

Letting Go - Lee Kuan Yew

Life is better than death. But death comes eventually to everyone. It is something which many in their prime may prefer not to think about. But at 89, I see no point in avoiding the question. What concerns me is: How do I go? Will the end come swiftly, with a stroke in one of the coronary arteries? Or will it be a stroke in the mind that lays me out in bed for months, semi-comatose? Of the two, I prefer the quick one.

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Some time back, I had an Advanced Medical Directive (AMD) done which says that if I have to be fed by a tube, and it is unlikely that I would ever be able to recover and walk about, my doctors are to remove the tube and allow me to make a quick exit. I had it signed by a lawyer friend and a doctor.

If you do not sign one, they do everything possible to prevent the inevitable. I have seen this in so many cases. My brother-in-law on my wife's side, Yong Nyuk Lin, had a tube. He was at home, and his wife was lying in bed, also in a poor shape. His mind was becoming blank. He is dead now. But they kept him going for a few years. What is the point of that? Quite often, the doctors and relatives of the patient believe they should keep life going. I do not agree. There is an end to everything and I want mine to come as quickly and painlessly as possible, not with me incapacitated, half in coma in bed and with a tube going into my nostrils and down to my stomach. In such cases, one is little more than a body.

I am not given to making sense out of life --- or coming up with some grand narrative on it --- other than to measure it by what you think you want to do in life. As for me, I have done what I had wanted to, to the best of my ability. I am satisfied.

An editorial team from The Straits Times comprising Han Fook Kwang, Elgin Toh, Zuraidah Ibrahim, Chua Mui Hoong and Shashi Jayakumar (an administrative Officer on secondment to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy) asked the questions below.

Q: You have said before that you consider yourself a nominal Buddhist. Would you still describe yourself as such?

A: Yes, I would. I go through the motions and the rituals. I am not a Christian. I am not a Taoist. I do not belong to any special sect.

Q: When you say "rituals", what do you mean?

A: On set days you've got to give offerings to your ancestors --- food and so on. All that is laid out by the servants. But it will go off after my generation. It is like clearing the graves during Qing Ming. With each passing generation, fewer people go. It is a ritual.

Q: *Where do you draw your comfort from, if not from religion?*

A: It is the end of any aches and pains and suffering. So I hope the end will come quickly. At 89, I look at the obituary pages and see very few who have outlived me. And I wonder: How have they lived? How have they died? After long illness? Incapacity? When you are 89 you will think about these things. I would advise that if you do not want to be comatose or half-comatose in bed and fed through a tube, do an AMD. Do not intervene to save life.

Q: *The number of people who do this in Singapore is still very low, for some reason.*

A: Well, because they don't want to face up to it.

Q: *Are you in favour of euthanasia, which some countries have legalised?*

A: I think under certain conditions where it is not used to get rid of old people and it is a personal decision of a man taken rationally to relieve himself from suffering, I would say yes, like the Dutch. So in my AMD, I am in fact saying: "Let me go."

Q: *If a grandchild of yours comes to you and asks you what a good life is, what do you say to him?*

A: I have grandchildren in their 20s. They don't ask me what a good life is. They know what it is. There's been a change in the physical world they live in, the people they meet, a change in generations and different objectives to what people do in life.

Q: *Are you saying that it is not possible to influence young people these days?*

A: No, you can influence the basic attitudes from the day they are born to about 16 or 17. After that --- sometimes earlier --- they have a mind of their own and they are influenced by what they see around them and by their peers.

Q: *You spoke about not believing you would meet your wife in the hereafter. Do you not hold out such a hope, even in your quieter moment? Is it not human to do so?*

A: No, it goes against logic. Supposing we all have a life after death, where is that place?

Q: *Metaphysical, perhaps?*

A: So we are ghostly figures? No, I don't think so.

Q: *How often do you think of Mrs Lee?*

A: I have an urn with her ashes and I have told my children to put my ashes next to hers in a columbarium, for sentimental purposes.

Q: *And hope?*

A: Not really. She's gone. All that is left behind are her ashes. I will be gone and all that will be left behind will be ashes. For reasons of sentiment, well, put them together. But to meet in afterlife? Too good to be true. But the Hindus believe in reincarnation, don't they?

Q: It is in the Hindu creed, yes.

A: If you lead a good life, you come out in a better shape in the next world. You lead a bad life, you become a dog or something.

Q: So do the Buddhists.

A: But they are not so sharp in their conceptions of the hereafter.

Q: Is your routine these days very different compared to when you were still in Cabinet?

A: Of course. The pressure is not there.

Q: But you are somebody who has always coped very well with pressure.

A: Well, the pressure of office means a decision has to be made. And when several decisions come at the same time, you've got to look at the questions carefully and decide. Once you have decided, you cannot backtrack. It is a different kind of pressure.

Q: Do you miss having that sort of pressure?

A: No, no. Why should I miss it? I have done my share.

Q: And would you say you miss attending Cabinet meetings, and the opportunity to interact with younger ministers?

A: No, I think the time has come for me to move on. I am 89. Compared to my world and the reference points that I have fixated in my mind, the map of Singapore --- the psychological map of Singapore --- has changed. I used to visit the housing estates. I used to know people from the residents' committees well. I interacted with them. I had a good feel of the ground. Now I do not have that. I have to go by reports, which is not the same thing. So I have to leave it to the people in charge who do go around.

Q: Do you regret the decision to step out of government shortly after the 2011 general election?

A: No. How can I carry on making decisions when I am losing the energy to make contact with people on the ground? It requires a lot of physical energy. The mental effort does not bother me because I have not had a stroke nor am I going into dementia. But I lack the physical energy. Before this interview, I had a light lunch, did my treadmill routine and then rested for 15 minutes. I did not need that in the past.

Q: So you have no unfinished business that you had wanted to...

A: No, I have done what I had wanted to do. I gave up my duties as prime minister to Goh Chok Tong. I helped him. He passed them on to Lee Hsien Loong. It is a different generation now. So my contributions are less meaningful --- except when they want to go back on dialects.

Q: How is your health, if I may ask?

A: I was recently hospitalised after experiencing what the doctors said was a transient ischaemic attack. But I have since recovered fully and have returned to work. If you take into account the fact that I am in my 90th year... the doctors have told me there is no benchmark for people of that age.

Q: You set the benchmark. So you are reasonably happy with your physical and mental state at the moment?

A: No, you have to accept the gradual decline in your physical abilities. So far the mental capabilities have not declined, which has happened to some of my friends. I am grateful for that. I think it is largely due to inherited genes. But the physical ageing --- you cannot stop it.

Q: Your mental faculties --- could that be due to your mental habits as well? You are someone who has kept himself mentally very occupied and interested in what is happening.

A: Yes, of course. And I keep on learning new words and phrases in Chinese, so that I am forced to. It is like playing mahjong.

Q: Have your dietary habits changed over the years?

A: Well, I no longer eat to my heart's content. I stop before I am full. I also try to eat more vegetables and less protein.

Q: At an interview with The Straits Times when you turned 80, you said one worry you had was the narrowing window that people who are ageing tend to have, and that it gets smaller and smaller, that would be the end of existence. Is that something that you still think about --- keeping that window open?

A: Yes. Otherwise I would be sitting alone. Why should I meet you and talk to you?

Q: Are you afflicted by loneliness sometimes?

A: You have to distinguish between loneliness and solitude. I had a friend who was one of the brightest students in Cambridge. He is dead now. His name was Percy Cradock. He had a wife who was Danish and had diabetes. She had lost two legs. Percy used to say: "I enjoy my solitude." And I said: "Get hold of the computer and go on Google. You can get all the poems that you have read and enjoyed, purple passages from works of literature. You just type in the keywords. It will come out." And he did.

Q: What newspapers or Internet sites --- do you read regularly?

A: I read *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobai*. I used to read *Berita Harian* also but now I don't. I used to be very good with my Malay but it is not necessary now that most Malays in Singapore speak English. I follow closely on the Internet news on Singapore, the region, China, Japan, Korea, America, India and Europe. The Middle East --- occasionally. Latin America --- almost zero, because it is not relevant to us. Too far away.

Q: What particular Internet sites?

A: Google. I prearrange for news from the various regions to be automatically passed on.

Q: What books or movies have you read or watched recently?

A: I do not watch movies.

Q: And books?

A: Usually I read biographies of interesting people. I am not attracted to novels --- make-believe, or recreations of what people think life should be.

Q: Any recent one that you enjoyed particularly?

A: One on Charles de Gaulle. France was lost. He was a nobody. He went to London and said: "I am France." And he went to Algiers and told Alphonse Juin, who had obeyed the Vichy government and was in charge there: "As a Marshal of France, you ought to be ashamed of yourself." That was a pretty bold man. And he walked back to Paris, of course, with the Allied troops having cleared the way for him.

Q: What are your foremost preoccupations these days? What are the things that keep you awake?

A: I think our changing population. With an overall fertility rate of 1.2 --- we have no choice but to take in migrants. It is difficult to get Singaporeans to change their mindsets. The women are educated. They want a different lifestyle, not to be stuck with early marriages and children. They want to travel first, see the world, enjoy life and marry later, by which time they will have trouble having children.

Q: Any hopes for Singapore?

A: Well, the hope is that it will keep a steady course and uphold all these institutions which make it different from the rest of the region.