

**The Good Heart.**  
**Reflections on the 1994 John Main Seminar**  
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On the morning of the first full day of the John Main Seminar His Holiness the Dalai Lama entered a hall full of people representing more than thirty countries and two of the world's great religious traditions. He walked bowing low, looking at the people over his hands joined in homage to them, beaming goodwill and humour, noticing those he knew and making everyone feel that he knew them also. The previous evening at the opening of the Seminar, and again early that morning, he had meditated for half an hour in silence with everyone in the hall. So we were already enjoying that goodly and beautiful feeling of shared humanity which meditation creates as it dissolves the barriers of pride and suspicion and separateness. A sense of wonder was already in the air.

But also, I must admit, a certain trepidation. The Dalai Lama had accepted our invitation to lead the Seminar because he remembered so warmly his meeting with John Main in 1980 when they had meditated and eaten together and then shared their vision of the spiritual needs of the modern world. He had also accepted my suggestion that he comment on a number of gospel texts which we had selected and discussed at earlier meetings. From the beginning he reminded us that he was not very well acquainted with Christian scriptures or theology but was ready to read the texts and respond to them "as a simple Buddhist monk."

There was no doubt that what he would say would be stimulating. The Dalai Lama's philosophical training from childhood has formed him as one of the most incisive and discerning religious minds in the world. And even if he was to say nothing, any meditator could have sensed the grace of his presence and the powerful radiance of his personal human integration: his holiness. We intuited that the benefit of meditating with him would release an experience of clarity and depth, a fuller degree of centred attention, peace and mindfulness which would make the Seminar a time of spiritual advancement for us all as individuals, whatever meaning it might have for a wider audience in the future.

Yet, that first morning, we did not know quite what to expect as the Dalai Lama took his seat centre-stage between his Buddhist monk-translator, Thupten Jinpa, and myself. He turned his attention to the first text, from Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt. 5:38-48). Leaning over it and following each line with his finger he began slowly and carefully to pronounce the words. He spoke the words of Jesus in the midst of a profoundly wakeful, historical silence.

Like every moment of great meaning in life this moment had an almost absurd, deeply disturbing simplicity. Like a child experiencing wonder. Like Miranda,

in *The Tempest*, seeing human beings for the first time. This was a moment when the critical, objectifying, judgemental mind was gently outspoken and quieted by something of unquestionable truth, innocence and integrity.

Of course it is impossible to communicate this. Speaking of something "unquestionable" makes one want to question it! Afterwards speaking with so many who said disarmingly how their eyes had filled with tears as he read the gospel, I felt glad that there were 400 others present to confirm what I felt sitting beside him. The videos and tapes of the Seminar have captured something of this moment and the even stronger moments of understanding and communion for which it opened the door. Either way, I feel certain that the fruits of this John Main Seminar will be real and palpable in many spiritual paths and in the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity far into the future.

The spiritual experience and its fruitfulness testify both to the Scriptures and to the person who was commenting on them. For Christians, as for those of other faiths, their scriptures are called "holy". Christ as the incarnate Word is present in the words in a direct way. In the 5th century St. Caesarius of Arles had a question for his brothers and sisters: "Which do you think more important the Word of God or the Body of Christ (in the Eucharist)?" His reply was that they possess equal importance. "How careful we are, when the Body of Christ is distributed to us, not to let any bit of it fall to the ground from our hand! But we should be just as careful not to let slip from our hearts the Word of God" by listening to it negligently.

The words that carry the presence of the Word are nevertheless subject to human understanding - and misunderstanding. The words of Jesus, in particular, exist for us only in translation and so from the beginning they needed to be interpreted through the mind if the heart was to know their meaning. No religious tradition has refined the instruments of the mind for the perception of truth more carefully than Buddhism. And of Buddhist teachers no one is better trained in this art of perception than the present Dalai Lama.

So as Christians we looked forward to seeing our scriptures, with which we were familiar (and often so familiar that we read them negligently) in a fresh and new way through the Dalai Lama's eyes. To see the Word in the words is, of course, not a merely mental perception. True insight (vipassana, in Sanskrit) involves our entire consciousness and forms in us an experience beyond the perceptual range of thought, word and image. Thomas Aquinas reminds us of this when he says that it is not in propositions or ideas that we put our faith but in the reality which words point to. Meditation, for John Main, was precisely that art of prayerful attention to the truth which leads to the experience of reality which is beyond words but which also inhabits the worlds of words.

Each day of the Seminar we meditated with the Dalai Lama three times. This not only created an atmosphere of trust and communion; it also regularly cleansed the doors of perception and allowed the Word to shine in silence through the commentary and discussion. Silence and presence were the heart of the seminar.

The Word of God, then, had its own power and dynamic. We felt it "alive and active ... cutting more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing so deeply that it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it discriminates among the purposes and thoughts of the heart. Nothing in creation can hide from him." (Heb. 4:12-13). But the Word, as St. Augustine once said of John the Baptist's role, needs a voice to carry it. For three days the Dalai Lama was that voice, for Buddhists and Christians alike. His presence and personality communicated the Word that yet must always speak for itself.

One should say, perhaps, that Tenzin Gyatso (the present, 14th Dalai Lama) was that medium because it was not his office but his personal humanity that bore authority. More than mere official status he embodied the rich tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. He was also present to us through an exemplary humanity which had suffered deeply, lost home and country, witnessed and daily felt the ravaging of his people and religion while the rest of the world denied or ignored it; yet he radiated joy and humour in an eloquent absence of all religious pretentiousness or impersonal formality. And above all, he taught the doctrine of love of one's enemies with the authority of one who lived his teaching each day of his life and believed with his whole being in the way of non-violence. It was not surprising, then, that when he spoke the words of the Sermon on the Mount, "But what I tell you is this: love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike ..." their power and meaning flowed from him into his listeners.

Because of this strange and beautiful freshness of meaning in familiar words spoken in this way, the questions a Christian would naturally want a Dalai Lama to answer - what does "heavenly father" mean to you, how do you understand Jesus and so on - acquired a more than causal interest. The answers to these questions by someone who communicated the meaning of the words of Jesus so powerfully would have great importance to any person of faith.

In most discussions there are people quick to swoop down on points of difference and drive wedges between people as they approach each other. Much of our public discourse today is driven by the attitude that people are naturally untruthful and that all feelings of unity or friendship are deceptive. It was a sign of the Holy Spirit at our meeting with the Dalai Lama that our questions and discussions with him were not undermined in this way. There was time for trust and respect to build up to a sufficient degree to allow real understanding to occur.

This was also due to the Dalai Lama's own clarity of purpose in reading the Gospels with us, a purpose which was a model of how dialogue should be held. He began by explaining his limited knowledge of Christianity; that he looked forward to learning more about it and, of course, that he was commenting on the Gospels simply as a Buddhist. He went on to say that he did not want to cast seeds of doubt in anyone's mind or create confusion. He then repeated his belief that naturally a person should not, or need not, change their religion, though respecting a person's freedom to do so. Nor did he believe in the eventual merging of all religions into a single "global religion." But that the common purpose of every religion is to create "good and happy people" and the true witness of every religion is a "good heart" full of compassion and tolerance.

No religious leader in the west has convinced as wide a range of people as has the Dalai Lama in his visits to Europe and America, since his exile from Tibet, of the value of religion. The media, education, science, entertainment and politics generally combine to disempower religion by marginalising, scandalising or trivialising it. But in a unique way the Dalai Lama, speaking with faith but without dogmatism, with passion and reason, conviction and tolerance of other views, has become a model of authentic religion to a sceptical and materialistic world.

His clarity about the true fundamentals of religion dispels fundamentalism. In the Sermon on the Mount he saw the fundamental law of compassion. And, he asked, quoting Shantideva, "if you can't show compassion to your enemies who can you show it to?" Nonviolence is not a passive response to violence but an actively compassionate one. It is the mark of a Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism, who is an enlightened being who chooses to remain in the world for the well-being and liberation of others. In such a person - and the Dalai Lama clearly recognised this in Jesus - you can see that equanimity is the precondition for compassion.

From the clear vision created by inner equanimity one recognises that no human being is irrelevant to one's self, that one's enemies are capable of being one's special spiritual teachers and that the aim of all spiritual practice must be to enhance our capacity for compassion. By remaining in the equipoise of living kindness, shown to friends and enemies alike, one is then absorbed into a state of uninterrupted compassion. "There must be no limit to your goodness as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds," Jesus says.

At the ethical level the parallels between Christianity and Buddhism run close and frequently converge. At other levels, which were raised by other gospel passages, the resonance between the beliefs of the two traditions sounded from a depth beyond verbal definition. Thus, the Dalai Lama said, the differences are as important as the similarities. His reading of the Beatitudes perceived the law of causality (karma) in the way Jesus described the connection between right

attitudes and behaviour with "rewards" such as the vision of God, inheriting the earth, and the kingdom of God. But these, at least conceptually, cannot be directly translated into Buddhist terms. You cannot, as the Dalai Lama quoted a Tibetan saying, put a yak's head on a sheep's body.

Nor did anyone think the experiment worth trying. The Dalai Lama's respect for the Christian belief in a Creator-God was sincere and in no way condescending. And Christians respected the non-theism of the Dalai Lama's vision of reality. On this occasion both Christians and Buddhists, with the open-mindedness that comes with sincere respect for others, learned the deeper meanings of their own beliefs. After discussing the Christian idea of God in the contemplative tradition and hearing of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Dalai Lama was asked by Sr. Eileen O'Hea, one of the panelists, what he would like to ask Jesus if he had the chance. He replied quickly, with a laugh, "what is the nature of the Father?"

The Dalai Lama had shown great courage and trust in agreeing to comment on the Gospels with us. As the Seminar progressed and the meeting of mind and heart deepened in the Word I realised too, seeing the strength of his mind and insight, what an act of trust it had been on the Christian side to entrust these precious texts to him. It was a trust richly rewarded because of the delicacy with which he used his strength and how he balanced the perceptions of convergence, parallels and resonances between Buddhist and Christian beliefs. This delicacy of strength became clearest in his comments on those passages in which the person of Jesus was central.

About Jesus the Dalai Lama had as many questions about what Christians believed as statements of how Buddhists can see him. Some passages showed Jesus as a teacher (Mk. 3:31-35: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," Mk. 4:26-34: "The Kingdom of God is like this."). Watching and hearing the Dalai Lama read and expound them one realised that a teacher exists in the very act of teaching. The term "teacher" denotes a relationship with those willing to be taught according to their different degrees of receptivity. One realised too that Jesus like any teacher spoke in the words and metaphors his listeners would best understand. The "will of God", the "kingdom of God", intimate relationship with Christ became once again, through the Dalai Lama's eyes, charged with meaning and wonder.

Even on the question of the Christian mission (Lk. 9:2-6) the Dalai Lama's comments opened a deeper and more helpful Christian understanding. He distinguished between the call to mission and the attempt to convert others to our own beliefs. To share the "good news" or the "dharma" freely and widely is integral to the faith of any practitioner, Buddhist or Christian. What we share essentially is our practice, through the teaching of the scriptures as well as through one's own degree of realisation. The way to do so is, as Jesus shows in

the instructions to his disciples, basically simple and modest. His instructions to them to preach and heal shows also that these are two aspects of one act of service. To share the good news is to heal the many forms of sickness that human nature can be crippled by.

"Jesus proclaimed: To believe in me, is not to believe in me but in him who sent me." (Jn. 12:44-50). The closer we approached the heart of Christian faith, the personal nature of Jesus and his relationship to God, the deeper was the Dalai Lama's focus on the words and his reverence for their meaning. "Whoever sees interdependence sees the Dharma and whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha," he quoted musingly after reading what Jesus in St. John's Gospel says of himself.

Vision at this level of perception, is for Christian and Buddhist alike neither physical nor intellectual. In Jesus' use of the symbol of light the Dalai Lama found a familiar term to describe the wisdom and knowledge which the Buddhist pursues. Faith in Jesus evoked a characteristically analytical Buddhist response describing the need for faith and then the three forms of faith (admiration, aspiration and conviction). Where the darkness of ignorance is dispelled there is salvation.

In the last passage on the Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene the Dalai Lama's commentary made sensible to us all the mystery of connection that is to be found in the spacious silence between our many words and ideas. It was not (as for many westerners) a matter for him of believing or not, but of how to understand the truth expressed in the Resurrection narratives. He spoke of the different forms of the body and of the dharma and he asked us what Christians understood by this truth. In his way of asking that last question, many of us felt that he taught us as much as he had given during the whole Seminar.

After the Seminar about 65 meditation group leaders from many different countries made a three day retreat together. As we reflected on the experience we had just shared with the Dalai Lama it was clear to me that one valid and frequently expressed way of describing our experience would be that we had seen Christ in him.

Certainly we had felt the presence of the Holy Spirit whose work it is to reveal Christ. And as we were all gathered there "in his name" was it so surprising that we should have seen him? "Here I stand knocking at the door, I will come in and he and I will eat together" (Rev 3:20).

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in a poem that "Christ dances in a thousand places." Hopkins had seen Christ in a thousand places which had inspired his poetry but did not carry the overt religious symbolism or the imprimatur of "Christianity" - in the flight of a bird of prey or in the tragedy of a shipwreck. This allowed him to teach, better than in any church sermon (at which he was

notoriously hopeless), about the universality and the omni-presence of Christ: Christ who we "know no longer in an earthly way" but as a "life-giving Spirit."

The early Church Fathers wrestled with the question of how truth and holiness could have existed before the coming of Christ. They found the answer in understanding what this Coming or Incarnation really involved: the embodiment of the Word. But the Word has always been, before the historical moment of the Incarnation, and it continues to be both in time and beyond time. As the Church itself now sees and teaches, the Word can operate outside of the faith that names and bows before the name of Jesus.

And as the prophets of our era have taught us, Merton, Rahner, Bede Griffiths, John Main among them, Christianity is at a cross-roads at least as crucial to its future as when it left Jerusalem and journeyed to Rome. Now in the era which is seeing the formation of a new, global evolution of consciousness among humanity, Christians are being released from old limitations - from religious imperialism and intolerance - to see their Lord dance in a thousand places. We can only be humbled and elevated to be taught this by a human teacher like the Dalai Lama in whom the Word shines so strongly and whose life and teaching so clearly embody his message of peace, forgiveness and compassion.

Words which attempt to tell the truth are, of course, always risky. They can upset and mislead. But the experience of the Word requires we risk using them to communicate what can ultimately only be known in communion.

At the retreat we tried to articulate a vision of the future for our small but global community of Christian meditation. We realised it was not a matter of predicting but of seeing the future, not the details but the essentials of what could be and what we wanted to be. Seeing the meaning of the present. Not fortune-telling but prophecy. It seemed to me that the future lies in the empowerment of more and more people to be voices, silent voices, of the Word we love and are absorbed by in the human and divine person of Jesus the Risen Christ.

The Seminar helped to clarify our vision of the church's future just, as for many who spoke to me afterwards, it had deepened their faith in Christ. That future seems to invite the development of a contemplative Christianity, not concerned primarily with its numbers or institutional power. In such a church the spiritual formation we receive throughout our life, in home, community, parish and school will not stop at words, will not defend propositions at the cost of charity, but will advance into the experience of the Word itself.

A community of this kind will be one of growth, not of embattled decline, and its self-communication will nourish the earth. Its perception of God will teach it to be aware of the ground of unity it enjoys with all peoples. Its discipleship

of Jesus will empower it to teach and celebrate his words in prayer, liturgy and social action. Its receptivity to the Spirit will align it with all the valid salvific movements of its day.

Such a vision should make us laugh with joy. Whenever old fears and divisions are dissolved transcendence ignites laughter. At the end of the Seminar the Dalai Lama told a joke to illustrate a point. In telling it in English, Thupten Jimba, his superb translator, lapsed (o happy fault) from his usual self-control. Time and again as he tried to finish the joke he collapsed in laughter and carried the entire hall with him. As we rocked and wept with laughter nothing could have better illustrated how deeply serious we were and what wonder and joy the fresh hearing of the Word had been for us all.

Cassette tapes and videos of the 1994 John Main Seminar given by the Dalai Lama will be available soon. Please contact The Christian Meditation Centre, 29 Campden Hill Road, London. Tel: 0171 912 1371 for further details.

