

The Practice of Kum Nye

Interview with Ven. Tarthang Tulku

Can you tell us something about the Kum Nye techniques that you have taught and written about?

Rinpoche: In Tibetan “kum nye” means body massage, but body in this case means all the sense organs, including the mind and inner organs, and massage means touching and expanding inner energy. By nurturing and expanding the fields of feeling, we can create balance in the body and mind. Developing awareness of breathing is also important—in a subtle way the breath focuses awareness. Through the Kum Nye exercises, we can learn to guide our actions through awareness, and not just impulse.

Kum Nye techniques make use of both physical exercises and meditation practices. They are based on traditional teachings, but I also created some new elements. Traditionally Buddhism teaches that there is energy within the mind and body which can nourish the individual and make him healthy. Westerners usually do not do anything to develop this energy until they're already sick and the energy is dissipated. Physical exercise that stays completely external is not

that effective in healing. But Kum Nye goes deeper—it's like a combination of yoga and meditation. At the same time, it's very simple and straightforward, so teaching it to someone is like giving him a manual that he can use for himself.

With so many problems in the world today, practicing self-healing techniques like Kum Nye can sometimes seem selfish when compared to political or social action.

Rinpoche: Self-healing is changing the world. If you can take care of yourself, so that you don't have problems, then you can also have an impact on the global level.

People right now are caught in a trap because they don't really know how to share; how to have real relationships. They have these problems because of their own inner conflicts and stress. If they can learn to change this, then they can truly say they have had a real education. I have noticed that in the West education is often understood in terms of learning specific skills and role models. Western education teaches people how to act in a mechanical way, how to manipulate their environment and others. But it does not teach very much

about how to cope with personal or emotional issues, such as stress. We are taught that if such problems do come up, we should go to someone who specializes in treating them. If we learned to act directly, and to take responsibility for ourselves, then we could make great contributions. We could become perfect examples for others. Of course, that's not easy.

Do you see Kum Nye as a self-contained spiritual path, or more as a preparation for a traditional spiritual discipline?

Rinpoche: I don't think there's too much difference. My understanding of "spiritual" is that it refers to a way of being that is healthy and balanced. It isn't necessarily religious, or connected to specific images or doctrines. To truly prosper, to be healthy on all levels: this is the fruit of a spiritual path. Now, you could say that Kum Nye is a foundation for other teachings. However, I am not trying to present Kum Nye as part of a Buddhist path. I am simply grateful for any benefits that the Kum Nye practices bring to individuals.

Is there a connection between the three levels of the Kum Nye practice and the traditional teaching of inner, outer, and secret levels?

Rinpoche: Many of the traditional teachings speak in terms of different levels of understanding, and you can see this in Kum Nye also. But until you become involved with the practices on a daily basis, deepening your experience, you may not come in contact with some of the blissful and healing tendencies that are present in the teachings. Touching these deeper levels may require more involvement than just taking one or two courses or experimenting with some of the exercises in the

book. From my conversations with people who have practiced Kum Nye intensively, it does seem that through the exercises it is possible to touch the inner senses.

What is the role of the mind in all this?

Rinpoche: The mind operates through the senses. When the senses relax, then the mind relaxes. Technically, Buddhist psychology distinguishes all these aspects very carefully, but in general we can say that consciousness, perception, the senses, breathing, and the underlying body energy are all aspects of mind—they are all linked. In a more narrow sense, the task for the mind is not to get caught up in dichotomies; for example, "Am I doing right?" "Am I doing wrong?" Instead, the mind can go into feelings and can explore deeper, more significant levels. Traditionally such states of mind are called samadhis.

Are there some typical traps one might fall into while practicing Kum Nye, traps that would block access to the liberating qualities of the practices?

Rinpoche: One dangerous trap is self-doubt and self-criticism. Also, there can be a feeling of agitation, or else a sense of numbness, a feeling that you are not making any progress. The best way to practice is to set aside a specific time to do the practice, and then to keep this time separate, while also trying to relate the practices to your daily activities. Explore and enjoy your senses. Loosen your tension while you continue to maintain the quality of awareness. In spiritual work, the emphasis is not on the awareness of the object, but on the awareness of the subject, which is intrinsic awareness itself. With this kind

The key to both our internal integration and a balanced relationship with the world lies within our feelings and sensations. We can nurture and heal both our bodies and minds by touching our feelings deeply and expanding the flowing rhythms they bring to us, for they are linked to the vitality of the universe itself. Through relaxation, we awaken feelings which then expand and accumulate until we slowly become aware of a deep, interpenetrating field of energy, inside our body and beyond it. This energy can stimulate itself internally to sustain and nurture us in our daily lives, recycling sensation so we become sensitive and strong, and our sensations rich and powerful. Our minds become clearer as well, and we discover what it means to be balanced.

Our senses, feelings, and thoughts are integrated and all of our relationships, actions, ideas, and movements are flowing and harmonious. Our awareness gives us the freedom to take charge of our lives, not in a forceful or grasping way, but with confidence. We then naturally do what is appropriate and beneficial, and function in a positive way in the world.

Tarthang Tulku, Kum Nye Relaxation

of awareness there will be a great flow of energy and creativity.

Can enjoying the senses really bring so much benefit? I would say that sensual pleasure often increases our delusions about ourselves and the world.

Rinpoche: Any kind of pleasure can give rise to attachment, and this immediately limits our understanding. It's true that when people taste something delicious, they have a hard time giving up this experience. Buddhism teaches that all aspects of experience can be valued equally, and it gives practices that help develop this sense. With Kum Nye, people can at least taste the deeper levels of joy that are available. Then they have the choice—perhaps they can open this experience up, instead of just holding on to it.

Kum Nye has been taught now for ten years at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley as well as in workshops in many countries. Are you content with the results, or do you feel that Kum Nye could be practiced on a deeper level? After all, it seems to go potentially far deeper than body therapies.

Rinpoche: We are really just beginning to tap the potential of the body and mind. There is a tremendous vastness there; a new frontier to explore. What happens to Kum Nye depends on the individuals who are practicing: How far do they want to go?

Ven. Tarthang Tulku, author of Kum Nye Relaxation, Parts 1 and 2, is an accomplished Lama from Tibet. A longer version of this interview has been translated into German for publication in the periodical, Planet Erde.