

ON A QUEST TO LEARN:
A series on the evolving nature of one's learning journey

Harmony of Head & Heart

with Venerable Geshe Lhakdor

17th February 2024

Webinar Report



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INTRODUCTION

On February 17th, 2024, Pallavan Learning Systems hosted its 13th webinar, centered around the theme of 'Harmony of the Head and Heart' in association with Ritinjali and Centre for Escalation of Peace. The event seamlessly blended physical presence at the PLS office with a vibrant online audience, featuring Geshe Lhakdor, a renowned Buddhist philosopher, as the focal point of a spirited dialogue.

The webinar provided a profound exploration into the multifaceted realms of education, societal structures, and conflict resolution. Various topics were meticulously dissected, shedding light on essential principles crucial for navigating today's complex world.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Venerable Geshe Lhakdor is a distinguished Buddhist scholar who served as the English translator for His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, from 1989-2005. He studied Buddhist philosophy extensively, earning master's degrees from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics and Delhi University.



Geshe Lhakdor has co-authored several books with the Dalai Lama. He holds honorary professorships at the University of British Columbia and the University of Delhi's Department of Psychology.

As the Director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Geshe Lhakdor facilitates the Science for Monks programme and shares his scholarly expertise. He also directs the Central Archive of His Holiness, serves on the Advisory Board of the Institute of Tibetan Classics, and is Chairman of the Education Commission of the Central Tibetan Administration.

OVERVIEW

The webinar covered a wide range of topics related to education, societal structures, and conflict resolution. Geshe Lhakdor, emphasised the importance of morality, concentration, and wisdom in education, as well as the significance of love, compassion, kindness, and self-care. The conversation also touched on the impacts of Covid-19 on children's education and social interactions, the roles of different societal structures on parenting and education, and the role of good people in times of conflict.

EDUCATION AND HARMONY

Geshe Lhakdor shared his insights on education based on Buddhist philosophy, emphasising that it is primarily rooted in morality, concentration, and wisdom. He stressed the importance of morality, which he described as the foundation that breeds positive qualities and restrains negative deeds. He also highlighted the need for education to focus on helping others and living happily, peacefully, and harmoniously.

CONCENTRATION, EDUCATION, AND COMPASSION IN COVID TIMES

Geshe highlighted the significance of concentration in education and life, expressing concern over the current teaching system's shortcomings and the impact of

distractions on individuals' abilities. He stressed the need for individuals to focus and become experts in at least one field. Geshe also emphasised the importance of inner resources such as love, kindness, and patience, particularly in dealing with challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic. He criticised political leaders for a lack of concern and compassion and suggested they could learn from India's handling of the pandemic. He highlighted the unique features of human beings, such as the capacity to judge and analyse, and emphasised the need to teach children not to follow anything blindly. Geshe expressed concern over the misuse of human intelligence, specifically in the development and stockpiling of atomic weapons, and called for a mass movement to minimise global problems.



CALL FOR LOVE AND ACTION ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Geshe stressed the significance of love, compassion, and kindness, and the benefits of helping others. He noted the problems in the world, particularly environmental degradation and pollution, caused by human actions. He criticised the idea of unlimited growth from limited resources and suggested that these issues cannot be solved by science or religion, but by human beings themselves. Geshe emphasised the need for education to foster positive change within individuals and highlighted the importance of individuals and the government taking action to address issues such as pollution in Delhi.

HYPOCRISY, SELF-CARE, AND EDUCATION

The webinar discussed the prevalence of hypocrisy and double-speak, with a focus on the negative implications of such behaviours, particularly among leaders. Geshe emphasised the importance of self-care and extending that care to others, highlighting that everyone seeks happiness and avoids suffering. He stressed the need to understand the reality of life and death and avoid discriminatory behaviours. Geshe expressed concern over the increasing aggression, resentment, and anger among people, particularly children, and suggested that a proper system of education that includes teaching moral questions is necessary to address these issues. He also shared his experiences of giving talks in Mumbai and Vancouver, where he emphasised the need to challenge idealised notions of life.

LIFE'S REALITIES AND EDUCATION'S SHORTCOMINGS

Geshe stressed on the importance of understanding life's realities such as aging, sickness, death, and separation, and the negative impacts of anger. He criticised the

education system's inability to prepare children for these realities and highlighted the need for balance and discipline. The importance of self-reflection was emphasised, with theatre as a medium for enabling self-reflection being discussed. The impacts of Covid-19 on children's education and social interactions were also discussed, with an emphasis on the negative consequences of overcompensation. The discussion focused on the roles of different societal structures, particularly the implications of capitalism and socialism on parenting and education.

LIFE, DEATH, AND HAPPINESS

Geshe Lhakdor discussed the inevitability of grief in life and shared his strategy for coping with it, emphasising the importance of accepting reality and living in the present. He highlighted the concept of the mind's immortality and the need for preparation for death to bring contentment. Geshe also shared his views on education, stressing the importance of understanding oneself and the world to navigate life's challenges. He criticised the role of scientists who create technology without taking responsibility for its consequences and highlighted the influence of the environment on individuals, particularly children. Geshe stressed the crucial role of the mind in controlling our lives and its potential for happiness and harmony through fine-tuning. He also touched upon the mind's role in the scientific and technological realms, questioning the separation of mind and brain. Geshe discussed the pursuit of long-lasting happiness and the role of negative emotions in promoting it. He emphasised the need for self-reflection in the contemporary world and the importance of taking responsibility for change in their lives and communities. The webinar concluded with a discussion on the role of good people in times of conflict and the importance of highlighting positive aspects and values in India.

OBSERVATIONS

A member of the audience, expressing concern, brought up the extensive research conducted at Harvard University regarding the significance of addressing inequalities. They stressed the importance of instilling values, lamenting a perceived trend of coddling children in recent decades. There seemed to be a consensus that contemporary society often shies away from confronting children about their mistakes, a departure from earlier, stricter disciplinary practices. The question posed was why there is apprehension about being candid and forthright with children, juxtaposed with historical methods that were notably severe.

Another attendee chimed in, lamenting the lack of emphasis on self-reflection within the educational system. They observed that modern education tends to focus predominantly on external knowledge, neglecting the inner realities that shape a child's worldview. This absence of inner reflection was seen as a significant deficiency in current educational approaches.

A participant offered a theory regarding the reluctance to expose children to harsh realities, attributing it partly to the increased participation of women in the workforce. The guilt associated with not being present for their children may drive parents to overcompensate by spending excessive time with them. However, this approach, while well-intentioned, may not be conducive to healthy child development, as children also require space for independent growth away from parental influence.

Another audience member interjected, asserting that a child's environment, including genetic predispositions, plays a crucial role in their development. They argued that education is not solely about what one tells a child but rather the environment in which they are raised, be it through travel experiences, community dynamics, or social

interactions. This perspective highlighted the multifaceted influences that shape a child's worldview beyond traditional educational settings.

The discourse then delved into the broader societal implications of parenting styles, particularly contrasting capitalist and socialist perspectives. In capitalist societies like America, educational policies often prioritise fostering individual creativity and innovation, with an emphasis on nurturing potential "geniuses" who could make significant economic contributions. This contrasts with socialist frameworks, where societal welfare and community cohesion may take precedence over individual achievement. The dialogue emphasised the complex interplay between parenting philosophies, educational policies, and broader societal values in shaping the future generation.



Q&A

Q. An online participant asked, "Grief comes in various degrees, but how to manage the utmost grief for good inner peace for a healthy life?"

A. "As I've been discussing, many of life's problems, including grief, arise from our failure to grasp the broader perspectives of nature and existence. When we're deeply connected to our family and friends, particularly those we love romantically, we often harbour the illusion of eternal togetherness. But this perception is flawed. We should start by acknowledging the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death. By cultivating kindness and compassion from the outset, we can lead our lives with greater harmony and fewer regrets.

Think about the early stages of a relationship; everything feels blissful. You don't need extravagant gestures; simply being in each other's presence is enough. During the honeymoon phase, love permeates every interaction, and you feel like you're walking on air. However, as time passes, familiarity may breed contempt, leading to less pleasant exchanges and occasional unkindness. Yet, when faced with loss, genuine care and concern emerge. It's as though we suddenly remember what truly matters. I understand this might sound intense, but it's a common trajectory in life.

As the Buddha wisely advised, we shouldn't squander our time on trivial matters. Instead, make every moment count when you're together. Show appreciation, cherish each other, and treasure the time you have. These are the things that truly hold significance in the grand scheme of things.

Let your actions be virtuous, so that when your loved one passes, you have no regrets, only acceptance. Understand that parting is inevitable. If you wish to avoid parting,

then abstain from forming attachments in the first place. These are fundamental truths about reality.

The most crucial aspect is understanding that grieving, while natural, is not a solution. During a recent talk, I was asked if I'm genuinely happy despite the world's suffering. I responded affirmatively, explaining that my happiness doesn't solve global issues, but it allows me to be in a position to offer assistance.

It's imperative to comprehend the laws of nature, seeing reality from a broader perspective and embracing it rather than resisting. Our current attitudes toward death, manifested in medicalisation and taboo, stem from a lack of understanding. Death is not something to fear but to comprehend. It's merely a transition, a natural part of life's cycle.

Scientifically speaking, our bodies undergo complete regeneration every seven years, essentially rendering us new individuals. Yet, we often fail to acknowledge this constant process of change. By accepting the inevitability of death, we can cultivate contentment, reduce greed, and find peace in the transient nature of existence."

Q. A student from the audience said, "I want to take this whole conversation that we're having so far to an entirely new different perspective, not as a teacher, as an educator, but as someone who's consuming this education as a student. So as a primary student, then as a high school student, and now, as a college student, I've come to realise that the mark of a true educationist, a mark of a true education, and someone who's consuming this education as a learner comes from the fact that they understand themselves. They know themselves better. But something that has been bothering me so far is that I don't really know the steps toward this understanding of self. I don't have a proper tip or proper advice for someone who wants to start this journey. So,

do you have any methods that can take you towards those journeys of learning yourself better to understand your individual 'self' better?"

A. "You know, it's crucial to understand not just individual actions but the whole law of nature, including understanding other people and the upheaval of emotions that we all experience. Dealing with these emotions effectively is key to achieving transformation. One thing that's absolutely essential is integrity. Without it, we're at the mercy of external influences, tossed around like leaves in the wind. The challenge we face today, especially with education, is the overpowering influence of the environment. Children are heavily influenced by technology, what they see on TV, and their peers. Unfortunately, science and technology, which have their merits, often contribute to this problem. Scientists create technology and then hide behind it, allowing society to play with these toys without fully understanding their implications. Our minds are constantly drawn to sensory objects, which leads to a superficial existence. We're surrounded by materialism, filling our lives with gadgets and distractions, neglecting the deeper aspects of our consciousness. But it's essential to recognise the power of the mind. It's our true boss, directing our actions and decisions. Yet, many people struggle to understand or define the mind, despite its undeniable influence. During a meeting I attended, scientists and Buddhist teachers debated whether the brain or the mind does the thinking. But ultimately, what matters is that we can change our mindset for the better. So, rather than solely relying on formal education, we must broaden our approach, educating everyone we interact with, especially parents and teachers. They play a pivotal role in shaping moral values. Love and compassion should permeate our society, instilled by parents, reinforced by teachers, and embraced by all. When these qualities are ubiquitous, positive traits naturally flourish. Ultimately, it's about fostering a culture where care and kindness are the norm, creating a society where everyone can thrive."

Q. An observation was made by a member of the audience: "You mentioned the desires we have. So these desires that we have are also a manifestation of what is in the universe that doesn't come from nowhere. As Buddhism says, everything is within and without. So that is the first thing. The second thing is, as far as I understand, certain streams of Buddhism believe that these earthly desires are basically a ladder to our own salvation. Without these earthly desires our own instinct or our own seeking spirit would not be there. So they have a positive impact on the human psyche as well as what you have already said, because without the earthly desires. This universe, as we know it, would not exist."

A. "Number one, the whole purpose of our discussion here is whether we truly want long-lasting peace and happiness. It's a question we need to ask ourselves sincerely. If we're aiming for enduring fulfilment, then we have to consider whether emotions like anger, desire, and jealousy really contribute to that goal. It's not just about their universality or origin; it's about whether they serve our ultimate purpose of achieving lasting happiness. When we talk about happiness, we're not talking about fleeting pleasures; we're talking about something deeper and more enduring. Whenever I begin my teachings, I always start by asking people if they want happiness, and without fail, everyone says yes. But then I follow up with another question: How many days of happiness do you want? That's when people start to realise that they want happiness for as long as possible, regardless of their religious beliefs. So, if we're serious about attaining that long-lasting happiness, we have to question whether negative emotions like anger and attachment can truly provide it. From a Buddhist perspective, it's clear that these negative emotions won't lead to lasting fulfilment. Some might argue that anger is necessary in today's society, equating it with strength and power. But the truth is, we can cultivate far more potent forms of energy and strength without relying on anger. We also need to be mindful of how we use terms like desire and attachment. While English might treat them similarly, in Buddhist

philosophy, there are distinctions between positive and negative forms of desire. Ultimately, clarity in understanding these concepts is essential if we're to cultivate genuine peace and happiness in our lives."

Q. A member of the audience asked, "Geshe, as you rightly mentioned, it is self-reflection that we need in the contemporary world as human beings. But, sir, in the contemporary world we are being bombarded with constant influences from around us through social media and other processes. I think that these influences also lead to a lack of personal agency, or free will. So my question is, in this current state of the world, how can we regain or develop that sense of personal agency and free will in order to achieve or walk the path of enlightenment?"

A. "You know, if we truly want to align ourselves with the majority, then the destination is often where everyone else is heading - the place of conformity. But what I'm really emphasising here is the importance of maintaining total integrity based on our convictions, studies, and understanding. Even if something wrong is widely accepted, if we know it's wrong, we should have the courage to stand against it. This is how true leadership is born - by inspiring others through our integrity. As Martin Luther King once said, 'I'm not saddened by the actions of bad people, but by the silence of good people.' So, while it's disheartening to witness injustice, it's our responsibility to speak up and take action. Yes, there are many challenges, but it's not all bleak. For instance, if we focus solely on the negative aspects of society, we overlook the countless acts of kindness and compassion happening every day. We need to highlight the good as much as we acknowledge the bad. India, for instance, has rich cultural values and philosophies that often get overshadowed by superficial entertainment. We should celebrate and promote these positive aspects. Love and forgiveness should be emphasised more than anything else. If we keep emphasising these values, gradually, people will shift towards a more compassionate direction.

Regarding the question of free will and determinism, it's a complex issue often attributed to karma in Buddhism. Karma is not fatalistic; it's about the consequences of our actions, past and present. Despite the influence of past actions, we still have the freedom to shape our future through our choices. So, in conclusion, let's remember that change starts with us. We must take responsibility for creating a better world, not just in education but in every aspect of our lives, our communities, and our families."



SUMMARY

On February 17th, 2024, Pallavan Learning Systems hosted its 13th webinar, centered around the theme of 'Harmony of the Head and Heart' in association with Ritinjali and Centre for Escalation of Peace. The event seamlessly blended physical presence at the PLS office with a vibrant online audience, featuring Geshe Lhakdor, a renowned Buddhist philosopher, as the focal point of a spirited dialogue.

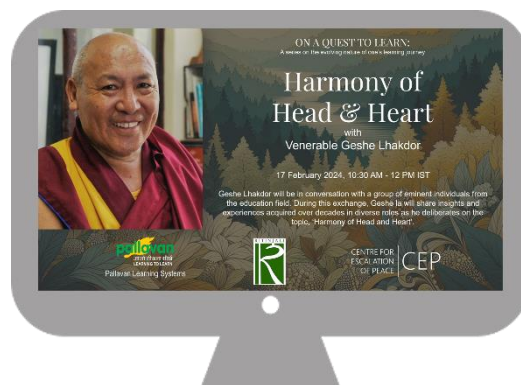
The webinar provided a profound exploration into the multifaceted realms of education, societal structures, and conflict resolution. Various topics were meticulously dissected, shedding light on essential principles crucial for navigating today's complex world.

Geshe Lhakdor focused on the foundational role of morality, concentration, and wisdom in education, drawing upon Buddhist philosophy to advocate for nurturing positive qualities and ethical conduct. He emphasised the imperative of cultivating love, compassion, and self-care, particularly amidst contemporary challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, urging for a harmonious blend of empathy and action to address pressing global issues.

Additionally, the discussion addressed practical implications for societal structures and education systems, critiquing prevailing hypocrisies within leadership spheres and advocating for moral questioning and self-reflection to promote individual well-being. The webinar also touched upon the realities of life, including aging and sickness, emphasising the necessity for balanced education to prepare individuals for life's inevitable challenges.

Geshe's insights extended beyond philosophical musings to practical considerations for fostering societal change, stressing the importance of collective responsibility and action in addressing environmental degradation and social inequalities. He emphasised integrating mindfulness practices into education to promote emotional resilience and ethical decision-making.

As the webinar concluded, Geshe delved into coping mechanisms for grief and the pursuit of long-lasting happiness, highlighting the transformative potential of self-awareness and compassionate action. The session served as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between education, societal structures, and individual well-being, resonating as guiding beacons in our collective pursuit of harmony and progress.



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