



**The Janki Foundation**  
for Spirituality in Healthcare

## The Psychology of Meditation: Research and Practice

With Professor Michael West and Sister Jayanti

The Janki Foundation Annual Lecture, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2016, GCH, LONDON

### FULL REPORT

A warm welcome was extended to everyone present (240) and those also joining online (50-60) by MC consultant psychiatrist, **Dr Sarah Egger**, who noted that meditation is an ancient art and modern skill, and has been practised across time and cultures in human society. Sarah introduced the Janki Foundation (JF) and emphasized how spirituality and healthcare is at the heart of this charity's message... *'the way we are as souls has a profound impact on our body' and that a core activity of JF has been to promote meditation as a tool in helping healthcare professionals deal with the rigours of delivering care in the healthcare systems of today.*

Healthcare professional and poet **Dr Rachna Chowla** spoke an eloquent poem on the interconnectedness of existence, ending with a challenge: *Come and see and live out of your own story's mask!*

Sarah noticed how *'there is often the sense of parallel lives and somehow through our different endeavours we are coming together'*, before introducing the key-note speaker, **Professor Michael West, Senior Fellow at The King's Fund and Professor of Organisational Psychology at Lancaster University Management School** who lectures internationally on reflexivity, meditation, mindfulness and leadership and whose recent passion is how leaders can provide compassionate leadership in healthcare settings. He has authored, edited and co-edited 25 books including 'The Psychology of Meditation: Research and Practice' (2016).

**For the next 30 mins Professor Michael West presented a scholarly synopsis, back up with much evidence, on how meditation and mindfulness are being integrated throughout many areas of life, not just healthcare, as a life enhancing and powerful tool to manage pain and support healing and relief from so many types of human sorrow.**

Before starting Professor Michael expressed his gratitude to Sister Jayanti and Dr Sarah for inviting him *'to talk about a topic that has been central in my life for so many years'*.

Points from his presentation:

- Practising mindfulness and coming into moment to moment awareness of experience allows us to catch uncomfortable feelings before they overwhelm and/or we react to a trigger from within or our environment.
- With addictions if we can practise noticing sensations, thoughts and feelings when cravings begin then again they can be caught before being acted on. So people develop less 'cue reactivity'.
- We develop more self-compassion as we meditate as we can experience more peace within.
- We are able to reduce the experience of shame and discomfort within the self as we focus on the goodness of our being.
- Meditation can precipitate a sense of detachment and heightened awareness of the self and the present moment. This can bring great benefit to those suffering chronic disease such as cancer and can relieve stress and worry.
- Meditation can have specific effects on the brain...with loving kindness practices changes in brain structure have been noticed.

- When there is more compassion with the self then people are more likely to request support and connect with others more readily thus often increasing social support and quality of life.
- Spirituality can be hugely consoling for those facing the possibility of death.
- Practising meditation has been shown to have a positive impact on many medical disorders and allows the patient to become quieter in the mind and find ways to manage more effectively as there is less worry which damages the immune system and mental health. Some of the diseases that meditation has been proven to help with are:
  - Cancer – with more peace and joy the immune system is enhanced.
  - Blood pressure – less stress alleviates the pressure.
  - Diabetes - with improved psychological well-being glycaemic balance is more easily achieved.
  - IBY – stress is reduced.
- With mindfulness practice it is possible to create a distance between the self and with what is going on therefore the ability to make choices is easier.
- Accepting the present moment helps relieve physiological and psychological stresses.
- People intuitively like meditation and therefore take up this support quite readily.
- There is much research on the area of meditation and how it helps with depressive disorders, and how through present moment awareness there is increased emotional stability with letting go of reactions.
- Meditation brings increased attention regulation.
- Meditation brings increased body awareness and noticing of feelings in the body, this then increases the capability of melting away any negative emotions just by being aware of them.
- Meditation brings changes in self-perspective, so is not only useful in a therapeutic context, but for people addressing a wide range of problems...the results from many academic studies are promising: large improvements in relationships, reductions in anxiety and negative emotions; a more robust sense of self and heightened well-being in general; greater compassion for self and others.

SUMMARY of some of the benefits of a regular meditation/mindfulness practise:

- Attention regulation
- Openness and acceptance of both positive and negative experience
- Compassion towards self and others increases
- Less worry and rumination
- Less reactivity
- Robust and positive sense of self
- Sense of self control and life control
- Present moment awareness
- Less stress
- Better sleep

*'When we practise meditation and go to the heart of our self we go to the basic motivations to whatever it is to be human. Compassion and altruism is a characteristic of our species. When we clear away the undergrowth of stuff that goes on in our mind we reach a place of greater love and acceptance of ourselves and those around us'.*

Other areas of life where meditation and mindfulness are having a profound effect are:

In education:

- Helping calm children with ADHD, aggressive and oppositional behaviour
- Helping children in their relationship with themselves and with others
- Helping children in their academic performance
- For school staff a daily practice can help with alleviating burnout stress, empathy in the classroom and overall classroom effectiveness.

In companies, many are training their employees: e.g. Google is using mindfulness and says it is the key to the power of positive business.

On a personal level meditation can bring about the following:

- Profound peace of mind
- Deeper sense of the meaning of existence
- Connection, compassion and altruism
- Deeper meaning of existence, insights about the conditioning of the mind
- Existential and experiential enquiry
- Moving towards the difficult and exploring moment to moment awareness
- Sharing the learning in service of others
- Wisdom, presence, inner peace, balance, privilege, gratitude and joy
- *'Joy, the inner throb at the heart of everything, even sadness'*

Professor West concluded with how meditation *'Helped me to engage with the wonder of being in each moment. Bringing a sense of joy, completeness and love that comes from the peace in each moment...'*

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**Then followed a conversation with European Director of the Brahma Kumaris, Sister Jayanti and Professor West on the power and practise of different meditation practices, and the many paradoxes that exist.** Below are some of the points that arose in the dialogue:

- Sister Jayanti shared how with Raj Yoga Meditation we focus on the here and now and yet also the transcendent as we learn to connect with a higher energy that empowers when the two meet.
- Professor West noticed that *'When I sit by my pond and I feel the wind...there are times of real stillness which are very here and now and are filled with feelings of gratitude and love...this then feels transcendent and it is connecting'*.
- Secular versus spiritual practices: Often what it doesn't say on the tin with secular practices like mindfulness is that it will take you to experiences that are far more meaningful than just the therapeutic experiences.
- Mindfulness fits in with Raj Yoga meditation. There is the experience of Om...I am present.....coming to the awareness of the peace and stillness that sits within.
- When we connect with the here and now we can then connect more clearly with the awareness of our inner being... I can then go beyond and come into the connection with the Divine and experience a very real feeling of warmth and comfort and power.....
- It is possible to start at a very secular level but eventually other aspects of consciousness open up so we are able to tune in and feel the higher presence.
- Through the practice of meditation and engaging with this sense of being there is no need to get lost in everything that goes on in our heads ....it evokes wonder and joy.....
- Theory can be daunting, but when we begin by practising we can easily experience. E.g. when we think about infinity it can be difficult as a thinking state, yet when we connect with The Divine and experience a deep peace, it feels infinite.
- With Raj Yoga, Instead of looking at things from a linear perspective we start looking at things from a cyclical perspective where there is no beginning or end.
- On the level of theory it can sound like nonsense but in the experience of infinity.....eons and eons...cycles upon cycles then new aspects of truth and reality open up as the thinking mind doesn't push its way but a new type of awareness and understanding emerges.
- It is a reality that we can see things from a very different perspective when we meditate.
- We can return to a bigger picture as we meditate and the small stories are reduced.

- Through feeling positive we develop our behavioural repertoire and it improves our ability to engage with the world.
- If our approach to life is to strive we experience it as a burden yet if we let go and accept we feel much lighter.
- With meditation there can also be a 'striving' to connect which creates a struggle but we can simply come into the awareness of who we are and naturally and easily let our thought connect with The Divine and this then results in a very sweet experience.
- The more regularly we practise the easier it is to remain 'connected'.
- To practise meditation well it is important to cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance; to be compassionate on the self whatever is happening. This then produces a sweet feeling with the self.
- It is important to practise being present throughout the day as well as practising more sustained times of meditation. This can happen during the course of our normal daily routine.
- This then will ensure that the practise suffuses more into our lives and impacts how our days develop.
- Starting the day with a disciplined practise is important and this gets our thoughts and feelings moving in the right direction...before we meet we prepare ourselves....as we begin to see the value of doing this, it empowers us to do this more and more....
- The key is to experiment and keep doing it.
- Many are attracted to mindfulness as it doesn't have any trappings of religion that would feel uncomfortable. Mindfulness over time brings a greater presence and an ability to experience more.....to see the smiles in those around.....when we become less encumbered and more joyful and we see the lyrical in our existence and the miracle of our connection with each other becomes more apparent, this no longer is merely an intellectual exercise.
- Secular technique therefore can take us to profound spiritual experience and help us develop a profound sense of gratitude for our existence.
- We need to act with caution in the therapeutic application of meditation practise, especially when people immerse themselves in long hours of meditation practice, because those who are damaged in some way can have really difficult experiences and need medical care alongside these practices.
- Meditation helps us to see the workings of our mind, to see how we are being 'driven' and help us deal with the problems we are facing.
- If our consciousness is driven by 'I' and 'mine' then we are gripped by materialism.
- If we can change our relationship with others and the planet then our world could be a different one.
- The difference between hypnosis and meditation is that with hypnosis we are following directions, but meditation is like driving the car as we follow directions.

**Rachna** closed the conversation with another poem: *A simple falling into myself....an eternity, better than gold,..into love...*

The evening was then closed with a spoken meditation commentary by Sister Jayanti and thanks were extended to both the speakers as 'we appreciate your presence and your roles as amazing people doing amazing stuff in the world' and thanks to Rachna for the beautiful poems as well as to the whole organising and production teams for the evening.

ENDS