

Spotlight

Buddhist Monk Dr. Barry Kerzin On How to Cultivate A Deeper Sense of Happiness

By Ron Cichowicz

LIKE A MODERN DAY JOHNNY APPLESEED, DR. BARRY KERZIN WALKS THE EARTH SPREADING SEEDS OF COMPASSION.

A frequent visitor to southwestern Pennsylvania since 2016 when he spoke at the annual conference of the Family Medicine Education Consortium, Dr. Barry Kerzin seeks to help others find inner peace in a world often seen as nothing less than chaotic.

An American-born Buddhist monk, Dr. Kerzin is the personal physician to the 14th Dalai Lama, the founder and president of the Altruism in Medicine Institute and author of "No Fear, No Death: The Transformative Power of Compassion."

"When we talk about inner peace or happiness, we have different levels," said Dr. Kerzin. "We enjoy a good movie. We love eating good food or drinking nice wine.

"That's one level of happiness. Sometimes we call that 'pleasure' when it is sensory-driven. But this tends to not be fully satisfying for a couple of reasons."

For one thing, Dr. Kerzin explained, these experiences never continue indefinitely: the wine runs out, the food is gone. Sometimes, what begins as pleasure turns into the opposite. Dr. Kerzin shared the example of someone who relaxes on a beach all day only to wake the next day with severe sunburn.

"So the pleasure of being at the beach turns into pain and suffering," he said.

Dr. Kerzin says there is another, deeper, level of happiness, related not to the senses, but to the mind. This level of happiness is steadier; it doesn't fluctuate as much, nor is it excitable. And the more one cultivates it, the longer it can last.

So how does one cultivate this level of happiness? Dr. Kerzin says the key is compassion.

"It's all about thinking of others and having genuine concern for their welfare," he said. "Because the



Dr. Barry Kerzin

more you do that, you move the spotlight from 'me, me, me' and focus it on others. When we can do something to help others, which is a big part of compassion, we feel good. And that feeling cultivates that deeper level of happiness."

The more a person develops such compassion, according to Dr. Kerzin, the more he or she develops a mental "place or refuge" where one can go to find inner peace.

"There's often a lot of chaos going on around us, maybe situations where everyone is upset or angry," Dr. Kerzin explained. "In these situations, you can go back into that place. you're not escaping, because you're still there and present with everyone, but you've got this calm, peaceful place inside."

Dr. Kerzin stresses that, whatever the situation, anxiety and worry never helps. He suggests that when feeling negative emotions, try not to follow it.

"We call that 'letting it be,'" he said. "Take three slow breaths and try to stay in the present moment.

It's incredibly refreshing."

Dr. Kerzin added that, whatever challenge faced, a person needs to remember that he or she is never alone.

"Let's say you are diagnosed with Stage 2 cancer and are feeling depressed," he said. "Some people might turn to alcohol or drugs or self-harm. But you need to remember you are not alone, that you're not the only one with cancer. So try asking yourself, 'How are they dealing with this?'"

Dr. Kerzin then suggests that the person consider what they might do to alleviate other people's suffering, such as calling to see how they are doing or direct them to resource information or support groups.

"Even if we can't really help someone else, just thinking about others can be therapeutic," he said. "Helping others also helps yourself."

Equally critical, Dr. Kerzin added, is that everyone needs to be gentle with themselves.

"We tend to beat ourselves up," he said. "We feel we're not smart enough, not handsome enough, not good enough at athletics. We need to cut ourselves a little slack, be gentle with ourselves. try to begin to recognize when you're being hard on yourself. You can even laugh at it sometimes: 'there i go again!' This helps start the process of letting it go.

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