Dalai Lama enlightens and enraptures contemplative scientists in Boston

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, was given a rapturous reception by mindfulness researchers, but tactfully avoided the controversial question of applications in the military.

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When the Dalai Lama began a dialogue with cognitive scientists in 1987 to explore how the insights gained by Buddhist contemplatives could be used to inform research and find new ways to promote human wellbeing, he could not have imagined that businesses and even the US military would one day want to harness some of those insights.

That first meeting 27 years ago was attended by half a dozen scientists and two translators in the tiny audience room of his residence in Dharamsala, India. On Friday in Boston at the latest meeting of the Mind & Life Institute - the thriving organisation that grew from those discussions - about 1,700 delegates from 38 countries were in attendance.
Security was tight before the meeting, with an entire floor of the Marriott Hotel in lockdown. The atmosphere outside the hall was an odd mixture of tension and calm as delegates practised their morning yoga or meditation while a dozen dark-suited security personnel double-checked mindfulness researchers who set off the airport-style body scanners. The previous evening, they had been asked jokingly not to bring their guns to the meeting.

Introducing the 14th Dalai Lama, the president of the Mind & Life Institute, Arthur Zajonc, said that when the two-year-old Tenzin Gyatso was identified as the latest reincarnation, the monks couldn’t have chosen a more compassionate man. “You haven’t seen my ‘angry face’!” His Holiness interjected.

Joining the Dalai Lama on the platform was Richard Davidson, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and one of the first scientists to work with the Dalai Lama. “I’m reminded how lonely the journey was at the beginning,” said Davidson. “There were fewer than 10 people doing this research on the planet.”

Also on the platform was Amishi Jha, a psychologist at the University of Miami who has investigated potential applications of mindfulness in business and the military, with the help of grants from private foundations and the US Department of Defense.
One of the issues up for discussion with the Dalai Lama was “are there any guiding principles that should be considered when applying mindfulness to settings such as business and the military?”

Jha has been involved in testing Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training, a programme designed to counteract the effects of stress on US marines. She and her colleagues discovered that the amount of mindfulness practice by the soldiers was associated with decreases in self-reported stress levels. The training emphasises body awareness, attention control and tolerance of present-moment experiences.

Other work has suggested mindfulness training improves soldiers’ working memory capacity, which is associated with a greater ability to manage cognitive demands and regulate emotions. Prolonged stress is known to deplete working memory.

A study published earlier this year found that the heart rate and breathing rate of US marines who had received mindfulness training recovered significantly faster after a combat simulation. They also had lower blood levels of neuropeptide Y, a marker of autonomic nervous system activation. In an accompanying editorial, the Yale psychiatrist Judson Brewer (who wasn’t involved in the research) said the hope was that this training would prevent troops “burning out (or acting out) during prolonged stress exposure”.

It is a measure of the success of secular mindfulness programmes that they are now seen not only as a tool for promoting mental health and wellbeing, but also for enhancing concentration and performance under pressure in sport, commerce and the armed forces. But this is proving controversial, with some claiming that teaching mindfulness skills in the absence of any moral framework – for example to make money or win wars – is a perversion of the Buddhist values of compassion and selflessness.

In the dialogue on Friday, Jha told the Dalai Lama there was an interest in bringing mindfulness to every sector of society, from education to business and the military, so she and the Mind & Life Institute were developing ethical guidelines for these applications.

Perhaps out of tact, the Dalai Lama did not tackle the question of military applications head-on, though he had earlier asserted that “mental transformation never takes place by force or fear”.

The Dalai Lama remarked that ‘mental transformation never takes place through force or fear’, and criticised the widespread belief that money is the ultimate source of happiness. Photograph: Jurek Schreiner
And he said the ethics of applying mindfulness in business depended entirely on the corporation in question and whether it upheld social values and made a contribution to the welfare of its community.

But in his opening remarks he had criticised the fact so many people believed money was the ultimate source of happiness.

Asked how his interest in science originally developed he said he’d been fascinated by technology since childhood, recalling a clockwork toy British soldier with a gun that he played with for a few days before taking apart to see how it worked. He described how as a young man visiting China he was excited to be shown around hydroelectric dams and metal smelting works - though his entourage always found the visits boring.

Explaining why he thought it was so important to have scientists investigate the benefits of mindfulness, he said: “When I talk about Buddhist literature, people may not listen.” They were more likely to listen to scientists, who had hard evidence at their disposal. And researchers were beginning to realise that a healthy mind was essential for physical health. “We’re not talking about heaven, god or nirvana here,” he said, “but how to build a happier society.”

He added that the Buddha encouraged his followers not to take anything on trust but to investigate things for themselves, and in that spirit he had long since abandoned Buddhist ideas about cosmology after reading about the findings of modern astronomers.

After an exchange of gifts at the end of the meeting, holding Davidson’s hand on one side and Zajonc’s on the other, he thanked American scientists for leading the world in mindfulness research. “It’s another American invasion,” he joked. “But a positive one.”