

# Retirement is Not the End of Life

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## A mixed feeling

**T**his talk is about the various problems as well as the blessings of leisure or free time one gets after retirement. Apart from teaching as a psychologist for several years, I have also practised as a psychoanalyst for quite some time. Psychology has been my favourite subject for nearly half a century; I feel a sort of enthusiasm about it. Whenever I come across or communicate with someone with special needs relating to mental illness, I try to interpret his or her mental trajectory in the light of psychology in my own way. I get the same feeling while reading a book—a psychoanalytical explanation flashes in my mind. In the same way I look at a sketch, a picture or a photograph. I rarely watch movies, but when I do, there also I get the same feeling. With all these in my mind, I thought I should discuss problems related to old age from psychological point of view.

There is often a mixed feeling among us about retirement. On the one hand, a person starts thinking that he or she will become less important among his or her acquaintances. Being associated with a particular type of work for so many years, one develops some degree of self-confidence regarding one's expertise and efficiency. Hence a fear of getting less social respect and being left out grips the mind, as the hour of retirement approaches.

There are, on the other hand, people who consider retirement as a relief from the ups and downs in the workplace. To them it is a signal of freedom. Retirement is desirable for this group of people whereas the former group interprets it negatively. In a nutshell, there are two broad categories of people—some liking and some others not liking retired life.

I know about a freshly retired person who met his nephew's newly married wife in his house. Just after stepping inside, she initiated the conversation with, 'I heard you have retired.' The gentleman later told me that he had started disliking the lady from that very instant. 'How does it matter to her if I am retired?'—he said. I feel that the lady should not have said this in the first instance; negative words cannot have positive impact in such cases.

Then again there are people who opt for retirement and then engage themselves elsewhere. Voluntary retirement does not necessarily come from compulsion. In military or defence services, there is a provision for retirement after 20 years and many people take this opportunity and join a new service. To them the word 'retirement' carries no negative sense.

If retirement means the end of active life, then the way of viewing it matters. As the time of retirement comes close, various thoughts regarding an uncertain future come to mind. The daily routine followed for so many years is going to change abruptly.

In many cases, monetary issues also become a major concern. How to change the lifestyle in order to make do with less money! The cost of medical treatment has now increased so exponentially that arranging for medical expenses is a huge burden. A teacher of mine said, 'If I ever fall ill, it will entail expensive treatment; I'll be treated if there is money; or, else I'll gradually die.'

So everything depends on how you look at life. Anxiety is inevitable if the person is under the impression that retirement means departure from the habitual comfort and if one worries too much as to whether it will be possible to cope with the changed circumstances.

I have referred to work efficiency. The bigger the portfolio, the more is the dignity. We hardly come across people whose personality does not reflect the post held by him or her. Even after retirement, these people cannot change their attitude. Hence, they perceive a sense of reduction in self-esteem and self-image. In psychological term, we say, 'the person has started suffering from narcissistic injury.'

I know a gentleman whose driver was late by two minutes on the day following his retirement from a high post. The driver explained that it was unintentional but his boss kept saying, 'The delay is an insult to me! You just get out.' His family tried to reason with him and make him see that it was not right to dismiss the driver who had been working with him for so many years. In reply, he said, 'Not just the driver but from today whoever insults me will be erased from my life.' I feel this is not a sound mentality.

In my opinion, people of this type are unhappy and suffer a lot. If that be the case, can these people be made to understand that retirement or the spare time

after retirement can also be used for reflecting on the blessed moments of their past lives? Going down the memory lane may indeed give you great pleasure. Your past achievements may be the assets for the days ahead. The recollection of the golden moments may even give some relief to your brain, by bringing a sense of satisfaction.

On the other hand, there are people who think retirement is synonymous with pessimism and depression. They compare themselves with those who are still continuing their jobs. The result is the breeding of various physical and mental diseases.

### **Welcome change!**

At one stage, West Bengal government took a decision about the retirement age of its employees. It was 65 years for the teachers and it was 70 for the government doctors. Some people started agitation and questioned the decision. They asked, why this discrepancy?

I, however, feel that there is no harm in getting retirement early. In my opinion, early retirement gives you more time to devote to your own family and in a wider sense to the global family. In fact, retirement is not the end of life. While in service, we remain too busy with our official work to connect with our inner soul. After retirement, we get the opportunity to explore the hidden treasures of the mind. This will bring a person out of the cocoon of the individual self to be with the world outside.

Most people experience decline in their reasoning ability with age. They take time to decide what is right and what is wrong. Then they seek help from others. This is also the result of not accepting retirement sportingly. If retirement is accepted with a

smile, the happiness of mind will not allow self-confidence to fade out.

After retirement, my father or uncle did not think of joining another job for earning more. Nowadays, materialistic thinking compels people to search for new jobs after retirement. Only yesterday, I came across a gentleman who was very upset as he had retired recently from a university. Today I found him joining a private university which is not quite well-known and he was repeatedly informing his acquaintances about his identity as a university professor. This is an attempt to tell himself along with others that he is still working and he is probably not so aged as others might have thought. This mentality does not give any happiness or peace of mind; instead it brings unrest.

Let us try to analyze the reasons behind this attitude from psychological point of view. The progress in every branch of science, has, expectedly or unexpectedly, made today's world laden with knowledge. Advancement in technology has brought a change in our lifestyle because our desires can be fulfilled in no time. This era is called the era of instant gratification. This has increased our craving to acquire more and more; and the outcome is mental turmoil. We never think whether we are justified in doing so, especially at an advanced age! Even senior people are dying to exchange the cable TV set for a smart TV. Is it not like a kid asking for more toys after playing with one? You may even think of purchasing a very fashionable and comfortable car as the one you now have is unable to inflate your ego.

Of course, there are exceptions. But even then, basically, the overall picture is that we are in a disturbed state of mind and continually running after more and more. This running starts from childhood. Nowadays it has become a trend to give the kids coaching in a number of extracurricular

activities. A child is brought to the clinic if the kid fails to perform well in school examination. But when will the kid study if he or she is engaged in six extracurricular activities? Yesterday I met a student from a reputed school. He said that he was not getting time for self-study as his mother had arranged six tuitions for him. After coming back home at eleven at night, he hardly gets time and energy to study. Sometimes he even misses school as he goes to bed quite late and naturally cannot wake up early.

This is not the end. As a student moves to a higher class, he or she is burdened with internship, project, associateship, etc., in addition to extracurricular activities. These are done to improve the student's biodata/CV so as to get recognition in society in future. In this process, the student life ends. Finally, when you start doing a job, there is no one to share your responsibilities; instead you are to take the whole burden on your shoulders. At this hyperactive stage, you have no time to give rest to your mind or your body. You do not even get the chance to sit quietly after one achievement as you have to run after another. But, why this endless running?

### **Endless running**

According to the famous psychologist Levinson, every human being passes through various stages in life just like the seasonal changes in nature. There are stages of childhood, teenage, puberty followed by early adulthood and adulthood. Next is the middle age and then an involutional period. After that comes the old age and at the end is the last chapter of life. Levinson has used the word 'semi-sense' for the very last chapter of life to differentiate it from the old age.

Each of these different stages has its own identity, beauty and characteristics. There is an urge in human mind to appreciate and enjoy these. Instead we are

continuously changing our demands as we pass on from one stage to another. A normal journey through these stages and then leisure after retirement—this should make one feel balanced mentally. From spiritual point of view, it is an opportunity for all of us, apparently small human beings, to merge into the all-pervading universal consciousness, to know and understand oneself, in the true sense of the term. This is comparable to the flow of a small river ending its journey by running into the sea. We never think this way; instead, we run blindly to fulfil our never-ending desires.

Running has become such a habit that we cannot even stand for a while to think or watch our surroundings. But, remember our journey is always incomplete if we fail to take in the beauty of the surroundings, may it be a ride along a hilly road or through a village or a jungle. One of my teachers held the topmost post in the Calcutta University and subsequently joined as a vice chancellor in another university wherefrom he retired. Incidentally, I was present at his residence on the next morning after his retirement. I wanted to know if the morning seemed different to him as he could at least relish his cup of tea and was certainly getting some peace of mind. He replied, 'Nothing like that; Nilanjana, you are absolutely wrong. I can't even dream of a life without being constantly surrounded by people asking me something or the other and myself being ready every moment to provide the solution.' I was stunned. Within a few months after this, he passed away one evening while sitting on a sofa. He was absolutely fit physically but probably his lack of self-satisfaction did not let him cope with the situation.

The story of an uncle in a flat next to mine is no different. Throughout his service life, he used to take two pieces of butter toast and two bananas before leaving for office. One day, after his retirement, his

breakfast was served late by a few minutes. He refused the food which he felt was intentionally given late to insult him as he had retired. 'I am so sorry, you started feeling hungry. I woke up a bit late today'—said my aunt. But this could not melt the ice; he didn't eat anything!

### **Leisure is no wound**

If leisure after retirement be treated as a wound, there is no medicine in the universe for healing it. This is, in fact, not a wound, but a promotion, it is a good time in life. This truth we must understand. In fact, it is not true that only the working ladies or other working persons in a family get special attention and they alone have a special place in the family. Due respect is also given to the elderly ladies of the family, who had been looking after the household for a prolonged period. They are also sometimes asked to take rest on arrival of the new members in the family. These ladies are requested not to toil anymore in the kitchen.

In the teaching profession also, we face the same situation. We come across comments like, 'You've already done enough work, now is the time for you to relax' or 'Now, you give some space so that I can also jump around.' Is this an outburst of jealousy? But the truth is, you can never occupy my space by replacing me; your place is yours, my place is mine.

Taking rest does not mean lying down on bed all day and night or watching TV all along. Lots of people are now suffering from neuropathy since they do not have any physical activities. Why can't we concentrate on our own thoughts in a peaceful state of mind?

By the way, another noticeable thing is that the elderly parents, if they are weak physically or otherwise, are not given any chance to take any decision about

themselves. The children take all the decisions on their behalf. The mother is shifted to another room with a terrace garden. They feel that she would remain healthier in the airy room. But they never realize that this new room is unfamiliar to her. If she looks outside through the window, the surroundings may not appear pleasing to her. Most importantly, to her, her original room, full of memories, was invaluable. I feel it is injustice to shift her from her favourite room. Sometimes, young people staying away from home want their elderly mothers to stay with them, but little do they realize that the old ladies might not feel at home elsewhere. I am not quite aged; even then, if I am ever told to leave my room and go elsewhere, I am the last person to oblige. If I am to shift anywhere from my favourite room, it must be my decision, no one else can impose it on me.

Life has its own rhythm, its own flow; these can never be changed at will. Hence, we, the psychoanalysts, feel that the fundamental principle of education is to prepare oneself mentally for accepting what comes naturally on its own. Now, what are the do's and don'ts for achieving this?

First, too much of materialistic mentality drives people to think a lot about items that satisfy the external needs. If a lady purchases a South Indian cotton saree and likes it, she thinks of purchasing one Odisha cotton saree next time and another different saree after that. This attitude, however, is not generally observed when it comes to buying a book. The thought of immediately buying another book usually does not come to mind.

According to Erikson, the great psychoanalyst, late adulthood is a period of

developing wisdom. Having been engaged for a long time in the domestic life, one's mental bonding with the family gradually becomes loose at this stage, and the person starts thinking of the unknown outside world. In that case, late adulthood is a period of summation, rumination, integration and absorption. It is not a state of competition but a time of giving generously.

At this stage, a person does not want anything for himself or herself. It is the time to give away his or her belongings to others. People searching for new jobs at late adulthood after retiring from service, just to earn more money, often get insulted. On the other hand, people engaging themselves in constructive activities or any other creative activities that satisfy them mentally, are respected.

This is the time for learning how to make minimal use of usable items. The lesser the items, the cleaner and the lighter is life. We can try to learn from Mother Teresa who had only two sarees for regular use; only one extra saree was stored for emergency. We are not worthy of comparison with her, but at least we can start reducing our usable items by giving not-so-used and unused items to the needy people. We shall feel much more comfortable in life with minimality.

### **Time for rest**

Excessive use of gadgets, with screen light, especially mobile phone, TV and computer is to be avoided since the effect of screen light on the brain is very damaging. Alzheimer's disease is increasing at an alarming rate. As a preventive measure, doctors now advise us to learn piano as it may lower the risk of brain degeneration. Limited use of gadgets, proper and controlled intake of food, giving up (or at least reduction) of drinking or smoking habits are some of

the ways to get time for peaceful thoughts. A peaceful state of mind enables you to say at the end of the day, 'Thank you God, thank you for giving me this wonderful day.'

Before I conclude, I must say that retirement at a ripe old age has no negativity from any angle. This chapter in life is to be accepted with due respect so that we can have a sense of infinite fulfilment, like having a dip in the ocean of completeness in life. Ruskin Bond writes, 'If you have the

ability or rather the gift of being able to see beauty in small things, then old age should hold no terrors.'

I shall conclude by likening our life to the sun. We have lived our lives in bright sunshine in the morning, noon is the time to gradually wrap up our work and bring it to completion. Then we can relish the twilight and feel like chanting Tagore's lines: 'Samukhe shānti pārābār, bhāsao tarani hey karnadhār'—Ahead flows the ocean of bliss; set sail, O boatman! ■

- \* This article is based on a lecture that Professor Nilanjana Sanyal, former Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Calcutta, delivered in Bengali at the Institute on 23 August, 2023. Transcribed by Jayashri Basu, the lecture has been translated into English by Alaka Banerji.

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with reproduction.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the use of red powder or water in the Holi celebration assumes a larger significance.

### The touch of fire

Thus the festival Holi comprises the two celebrations—the fire ritual and the Holi proper. There exists, however, the general conception that fire burns and reduces whatever it comes in contact with to ashes. But burning or reducing to ashes is not the only function that is attributed to fire. It reinvigorates too. The discovery of graves of the Paleolithic age shows convincingly that the graves

were dug in the neighbourhood of some fireplaces. It betrays distinctly the motive of the survivors. The touch of fire was expected to help the death-frozen body of the departed get heated again. It reveals the fact that the primitive people knew that breath and death are closely related to heat and cold respectively. And because of these similar functions, the *prāna*-breath is equated in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* with the sun above. The ancients, therefore, did not think of death as the end of everything. With death the idea of return was inextricably bound up. ■

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