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Path to Enlightenment

Meditation and Mindfulness in Health Care Lama Michel Rinpoche

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Introduction

Good evening. I would like first of all to say that I am very happy to be here today. And it's really a great honor to be together and to have this exchange. Because in a way it's something that shows us - to me and I think to all of us - that we are together following the same direction. Which is: what we want is the well-being of everyone. Which is the best way we can get to that.

But first of all I like to do a very short prayer that I do anywhere I go. And I'm not able to do it without this prayer. So that's my own meditation. It's a prayer that I do, it doesn't matter if I go to a school, if I go to a hospital, if I go to a congress or in a temple. It doesn't matter. Basically it's a prayer in which I remember my teachers and the teachers of my teachers. Because I believe that gratitude is so important. And if there is anything I can share with you, it is because someone has taught me. So, I like to make a very short prayer, the first part is in Tibetan and the second part in Sanskrit.

*lo chok sangpoi pel gyur trashi pa
thub chen ten pe trinle yar ngo da
pel gye dro lor tsam pe dze pa chen
pal den lame shab la sol wa deb*

OM AH GURU VAJRADHARA SUMATI MUNI SHASANE KARMA UHTA VARDANAYE SHRI
BADHRA VAR SAMANYA SARWA SIDDHI HUNG HUNG

*pa khyo kyi ku dang dag gyi lu
pa khyo kyi sung dang dag gyi ngag
pa khyo kyi tug dang dag gyi yi
don yer me chig tu jin gyi lob*



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*ma khyo kyi ku dang dag gyi lu
ma khyo kyi sung dang dag gyi ngag
ma khyo kyi tug dang dag gyi yi
don yer me chig tu jin gyi lob*

OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI SHAKYAMUNIYE SOHA

Suffering of body and mind

I like to start with a question. Because I believe first of all, that questions are more important than answers. Very often we don't get the right answers simply because we never make the right question. I'm very happy when I have a question that I actually cannot find an answer to. That's really something good. But the question, it's a very basic one, but very often we don't think about it - When do we need to take care of our health? When we are healthy or when we get sick? I believe the most important moment when we need to take care of our health is when we are healthy. When we are not healthy anymore, then we need to take care of the sickness, trying to bring us back to a state of health. So when we talk about healthcare, we shouldn't be talking only to the sick and thinking it's something that has only to do with those that are sick. I think first of all, for those that are sick they need to take care of 'sick care'. For those that are healthy, we need to take care of healthcare.

Sometimes there will be some confusion in this. How do we apply meditation, compassion, to our own healthcare? When we talk about suffering, which is a state of lack of health, basically it's when our body, our mind, is in a certain state that generates suffering to ourselves, that generates a sensation of not being comfortable with ourselves; or at the same time there are conflicts. Basically, we are not feeling well with the body and the mind.

We go to something that is mainly coming through our modern times, which is, if I ask to all of you: what suffering do you have more - physical or mental suffering? What do you have more? What do you think. Physical or mental? Mental suffering right? We have developed in our society quite a good way to deal with physical suffering. This is a sign that we are some sort of part of the very rich part of society of the world. We are in a rich part of the world. Like one of the masters of my master, he used to say, "Sufferings are of two types: physical and mental suffering. Poor people suffer mostly from physical suffering. Rich people suffer mostly from mental suffering. By the end of the day they suffer in the same way."

So what happens is that we have very strong patterns of mental suffering. We have anxiety, fear, sadness, anger and many other states of mind that generate this sensation of not being comfortable with myself. The question that comes to me is, "What to do?" Because actually one of the most powerful resources that exists in the world, I believe [it] is the mind. If we look at conflicts that exist in this world. If we look for example at the conflicts that exist within a couple, family, at work. If we look at the conflicts that exist in society, the conflicts that exist internationally. Where are all of them coming from? The mind. From selfishness, from aggression, from unlimited attachment, from dissatisfaction, from ignorance and so on. So basically they are coming from the mind.

On the other side, if we look at the great things that happen in the world and the people that were able to really make a change and help so many others and so on. Which was the resource that they used to do all of that? The mind.



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Inner science

There is one point that we need to understand about the mind. The mind can be trained. So what happens is that, not only can the mind be trained; the important concept is that the mind is constantly being trained, willingly or unwillingly. Every image I see, every sound I hear, every thought I have, every place I go, every person I meet, every experience I have is shaping myself and is shaping my mind. We don't have the choice to transform or not to transform. We are constantly transforming ourselves.

The question that comes is: do I want to transform myself consciously or unconsciously? Do I want to be a simple by-product of the information I receive from around? Or do I want to direct my mind in the way I want to familiarize it and train it? Because there are many things that worry me nowadays. (I think the things worry me nowadays, because I have no memory of other times. We worry about what happens now.) When I look at society, one of the things that I'm really a little bit worried about, which is connected to what we are talking today, is the fact that first of all when we talk about healthcare, we cannot only remain on the aspect of taking care of the symptoms. We must go to the causes.

I'm very happy with the beautiful work about mindfulness. It is so important to see how these methods can help us to deal with many of the symptoms. And at the same time we need to go... even starting from our own lives and understand which are the causes that will bring such an increase on problems with tension, anxiety, people with panic attacks and so on. The level of number of people that are having more and more mental disorders, like starting from anxiety or burnouts or stress and many other forms, and panic attacks and so on, from the little that I know, it is growing quite a lot. I've seen in Brazil it is growing a lot. I think in Europe also.

So, what does that mean? That we are doing something wrong in our lifestyle, in our daily way of living. There's something that we do in our life that is creating this stress level and this level of the unbalance of the mind. So we need to go look also at these causes.

When I talk about inner science, it is the aspect that - in Buddhism one of the most important aspects - is logic. Following logical understanding and following one's own experience, we analyze our own experience and our own reasoning and we compare that with others. That's basically how we follow. And there are some things, which for me, they worry me quite a lot. And I like to share it with you also, which is connected to that. Because... we can go on the part of mindfulness and explain the benefits of meditation and so on, but I like to focus also a little bit on the other part, which is the actions that we do which have an opposite effect. We live in a world nowadays, where we have more and more a very high level of sensory distractions. Whenever we take a text, a traditional text from Buddha or later, inside Buddhism that explains how to meditate - before explaining: sit down, this is the right position, focus on your breath and this and that and so on - the first thing that it says is, first of all eliminate the objects of distraction. Nowadays if we look, there is an addiction to distraction. How many people go to sleep with their phone in their hand? How many people wake up, and not even awake yet, go take the phone to check what has happened? Hopefully not many, but that's not the case very often. And most of the times when we go to look for information on the phone, on the news and so on, Facebook, whatever; what is the main reason why we go look for information most of the time? (I am generalizing, okay?) Why do we do that most of the time? Not because we are truly interested in something, but it is the simple pleasure of having some new information. There are many doctors here that can explain much better than me. From my very small understanding, whenever we have something new that appears at our mind, it gives a shot of pleasure. And this creates addiction.



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The amount of stimulation, sensory stimulation that we give to children all day, it's so violent. And what is happening is that we are taking our capacity away just to be by ourselves, our capacity just to listen to others, to go deeper into subjects, because we need to run more and more and more. We try to go faster and faster and finally we get nowhere. The metaphor that I see is like - there is the gymnastics. This place, the gym, where people go do exercises. And there are some days - there is one in San Paolo that I am always passing when I go to my mom's house - there is this glass wall and you see all these people running to go nowhere. For me this is a very clear metaphor of all the things we are doing. Because it is this attitude of getting more and more information, but not really to know anything. And very often we run, run, run, and we don't know really where we are going.

So what I want to say is that: Yes, we must deal with the symptom. And we are very fortunate, because there are many people doing this as we have seen in research. There are many people that are taking care of that and that's so beautiful and precious. But at the same time we must, each one of us - I am not talking generally speaking the whole society; each one of us - we must look and say, okay, I'm still healthy. Mentally, I'm not yet at the high level of anxiety. I am not yet with the burnout. But which direction am I going? Am I truly taking care of my own mental state or not? And meditation is basically an exercise for the mind.

Meditation techniques

In meditation, one of the things that is very important is that we have an object of meditation. *Gompe migyu* we call it in Tibetan, which is - some people call it - the anchor to which we connect the mind. And there is the ability that we have to focus the mind on that object and simply relax from distractions. To meditate is not a state of tension that we focus on something and we block... [indistinct]. It is the other way around; we need to relax from the distractions and let the mind just rest in one object. It can be observing the sensation of the body, it can be observing our own breath, there are many different ways.

One of the concepts of meditation that I just would like to take the advantage to bring here today, because I see that very often it is not so much spoken about, is the fact that meditation is a technique in which we self-induce ourselves, we induce ourselves to certain states of consciousness. Certain states of mind such as patience, love, concentration, wisdom. There are different states in which we can induce ourselves in order for that state of mind to gradually become natural and spontaneous. So there are meditations to develop more patience; there are meditations to develop more love; there are meditations to develop more humility; there are meditations to develop more generosity, satisfaction and so and so on. There are many techniques that in the same way, the same techniques, they go in order to help us to overcome and to go beyond the uncomfortable part, which is anger, jealousy, fear, miserliness and all of that that we were speaking of before, which creates our mental suffering. So for me, meditation is something that we should apply as a method. Not the day that we really need it because something is getting really bad.

Also because the eight-week course is something very powerful, but as we were talking before: it's not something that is enough, in our lifetime, to do eight weeks. It's something that we need to go on with. And it's like, for example if I have a certain health problem, okay I do a certain exercise or I take a certain medication, but let's talk about... change of diet for example. I change the diet for a certain period, it will help with the symptoms I have. But I need to continue to keep a healthy diet as I move along. In the same way meditation is like doing the exercise for one's own mind, and this is very, very important in order for us to keep a healthy state of mind.



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One of the basic aspects that comes together with meditation, before entering in any other type of meditation, is mindfulness itself. It is the ability just to place the mind into one specific object and let the mind rest there, instead of going into hundreds of different objects and the mind running up and down. It is our ability to direct our mind, to be present at the present moment, and this is something that I believe is very, very important for all of us.

A healthy mind

One of the things, which I try to do myself and I think that is important for all of us to do, even as a normal person or as a doctor (doctors are also normal persons), not necessarily [in regard to] the relation doctor-patient, is first ask yourself: what is a healthy mind? How would I want to be? What is a healthy mind? How do I want my mind to be in order to have a healthy state of mind?

I tell you something, which I believe; I think each one of us, we may get a little different results. Basically for me, a healthy mind is a mind that reacts positively to different stimulations and difficult moments. It is a mind that relates to the world in a coherent way; that does not expect things to be necessary different from what they are; that understands the mechanism in which we exist. It is a mind that at the same time is in a state of relaxation, in which we are comfortable with ourselves, and we are comfortable with the environment and the people with whom we are. A healthy mind is able to connect with others and generate empathy, sympathy, love. A healthy mind does not complain, but puts effort in the solution, instead of being blocked in the difficulty and the problem - because one thing is very clear - life is difficult. Or not?

There is one thought that came to my mind the last days and I have been saying it on different occasions. It's the following: When we say life is difficult. Is childhood easy? No. I was yesterday in a school and I asked the kids, they were already teenagers, "Is childhood easy?" They said, "No." Then, is the teenage easy? Sure not. Then entering into adulthood, finding a job, choosing a career, building up relationships, taking care of one's own livelihood and doing all of that and keeping that up and all of that. Is that easy? No. Is retirement easy? It is not, especially in a society that does not respect much the elderly. Is dying easy? Not really I think. Is being born easy? I don't think that's an easy process either. Life from birth to death is not an easy thing.

The main thing, which comes from this inner research of Buddha, is that: our goal is not to make life perfect. Our goal is not to create conditions around us in which everything will be just as I expected it to be. Our goal is to develop our own tools in order to relate to the world in a way that is so-called perfect. It is to deal with the different situations of life that come, which is normal and it has always been.

I've never met anyone whose life was only easy. But I have met many people that used the right tools how to deal with the difficult moments of life, in a way that they didn't enter into a whole turmoil of suffering and anxiety and so on. They knew how to use that condition in order to make a good use for themselves. So the point is not to have an... One time I was talking to a friend and my friend was saying, "Oh, it's not so easy, something," and he was saying, "But our life is not meant to be easy. It's meant to be meaningful."

Meditation as a tool

The point is that meditation is one of the tools - there are others also - that should help us to be able to have the strength, to deal better with the different situations that happen in our lives. We all are going to go through losses. We have been through many losses. We all are going to go through our health degenerating. Or not? We all go through different situations of material things, of conflicts within our relationships and all the rest. That's normal, that's life.



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So, the goal is not to create a life that is perfect, but to change the way how we relate to situations. And in order to be able to do that, the main resource that we do have is our own mind. And for that we may be able to take our mind, to take the reins of our mind like a horse and direct it. That's where mindfulness, that's where meditation comes in, to be able to help us to direct our own mind and don't let it completely loose.

So, having a metaphor as I see it: through meditation, through mindfulness and so on, the objective is to become like a very strong tree with deep roots - that when the wind comes, the tree feels the wind. It moves a little bit, but never goes out of its own place, which means the situations come, we feel the situations, but it doesn't take us out of our own emotional balance.

On the other side what happens very often is, we are not even like a tree without deep roots. We are like a small leaf in the wind; wherever the wind blows we go. So normally if we ask to a person, why are you happy? Because this or that happened. Why are you suffering?

Because this or that or that thing happened. So very often we have this idea that our mind, our inner state of mind, is the result of the world that is around us. We have this idea that if my mind is healthy or unhealthy - which means if I am suffering or not suffering, if I am in an inner state of well-being, or if I am with sadness or anxiety and so on - that has nothing to do with my mind. It has to do with the conditions around me. But the way we experience conditions, it depends on our own mind. One very simple way of understanding that, is that no one is able to perceive anything independently of oneself. The observer is one of the most important parts in the experience of reality. When I see you, somehow I'm seeing a reflection of myself. Is this concept clear? So what happens here is that if I am sick, if my mind is not well, I will see everything through that eye - and I will deal with situations in that way. If I have a mind that is more stable, that knows how to rejoice, that has more a strong basis of compassion, of connecting with others and so on, I will deal with the situation through that. This is one of the very important things that I wanted to bring. It's the fact - that based on what I learned and experience that I have, and following logics and so on - what we may call inner science, which in Buddhism, they have a very specific way. But now I'm not going into the whole process of logic, reasoning and experiencing through meditation and so on. We don't need to go through that. But if we go and we analyze ourselves in our own lives, which is I think the first thing that we need to do: how important is our mind, and what are we doing about it? It is our mind that determines the way we experience the world, and it is not the world that determines the way how our mind is.

It's clear this distinction? Sure, our mind is influenced by the world, I have no doubt of that. But the world in the way we live it, it's much more influenced by our mind.

Meditation takes effort

Meditation is one of the ways where we start to direct it and we learn to have this ability. And this is something that I think we really need to take seriously into consideration. But it's not something that comes easy. It's something that takes effort, something that needs constancy. You cannot meditate for one week, and then you do not meditate for three months, and then expect that you are at the same line as where you were three months before. It's not like that.

There is one story, which really shows this, which for me is very clear. It is about the importance of constancy. I was one time in Tibet going to see my teacher, Kachen Lobsang Puntsok Rinpoche, the abbot of Tashi Lhunpo monastery. A very respected person. I went there to see him. And as I went to his room - he lives on the fourth floor in a very old building with very difficult stairs to go up - as I was going there, in front of me there was a young monk carrying like twenty liters of water on his back. Going up all that stairs, quite difficult actually. He was doing it quite easily, because he was used to do it, but it were quite difficult



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steps. And what was that water for? Cleaning, washing, cooking, drinking, because they have no running water from a tap. Very old constructions, at least eight hundred years old constructions.

Then I asked my teacher, when I reached there, I said, "Oh Gen-la", that's the way how I call him and I said, "Please, why don't you put a tank? Bring a pipe up, you know, it's quite simple. The technology is here! Running water is there in the city. We could do it so easily with a very pragmatic mind. And the money is there, the monastery has the money to do it. Why not?" (Later I came to learn about one technical reason, but that could be overcome anyhow.) But he told me the following. He said, "Very simple reason. If the young monks do not learn to put effort and constancy in the most basic things of life such as having water, how will they later put constancy and effort in their meditation?" Because it doesn't come easy. There is no free lunch. Everything comes and needs constancy, and needs some effort. Why do I think that it's much more easy finally for people that get sick to meditate than people that are healthy? Because they have an incentive. Luckily, fortunately, we have so many researchers that are showing the benefit of that. So we finally say, okay, that's good. Let's do it. Why? Because I'm out of my comfort zone. Because I'm feeling sick. So I will do something to help me.

But we need to start doing it right now. We need to take care of our health from when we are healthy. So when do we need to meditate? When we get sick, or when we are well? When we are well! And most probably if we meditate correctly and we do it enough in a nice way, what will happen? We will prevent some sort of sicknesses also.

So, my conclusion from this is: Remember that the most powerful tool that we have is our mind and we must take care of it. And do it based on your own knowledge, your own logical reasoning, but mainly on your own experience. If you do something and you feel it is good for you then just continue. So try to meditate. If you see that it is good, do a few days course, eight weeks, whatever. If you feel that it's beneficial, then move on and do it. Because we need to keep that state of our own health. No one else can do it for us.



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