human beings dread, even though we have facelifts and all kind of gadgets that can change things. There are many means to keep up the illusion of looking young and pretty. But what happens to the heart? What does it feel like for us to pretend we are something other than what we really are? In aging and sickness there is a tremendous uncertainty, and it brings us to that point where we are confused by the uncertainty of life, the uncertainty inherent in sickness and aging. Will I get better? When I age, what will happen to me? Will I be left alone? Will I end up as a kind of old rug somewhere, a reject of society or community? There is a huge amount of anguish around these things.

Fortunately, we are not just left with the suffering of aging and sickness. For any of us who have practiced or have some spiritual outlook on life, using either meditation or prayer, I think we have discovered that there is a process of transformation that arises through abiding with those experiences with awareness and acceptance. The difference between somebody following a spiritual path and someone who does not, will be that most who have committed themselves to a path of awakening will not easily move out of the experience and will be open to learn from aging and sickness; whereas others would be distracted and thinking about something else, or running, dancing, swimming, playing badminton at the age of eighty-two, or finding relationships of some kind. They would not really be present to what's going on, nor inclined to look deeper and see where their experience is taking them.

It always amazes me how people who were sick discovered through their sickness strength and courage they never thought they had, a kind of resilience. When we are sick and aging, many of us give ourselves, perhaps for the first time, the permission to BE. Most of us

get up to do things, get on with life. Even in a religious life sometimes, as I said, monasteries can seem as busy as the corporate world. But when we suddenly have to give up the willfulness in our mind to keep going, then the moment of sickness and aging suddenly gives us an extraordinary space inwardly and outwardly to recognize our limitations, to meditate and perhaps prepare ourselves to die more peacefully.

Continued in **Ajahn Sundara: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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