



homepage: <https://ssrijournal.com/>

E-ISSN : 3027-706X

Book Review: Life's Morals: Dharma for the Elderly

Author: Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto)

Publication Year: 2026

Edition: 24th Edition

Publisher: Bangkok: Sahathammik Company Limited

ISBN: 974-8239-54-3

Review by: Kanta Nimtatsanasiri, Ph.D.

Received: 14 December 2025

Accepted: 19 January 2026

Published: 28 February 2026



Note. The review focuses specifically on pages 27-76 of "Life's Morals," the chapter titled "Dharma for the Elderly."

Book Description

This review examines pages 27-76 of "Life's Morals," specifically the chapter "Dharma for the Elderly" by Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto), one of Thailand's most distinguished Buddhist scholars and recipients of numerous national and international academic honors. Published in 2013 as the 24th edition by Sahathammik Company Limited, this work addresses Thailand's aging society as it approaches complete demographic transition to an aged society by 2025, when nearly 28% of the population will be aged 60 and above.

The book has earned recognition for presenting complex Buddhist principles in accessible, practically applicable ways that resonate with contemporary readers while maintaining profound

philosophical depth. Phra Brahmaganabhorn's unique ability to bridge traditional Buddhist wisdom with modern life circumstances makes ancient teachings immediately relevant to today's elderly facing unprecedented longevity and rapid social change. This chapter represents a compilation of six Dharma discourses related to birth, aging, illness, and death, systematically organized to address the fundamental transitions in human life. The content draws from both written works and lectures delivered on various occasions, reflecting decades of scholarly work and practical teaching experience that have shaped his understanding of how Buddhist principles can meaningfully transform the aging experience.

Preface

As Thai society undergoes significant demographic changes, the elderly face crucial transitions including declining health, shrinking social circles, and diminishing roles. This critical juncture leads some to dwell on suffering while others transform this period into one of their most fulfilling life stages.

The chapter "Dharma for the Elderly" addresses these challenges through Buddhist perspective, offering more than a retirement handbook. It provides "a new, nobler goal," transforming retirement from perceived loss into "the most precious golden opportunity" for achieving true mental freedom. This reframing fundamentally alters the existential meaning of aging from decline to opportunity.

The Dharma principles organize into eight main points: (1) leaving old work to find new opportunities—reframing retirement as liberation; (2) looking forward to higher goals—shifting from material to spiritual development; (3) extending life with strong body and mind—emphasizing chanda as crucial life energy; (4) achieving clear mind and peaceful heart—providing practical meditation techniques; (5) becoming wise to worldly conditions—developing skillful responses to life's fluctuations; (6) cultivating complete brahma qualities—emphasizing equanimity in family relationships; (7) training continuously through right living—ongoing self-development; (8) reaching life's completion—achieving true happiness through wisdom. This progression reflects pedagogical wisdom making the path achievable for ordinary elderly practitioners.

Content Analysis

1. Systematic Framework: The Eight Principles

Principle 1: Leave Old Work, Find New Opportunities

Phra Brahmaganabhorn reframes retirement not as ending but as transition from "the world of wearing masks"—conventional society bound by social roles—to "the world of truth," representing authentic existence guided by dharma. This addresses the existential crisis many elderly face when professional identity suddenly dissolves. The text emphasizes that leaving work represents liberation from duties that have bound one's life, viewing retirement as gaining freedom for genuine spiritual development. The author states, "Among all things in this world, nothing is better than truth... the taste of truth is the best taste," establishing truth-seeking as superior to conventional achievement and positioning retirement as opportunity to access this realm previously unavailable due to work obligations.

Principle 2: Look Forward to Higher Goals That Await

After establishing the positive perspective on retirement as liberation, the text proposes setting nobler goals beyond worldly success. The framework distinguishes three levels of benefits: preliminary benefits visible to the eye (possessions, wealth, health, family wellbeing); benefits beyond what eyes can see (developing the mind toward excellence, finding deep spiritual happiness not dependent on external material things); and the highest level of having a mind that is free through wisdom that understands truth. Most people spend their working lives pursuing first-level benefits, which are necessary but insufficient for complete happiness. The elderly, having obtained these sufficiently during their working years, are uniquely positioned to pursue higher goals without the distractions and obligations that constrained them previously.

The text encourages the elderly to ask themselves, "With this remaining life, what will I do that is most valuable?" This existential question shifts focus from passive acceptance of aging to active pursuit of meaning and purpose. Having a clear, noble goal helps the elderly live meaningfully, maintain life energy, and avoid the despair that comes from feeling life has lost purpose after retirement. The emphasis on "looking forward" rather than dwelling on the past or losses represents a crucial psychological reorientation. Instead of ruminating on what has been

lost—youth, strength, professional identity, social status—the elderly are encouraged to anticipate with genuine excitement what can be gained: wisdom, freedom, spiritual development, and the peace that comes from understanding life's true nature.

Principle 3: Extend Life with Strong Body and Mind

The text introduces four foundations of success (iddhipada): chanda (aspiration), viriya (effort), citta (intention), and vimamsa (investigation). Chanda receives particular emphasis as crucial energy creating willpower more important than physical strength. The concept refers to having "satisfaction in valuable pursuits." Without chanda, the mind withers regardless of physical condition. Conversely, strong chanda enables even weak bodies to continue functioning through mind-body connection. This addresses elderly losing will to live after retirement. Physical strength alone cannot sustain life if willpower is lost, but good willpower can sustain even weakening bodies.

Principle 4: Clear Mind, Peaceful Heart

Practical meditation techniques, particularly mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati), achieve mental clarity and peace. The practice is accessible: breathing comfortably with mindfulness simultaneously adjusts body and mind, bringing normalcy and calming emotions. Beyond formal meditation, cultivating wholesome mental states positively affects physical health through mind-body relationship. Having chanda and living purposefully helps maintain cognitive function well into old age.

Principle 5: Be Wise to Worldly Conditions and Use Them Beneficially

The eight worldly conditions (lokadharma)—gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain—are inevitable aspects of existence that arise according to causes and conditions beyond our complete control. The elderly, having experienced these fluctuations throughout their lives, are particularly positioned to develop wisdom regarding their fundamentally impermanent and unstable nature. This wisdom enables mental freedom rather than being perpetually tossed about by life's inevitable ups and downs.

The text explains that practicing Dharma according to the four iddhipada helps cut off disturbing emotions, but the crucial skill is becoming wise to worldly conditions rather than futilely

attempting to control them. When the mind can be properly placed with wisdom that understands these conditions as impermanent and unstable, we achieve freedom from being dominated by their constant fluctuations and changes, making the mind clear, open, and comfortable regardless of circumstances.

More importantly, Phra Brahmaganabhorn introduces the transformative concept of "using worldly conditions beneficially" rather than merely enduring them passively. Specific examples include: when receiving praise, use it as encouragement to continue doing good rather than becoming arrogant or complacent; when being blamed or criticized, use it as valuable opportunity for honest self-examination rather than becoming defensive or resentful; when experiencing suffering or difficulties, use them as profound lessons in understanding life's true nature rather than succumbing to despair or bitterness; when experiencing pleasure or success, use these as motivation to share joy and benefits with others rather than becoming selfishly attached. This active, transformative approach to worldly conditions represents a significant advancement beyond mere equanimity, as it transforms potentially disturbing experiences into opportunities for continuous growth and wisdom development.

Principle 6: Being a Complete Brahma at Home

Cultivating four brahmaviharas (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity) emphasizes equanimity for elderly in family contexts. Three progressive levels guide application: letting children learn independently when young; maintaining family standards during development; and respecting adult children's autonomy in their own families. This proves most difficult for many Thai elderly, as cultural expectations encourage continued parental involvement. The balance creates peaceful families while enabling elderly to achieve happiness through releasing control.

Principle 7: Continuous Self-Development Through Right Living

Self-development in old age should intensify. The elderly should increasingly practice threefold training: morality, concentration, and wisdom. Training to find happiness independent of material things develops contentment as one ages. As wisdom converges, one "places the mind correctly," finding happiness from living according to reality rather than unstable conventions.

Understanding the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, non-self—forms the foundation for accepting all changes with peace.

Principle 8: Life and Happiness Reach Completion

When wisdom converges with ability to place mind correctly, life achieves complete, never-ending happiness. The mind's capacity for mental fabrication can create either suffering or happiness. Three characteristics define completion: inner peace and freedom from defilements; readiness to face death peacefully; and stable happiness arising from wisdom. This represents practical possibility for those systematically following the eight principles. Death becomes natural conclusion of well-lived journey rather than tragedy.

2. Prominent Strengths and Contributions

Revolutionary Mindset Reframing

The most significant strength lies in completely reframing retirement from "endpoint" to "starting point" of life's greatest journey. Rather than offering mere consolation that retirement "isn't so bad," Phra Brahmaganabhorn achieves a profound paradigm shift by transforming it into "an opportunity to enter the world of truth." This reframing provides motivation deeper than consolation—it offers genuine vision, clear purpose, and authentic excitement about possibilities ahead rather than grief about what has passed. The statement "Among all things in this world, nothing is better than truth... the taste of truth is the best taste" establishes truth-seeking as explicitly superior to all conventional achievements—wealth, status, power—that dominated working life. By positioning retirement as the gateway to this superior realm, previously inaccessible due to work obligations, the text transforms what society typically views as decline into what Buddhism recognizes as opportunity. Moreover, the metaphor of removing masks proves powerfully relatable. Working life requires playing roles, meeting expectations, maintaining appearances—all forms of "wearing masks." Retirement removes these requirements, allowing one to finally discover authentic existence. This resonates deeply with elderly people who often express profound relief at no longer needing to maintain professional personas or live up to others' expectations.

Systematic Integration and Clear Roadmap

The eight principles form an integrated, sequential roadmap where each builds upon previous ones. The progression follows sound pedagogy: adjusting perspectives creates mental foundation; building strength provides capacity; managing obstacles develops resilience; creating relationships establishes harmony; continuous development maintains momentum; achieving completion provides ultimate destination. This reflects wisdom in organizing Dharma principles into steps ordinary elderly can follow.

Practical Application of Equanimity

The teaching on being "complete Brahma at home" addresses challenging sources of suffering for Thai elderly—relationships with adult children. Three progressive levels provide specific guidance rather than vague exhortations. By framing non-interference as spiritual virtue, the text provides elderly parents dignified framework for adapting to changing family dynamics.

3. Critical Perspectives and Contextual Challenges

Economic Inequality

While philosophically sound, the transition from material to wisdom world may overlook that material security often enables spiritual practice. Many Thai elderly without pensions face financial insecurity. Elderly facing persistent financial pressures struggle to focus on spiritual development when fundamental needs remain unmet. Explicit acknowledgment of practicing under financial stress would strengthen applicability.

Psychological Transition Period

Identity formed over decades becomes deeply embedded. Rapid goal transformation from worldly to Dharma success may create unintended pressure. For those feeling they achieved inadequate worldly success, pursuing spiritual goals might intensify failure feelings. A gentler, graduated approach might benefit some elderly.

Cultural Interpretation of Equanimity

Thai family culture traditionally emphasizes interdependence and parental guidance. When recommending equanimity with adult children, this principle may clash with cultural expectations. Explicit guidance on communicating this balanced approach would strengthen application.

Social Interaction Dimension

The chapter emphasizes internal self-development. While this aligns with Buddhist teaching, social connection proves critical for elderly mental health. For many experiencing loneliness, social isolation represents more immediate problems. Integrating community service would strengthen applicability.

Benefits of the Book

Transformative Perspective on Aging

At individual level, the book transforms the question from "How to live after retirement?" to "How to use old age so life becomes complete?" This profoundly affects daily motivation and wellbeing. At societal level, it reframes demographic aging from crisis to opportunity, transforming elderly from burden to wisdom travelers.

Comprehensive Roadmap to Mental Freedom

Unlike texts offering either abstract philosophy or techniques without framework, this integrates both. The eight principles provide concrete roadmap addressing internal factors (mindset, mental states, wisdom) and external factors (family relationships, worldly conditions). Having such clear roadmap proves invaluable for elderly lacking clear paths toward spiritual goals.

Practical Guidance for Family Harmony

The teaching on equanimity offers concrete solutions to intergenerational conflicts. Three developmental levels provide specific guidance. By framing non-interference as spiritual practice rather than abandonment, it provides elderly parents dignity in stepping back while maintaining loving connection.

Integration of Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The text recognizes intimate bidirectional connection between physical and mental wellbeing. Practical techniques simultaneously address both dimensions. The emphasis on chanda aligns with contemporary research on successful aging.

Universal Relevance Across Life Stages

While written for elderly, the book speaks to everyone who will age. The principles represent wisdom applicable throughout life. The fundamental teaching that true happiness comes from internal development applies to all ages.

Conclusion

The chapter "Dharma for the Elderly" represents profound contribution to addressing aging. As Thailand approaches demographic transition by 2025, the work provides both practical guidance and philosophical framework.

The greatest achievement lies in revolutionary reframing: viewing retirement as "special opportunity for final self-development" rather than decline. This transforms aging from problem to opportunity, elderly from burden to wisdom travelers. By establishing truth-seeking as superior to conventional achievement, the text provides motivation transcending consolation.

The eight interconnected principles provide clear roadmap from adjusting perspectives to achieving complete happiness. The teaching on equanimity addresses common suffering sources. The emphasis on chanda directly addresses elderly losing will to live, shifting focus from fighting decline to cultivating mental-spiritual energy.

Critical analysis identifies important challenges enhancing the work's value. Economic inequality, psychological adjustment needs, cultural interpretations, and social interaction importance highlight areas for additional scaffolding. These identify contextual factors without invalidating Dharma principles.

The book's ultimate value lies in offering "roadmap to mental freedom" transforming fundamental aging questions. By changing "How to live?" to "How to use old age so life is

complete?" the text reframes aging profoundly. The teaching affirms that life's completion—defined by internal transformation rather than external achievements—is achievable for everyone seriously practicing these principles.

In conclusion, "Life's Morals: Dharma for the Elderly" fulfills its purpose of providing valuable guidance for Thailand's aging society. The analysis reveals work combining philosophical insight with practical applicability, traditional wisdom with contemporary relevance. While implementation challenges exist, the fundamental contribution remains: transforming how we understand aging, value wisdom, and organize lives to support what matters most, making it essential reading for anyone seeking to age with wisdom, dignity, and purpose

References

- Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Bizup, J., & FitzGerald, W. T. (2016). *The craft of research* (4th ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* (2nd ed.). Da Capo Press.
- Buettner, D. (2012). *The blue zones: 9 lessons for living longer from the people who've lived the longest* (2nd ed.). National Geographic Books.
- Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. (1997). *The four iddhipada: Power of success*. Dhammasabha.
- Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute. (2022). *Report on the situation of Thai elderly 2022*. Author.
- National Statistical Office. (2022). *Survey of elderly population in Thailand 2021*. Author.
- Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council. (2023). *National elderly plan no. 3 (2018-2037)*. Office of the Prime Minister.
- Payutto, P. A. (2007). *Buddhadhamma: Expanded edition* (13th printing). Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
- Payutto, P. A. (2010). *Charter of life*. Buddhadhamma Foundation Publishing House.
- Payutto, P. A. (2013). *Life's morals: Dharma for the elderly* (24th ed.). Sahathammik Company Limited.
- Virach Na Nakon, et al. (2016). *Thai families in the globalization era*. Chulalongkorn University Press.