

Voice of Clear Light

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Buddhism and Science Conference a Big Success

New Dialogs Conference Brings Researchers to Serenity Ridge



Ligmincha Institute's third annual Buddhism and Science Conference was a great success, according to both presenters and participants at the event, held Oct. 9–10 at Serenity Ridge Retreat Center in Nelson County, Virginia. And part of what made the conference so special was not only the quality of the presenters but also that intangible "human quality" —the connection among the presenters, their interaction with participants, and the welcoming atmosphere of Serenity Ridge and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, founder and spiritual director of Ligmincha.

"We are very pleased with the results," says conference organizer and presenter Alejandro Chaoul-Reich, director of research for Ligmincha Institute and a faculty member at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. "I knew we had really top presenters, but it went way beyond what I expected, both in terms of the quality of presenters and the way they connected with each other and their audience. They were really engaged—their smiles said it all." The presenters donated their own time to attend the conference, even paying for their own transportation.

This year's conference theme was "New Dialogs Between Buddhism and Science: Researching the Effects of Meditation and Compassion on Health and Well-Being." The two-day event had a more intensive research focus than did the two past conferences, the first focused on the paranormal and the second on both scholarship and research. This third conference not only built on the other two but also expanded the research content.

In addition to Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, nine other presenters from throughout the United States shared their research in areas ranging from the benefits of Tibetan sound healing on breast cancer patients' cognitive function, to mindfulness and behavior change, to compassion-based training for clinicians, to a longitudinal self-report on the effects of intensive meditation practice, and even to the effects of meditation at the cellular level. Making use of modern technology, participants viewed presenter Catherina Kerr's presentation via Skype when she became unable to attend in person.

The presenters' visit was enhanced by the presence of a group of lamas who had just prior to the conference attended the first meeting of Bon lamas in the West, organized by Tenzin Rinpoche at Ligmincha Institute. Presenters were able to interact with the lamas during tea breaks and at other times. Many of the presenters also knew each other personally and professionally, which contributed to the collegial and friendly interaction, which was palpable to the audience. During the retreat, they engaged with each other and participants, and enjoyed an informal dinner with Tenzin Rinpoche.

More than half of the presenters remained after the conference to attend the annual fall retreat that followed, whose topic was "The Open Heart: Healing in the Dzogchen Tradition." And almost 30 of the research conference's 80 participants also extended their stay at Serenity Ridge to attend the fall retreat.

In addition to his presentation on Tibetan Sound Healing (the basis for Chaoul-Reich's research study), Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche also welcomed the group, answered questions, led meditation sessions and gave a beautiful closure.

"Our intent at these conferences is to share, learn from each other and explore new ideas for future dialog and research," Rinpoche says. "I believe that in the future, the kinds of practices we do in the Tibetan Bon and Buddhist traditions will be widely seen as a potent medicine for

preventing and healing many forms of illness. For centuries, meditation practitioners have directly experienced these beneficial effects, and Western research is increasingly exploring and confirming the benefits."

The next Buddhism and Science Conference, "Pathways to a Healthy Mind," is scheduled for Oct. 7–9, 2014 (beginning on Tuesday evening and ending Thursday around noon). It will be followed by the fall retreat Oct. 10–12, whose topic is "The Healing Power of Primordial Awareness."

In the meantime, conference organizers and presenters are working to establish more relationships with other institutions, and possible new research projects may arise. Presentations from this conference are being transcribed to put in a volume that will be made available to the public. In addition, a new book based on Ligmincha's first annual Buddhism and Science Conference is in the works, edited by Berkeley physicist David Presti with chapters authored by each of the conference's presenters plus Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche.

Stay tuned for more!