

PLS WEBINAR

REPORT

Mental Well-being

Saturday, 12 December 2020

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Introduction

The sixth webinar by Pallavan Learning Systems was held on 12 December 2020. The webinar sought to elaborate on the understanding of mental well-being both from the perspectives of science and spirituality. The webinar was moderated by Dr. Saroj Thapa from Pallavan Learning Systems. The speakers included Dr. Monisha Akhtar, a licensed child, adolescent, and adult psychologist/psychoanalyst and Geshe Lhakdor, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar and author who works closely with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. The webinar comprised more than 100 active participants and 200 live viewers.

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Science and Spiritual Perspectives

The webinar commenced with Geshe Lhakdor providing an explanation of Buddhist philosophy of health. From a Buddhist perspective, health is mostly taken care of by doing things that are congenial and suitable to the individual. Its worldview is wholistic and is primarily based on a belief in the interdependence of all phenomena and a correlation between mutually conditioning causes and effects. This belief is formulated by the principle of dependent origination, also referred to as the law of causality, with the causal nexus operating in all phenomena - physical, psychological, and moral. In the physical realm, all things in the universe are intimately interrelated as causes and effects without beginning or end. And the world is an organically structured world where all of its parts are interdependent. Similarly, in human society every component is interrelated. The same is also found in the psycho-physical sphere, in which the mind and the body are not separate units but an interdependent part of the overall human system. The main problem today is not the pandemic but the fear in our minds. We need to prepare an outlook in tandem to reality and how really things are rather than fabricated to overcome this.

Physical health is viewed by Buddhism as constituted by the normal functioning of the body and its organically interrelated organs. When one of them fails to function, debility and disease set in. Geshe La also referred to a saying of Nagarjuna that ‘a person who always eats congenial food, will never get sick in terms of physical health’. The normal function of the organs in the body is the result of the harmony and equilibrium of the four primary elements i.e. earth, water, wind, and fire. If the balance is disturbed, the normal function is disrupted and a state of disease appears. Curing is the restoration of this balance, which requires putting the entire physical being, and not just the pathologically afflicted part, into good condition. Ignorance, hatred and attachment are on the other hand three evils that must be avoided to maintain a healthy balance.

According to Buddhism, for the mind to be healthy, first it is necessary to develop a correct view of the world and ourselves. It is a realistic acceptance of the three traits of existence: seeing Permanence instead of Impermanence, seeing Independence instead of Interdependence, and seeing the Whole instead of Parts. The adoption of the wrong views makes us see the transitory as permanent, the painful as happy, the impure as pure, and what is not self as self. Consequently, we crave and struggle for the illusory permanent and identical self, which leads to disappointment. By accepting things as they really are, which is nothing more than a complex of psycho-physical

elements, the mind no longer strives for the satisfaction of self-seeking impulses nor clings to objects. As a result, the mind is at rest and thereby psychological suffering is eliminated resulting in improved mental health.

Dr. Monisha Akhtar highlighted that science on the other hand indicates that children grow and develop rapidly in their first five years across the four main areas of development - physical, communication and language, cognitive and social and emotional. Social and emotional development are reflected in how children start to understand who they are, what they are feeling, and what they expect when interacting with others. The balanced state of mind and body is the ultimate aim of mental-well-being.

Positive social and emotional development of the child is very important. Meaningful development in these areas influences a child's self-confidence, empathy, the ability to develop meaningful and lasting friendships and partnerships, and a sense of importance and value to those around him/her. The social and emotional development of the child also influence all other areas of development. Parents play the biggest role in social and emotional development because they offer the most consistent relationships for the child. Consistent experiences with family members, teachers and other adults help children learn about relationships and explore emotions in varied interactions. Environmental challenges also add to it.

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The Pandemic and Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide. It cannot be solved quickly and to resolve such an issue, one needs to have a wider perspective of human life. From a Buddhist point of view, the physical body itself is susceptible and vulnerable to all kinds of illnesses and the so-called happiness which we try to achieve is not from the body but from an external source for temporary pleasures. The fragility of the body must be understood to value it and protect it. COVID-19 is surely the source of illness during current times but there have been different kinds of pandemics in our society throughout history.

The use of anger was a key takeaway of the discussion. Whether to use it productively or realise the need to destroy it, is upon the individual, society or the world. The similar could be used to analyse for ignorance and attachment. The panelists agreed that this is particularly worrisome because it comes at a time when the world is witnessing a surge in mental health issues, manifested in a myriad ways. What man truly desires is happiness, which implies mental satisfaction and not necessarily the body. However, the body is given far more attention, which has a market of its own and the importance of mind takes a backseat. A long term solution to this would be to cut off our negative behaviour. Our behavioural relation must change towards all living beings. A balanced way of life is the way ahead in this regard.

The circumstances that lead to an imbalanced life have an important role to play - the traumatic events for instance. People have all kinds of emotions - good and not so good feelings in the mind. Actions, on the other hand, have to be thought about and be purposeful and intentional. Early child development requires a stable environment, adequate nourishment, basic discipline and routine and also physical exercise. In the present scenario, the social interaction has been interrupted and the hybrid or online learning has taken its place. The threshold of resilience is being tested for quite some time now. The ongoing pandemic has been challenging globally and has forced many to consider different ways to approach their jobs. The impact on family due to job losses and economic downturn has been immense and marriages are becoming fragile. When people are afraid, emotions lead to actions often negative in nature.

Developing a coping mechanism, both at an individual level and at a social level, is essential. It was advised that doing things that bring balance to one's life, for example cooking with family members or meditating are good coping mechanisms. Having a sense of purpose in life and caring and sharing with others are also important. Children need a stable environment - a routine, such as exercising and time for socialising with other children. They require a structure with flexibility, factoring in playtime and virtual gatherings during the current situation. For the elderly, it is family support that gives them a sense of security and helps them to cope.

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Way Forward

How do we reach and maintain the balance? This is very challenging but depends on the individual and their life story. How you respond to stress during the COVID-19 pandemic can depend on your unique situation - your social support from family or friends, your financial status, your health and emotional background, the community you live in, and many other factors. From an adult's perspective, it is pertinent to have a structure. Families depend on discipline and routine and a defined structure helps the process. However, it need not be rigid. Juggling work and home priorities is not easy but having an end time to your day gives everyone structure and allows you to unplug. Play (both for children and adults) is an important part that tends to be often ignored. Family time is equally time. It is advisable to avoid a schedule for children which is over-focused on literacy.

The pandemic has alarming implications for individual and collective health, and their emotional and social functioning. It is sometimes necessary to cut off oneself from the news since outside information can compromise the relevance of internal information. Group activities can really help in this situation. Separately, gratitude and empathy are wonderful virtues, especially in such uncertain times. Gratitude can also be a part of growing resilience in oneself. The concept of 'care and share' is a great step towards this direction. These are the times that people should stick to each other.

There is no quick fix solution to a problem like Covid-19 pandemic. It requires time and patience and hence it is very important to build on resilience for one's protection and survival. As an immediate step towards a solution, we must combine the head and the heart - and this can be in the form of education. Education can be a powerful tool in addressing all vices in society. Also, we need to realise that compassion is the other glue which brings all mankind together. The solution we come up with must be wholistic and directed towards having a balanced life.

A Synthesis by Pallavan Learning Systems

Mental Well-being

Thinking of yourself is essential but one must think of fellow beings too. A good combination of selflessness and self-importance is the key to a balanced life. The pandemic has created a new awareness in many people regarding the importance of slowing down and maintaining a healthy balance between our bodies and our minds. Discussions on mental health have been considered unimportant for the longest time and now it is gradually becoming an ice-breaking conversation. However, there is still ample space to work on and people still have to make an effort to internalize the importance of mental well-being.

The new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues take time to get used to. Adapting to lifestyle changes such as these, and managing the fear of contracting the virus and worrying about people close to us who are particularly vulnerable, are challenging for all of us. We need to acknowledge that the sense of security always comes from family and relationships.

Anything is possible in life. No one thought a pandemic could occur again as the last one took place 100 years ago. The degree of impact of this uncertainty depends on how we maintain our mental well-being and the balance. The effort towards withstanding such uncertainties should start from very early in life. In light of this, it is pertinent to infuse education with compassion and positivity. The long term solution should always be about preparing the younger generation.

Depression and other mental health issues have become rampant with lockdowns and social distancing. Irrespective of age, any individual suffering from depression requires professional help. Trained support needs to be the ultimate option for crisis management. Psychologists have long recognized that anxiety is a normal and healthy function that alerts us to threats and helps us take measures to protect ourselves. However, if the anxiety becomes acute and hampers our daily functioning, then we must seek professional help. While scientists and public health officials race to find treatments and develop a vaccine, it is clear that every person needs to adopt a strategy of prevention and to optimize their ability to recover. Practices that help us stay calm, positive, hopeful and empathetic should become a part of our daily life in order to enjoy mental wellbeing.

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To watch the video of the webinar please [click here](#).

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