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## Power of the mind

The head of a lineage of Buddhism visits Oxford to discuss the role of mindfulness in the modern world, writes *Richard Lofthouse*.

### WATCH A VIDEO OF HIS HOLINESS THE GYALWANG DRUKPA IN CONVERSATION.

It's not every day that the head of a Buddhist sect brings an entourage of nuns to Oxford to perform kung fu on the lawn. The setting is Wolfson, the graduate-only college situated up the Cherwell from Lady Margaret Hall, north Oxford. On a cool, early spring day when mist rises around the Cherwell, reducing the sun to a pale disc, shaven-headed nuns fight mock battles across the neatly clipped lawns while college staff watch from a safe distance behind windows. It's an Oxford moment as only Oxford can.

One purpose of the display is to show that His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa, who heads the Drukpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, has made a quantum leap in gender matters, circumventing the weight of history by teaching nuns directly. Instead of teaching monks to teach nuns, he teaches nuns to teach monks. In Tibet, this is a revolution. For the purposes of the display at Wolfson, nuns practising a Chinese martial art symbolises the empowerment of women.

Another purpose of His Holiness' visit, which began that morning at Oxford's Mindfulness Centre, part of the Department of Psychiatry next to the Warneford Hospital, is to have an open discussion with the centre's founding director, Professor Mark Williams. Williams (St Peter's, 1970) is Professor of Clinical Psychology and Wellcome Principal Research Fellow at the University, and a world-leading authority on depression. The open forum was later described by Williams as "a great meeting of minds."

The incongruity of the head of a lineage of Buddhism visiting a centre whose research is funded by the Wellcome Trust and offers clinical services to the NHS, is not lost on me, because aren't we all taught that science and religion are basically at loggerheads with each other? What, I wonder to myself, is mindfulness, and how and why does it intersect with Buddhism?

As the discussion unfolds, I learn that mindfulness is based on ancient Buddhist practices with 'mindfulness' coming from the Pali word, 'sati', meaning 'awareness' or 'non-forgetfulness.' It is a western adaptation of an eastern practice. During the discussion between His Holiness and Professor Williams, the terms 'mindfulness' and 'meditation' are used interchangeably without any noticeable friction, although Williams later noted that the awareness that meditation cultivates is one of its central processes, but not the only one - an important qualification if we allow that all major religious traditions have had a meditative aspect, not just Buddhism.

Even more startling is the fact that science has come out on the side of these meditative practices dating back at least 2500 years. Instead of merely explaining the experience of it in terms of feelings, we now know why meditation works. In the UK, this is a revolution. First, it moves what is often perceived by mainstream media as a fluffy discussion of 'wellness' onto firm ground. Secondly, mindfulness (the clinical term is Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, MBCT) has profound implications for the treatment of depression.

Researchers studying people who regularly meditated found that not only did they feel happier but MRI scans of their brain patterns showed that this was reflected in the way the brain worked. There is a part of the brain's surface called the insula, which becomes more active during meditation. Over a longer period of time, regular meditation can actually alter the physical structure of the brain, according to research conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital. The insula happens to control many of the features that we regard as central to our humanity, such as empathy. Williams explains: "This part of the brain is integral to our sense of human connectedness as it gives us access to those body sensations that help to mediate empathy in a very real and visceral way."

The connection with depression is that empathy towards yourself, as well as others, has "hugely beneficial effects on health and wellbeing." It can free individuals from the narrowing, tunnel-like sensation that being depressed can bring.

One recent analysis, bringing together all the trials of MBCT for people who suffered three or more bouts of depression, found that those who had undergone an eight-week MBCT course were 44 per cent less likely to suffer another depressive episode.

So robust is the evidence underpinning it, that the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends MBCT for those who have suffered from such recurrent, depressive episodes.

Classic symptoms of people who experience unhealthy levels of stress include difficulty staying focused on what they are doing, constant tiredness, being preoccupied with the future or the past and rushing through activities without really paying attention to what they are doing.

In essence, Professor Williams' techniques train people how to focus on what is happening from moment to moment, in order to see more clearly the patterns of their mind and help them to develop focus, concentration and perspective.

A vital element is to respond kindly to what they find, rather than judging themselves harshly. "This takes practice and some gentle persistence, but it is possible," says Professor Williams.

"One of the things that people need when they are stressed is to find within themselves a place of stillness," he explains. "Mindfulness practice enables people to do this."



His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa in conversation with Professor Mark Williams, the founding director of Oxford's Mindfulness Centre (Photo: Dave Caudery)

His Holiness approaches the subject with a different, slightly more embracing vocabulary, but projects a common message. Reduce attachments to burning emotions; contain the ego; accept yourself, discover compassion. Whether we refer to it as Everyday Enlightenment, Walking the Path to Happiness in the Modern World (The Drukpa's recent book), or as Mindfulness:

A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World (Williams' recent book), the terrain overlaps hugely.

Above all, they both insist on action rather than debate. During the discussion with His Holiness, Williams jokes about the difference between reading about mindfulness and practising it. "I own all manner of books on gardening. Getting out there with a trowel and planting something is much harder!" In other words, meditation is an action. It is not just an idea. Therein lies the rub, because it is much harder to disengage from the torrents of everyday life than one might assume. Lighting up your insula takes a great deal of work and patience.

Another overlap concerns the increased pace of twenty-first century life - not a disavowal of the modern world at all, but an acknowledgement, as His Holiness puts it, that, "Our 'to do' lists are forever growing, our goals becoming bigger and more shiny than ever. When did life become a race?"

Still another shared view is that mindfulness is an action free of religion, unless the practitioner wants to endow it with religious significance - a position that confirms the privatisation of religious conviction in the modern world. This is where Buddhism is convenient for the west, because it wears its doctrine lightly in comparison to some of the monotheistic religions. His Holiness makes it clear that his mission is not evangelical. "Do not cut up compassion by the frame of religion," he warns. "You guys look at me as a religious leader because of my robes, that's very unfortunate!...It's a shame, all religions are in a problematic space these days..."

Colin Thubron's best-selling *To a Mountain in Tibet* or Thomas Laird's incomparable *The Story of Tibet*, indicate that there is a world of religious complication and opportunity (depending on your point of view) that is being swept aside here. Laird betrays incredulity at some of the magical aspects of Buddhism while talking to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, while Thubron cannot bring himself to dissolve the individual soul in the face of what is an essentially nihilistic philosophy.

Take the following sequence from Thubron. He meets a genial young monk called Tashi, three years into his studies. Tashi "refused to call it [Buddhism] a philosophy, still less a faith. 'We have no God.'"

Thubron continues:

"The gods were only guides to the enlightenment that would erase them. His arms unfolded impotently from his chest, trying to explain. 'I think it is a science. Anyone can do it. I think you can do it.'"

Thubron muses:

"I tried to imagine this, but the wrong words swam into my mind: rejected life, self-hypnosis, the obliteration of loved difference. Premature death... But tantrism was a way to be lived, Tashi said, not a doctrine to be learnt. You could not know it until you experienced it. Though by then, perhaps, it would be too late to return."

There are yet other complications, such as the question of why 2500 years of mindfulness did little to empower women.

Yet despite these queries, the Gyalwang Drukpa has obviously digested the west as much as the west is toying with the east, and the message is delivered with a wonderfully composed sense of happiness.

Later, when he speaks to a different audience at Wolfson, the 'non-NHS, non-science audience' if you like, he talks about the success of his Pad Yatra, a 400-kilometre walk through the Himalayas that took 42 days, conducted in a blaze of media publicity, three years ago. He talks about positive karma purifying negative as a consequence of the walk; of the fact that a third of the world's population rely on the Himalayan watershed flowing down into India and China, and thus the importance of planting trees and clearing litter; about female emancipation, and education.



(Photo: Dave Caudery)

He's not trying to make any of us into Buddhists, insisting that the Pad Yatra is not a pilgrimage, but a way of re-connecting with nature, including our own.

Williams, an honorary canon at Christ Church, talks about mindfulness as 'secularised spirituality.' "It's the wisdom of universal values," he says. "They [the values] are not to be buried in a cathedral or a temple or a monastery. But equally, they are not easy to implement. It takes effort." In his book he strives to keep the distinction. "Meditation is not religion". He continues: "Mindfulness is a mode of awareness that is available to us all, and the 'mind and body training' of meditation helps us to get out of our own way to realise it."

This helps to better explain the Drukpa's organisation Live to Love, which is described on its website as a "secular, humanitarian organisation." The five pillars of Live to Love are environmental protection, emergency relief, medical aid, education and heritage preservation, with active projects in each category. The educative element partly explains his courtesy visit to the University, while the organisation already has an international dimension.

The nuns are finishing their display on Wolfson's lawns in 2012. Globalisation is here to stay, and it has a positive aspect. Making our way inside for some tea, I ask one of the nuns, Jigme Rigzin, why they took up kung fu. "We were experiencing problems of laziness," she explains. "Ah, I see," I reply. "So there is a hard, physical counterpart to meditation?" "Yes", she says.

## Video of of His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa in conversation with Professor Mark Williams.

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