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Contemplation with the Dalai Lama

Music: Jim Franklin - shakuhachi (Stille 7)

Preliminary explanation

You are maybe astonished that we chose a Buddhist monk as inspiration for today's Christian prayer. There are four reasons for this choice.

- 1) Firstly, I'm convinced that we can learn from any religion, while remaining rooted in our own tradition. Buddhism as such has a lot to teach us without leading us on a way of syncretism. The Dalai Lama is a very inspiring man in his loving way and in the way he practices non-violence, in his way also to be a very humble man, but nevertheless a very strong authority.
- 2) Secondly, the Dalai Lama is a very inspiring man because he is a kind-hearted man; he is a man who practices his own religion. The most evolved teachers of all religions seem to meet and be united on their path beyond differences, when they reach the real depth of the spiritual path and the depth of everyday practice.
- 3) Thirdly, the Dalai Lama is a man of dialogue with other religions. He is very capable to meet us Christians where we stand. He knows a lot about Christianity, probably because of his own Buddhist training which has opened him to an authentic path, and knows how to talk to Christian people, while remaining what he is, i.e. a Buddhist monk as he defines himself.
- 4) Fourthly, because of these different qualities, he has been invited in 1994 by the World Community for Christian Meditation to take part in London in an inter-religious meeting, where he was asked to comment the main texts of the Gospel. He did that in such an inspiring way, that a book has been published which expresses his way of understanding what is the core of our tradition. The title of this book is "The Good Heart".

Prayer:

Some biographical notes

I will tell you in a few words some facts of the Dalai Lama's life, as it is described in the book "The Good Heart".

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born on 6 July 1935 in the province of Amdo in north-eastern Tibet. His family was of poor peasant stock, and of his fifteen brothers and sisters only six would survive: two girls and four boys. When he was two years old, he was recognised as the

fourteenth in the line of Dalai Lamas, the previous Dalai Lama having died in 1933. The title *Dalai Lama* means "ocean of wisdom," and holders of that title are considered to be the manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezig. With his family, the young Dalai Lama moved to Lhasa, where he underwent extensive spiritual and religious formation. He was officially enthroned in 1940. Tenzin Gyatso was the first Dalai Lama to come into full contact with modern technology, and he retains a keen interest in science. One of his hobbies is radios.

Before the 1950s, Tibet was governed as a religious state, and the Dalai Lama exercised both spiritual and secular power there. Every Tibetan has a deep and inexpressible connection with the Dalai Lama, who embodies Tibet for them in all its spiritual and natural meaning. Until one was appointed in 1942, no minister for foreign affairs was thought to be necessary because of Tibet's isolation from the rest of the world. But in 1950 the Chinese army invaded Tibet's sovereign borders. Militarily overwhelmed and committed to non-violence, the Dalai Lama believed an agreement of cohabitation could be arranged with Beijing in which Tibet could maintain its autonomy. In 1954 he went to Beijing for peace talks with Mao Tse Tung.

In 1959, the brutal manner in which the occupying Chinese forces repressed a Tibetan rebellion in March of that year and the imminent danger to his own position and life forced the Dalai Lama to flee Tibet and take refuge in India where the Indian government accorded him the right to settle in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh. Many thousands of Tibetans have followed him into exile. Many other thousands who remained in Tibet have been killed or tortured by the occupying Chinese forces; monasteries have been routinely destroyed, and a systematic program of cultural genocide has been pursued.

In 1963 the Dalai Lama presented a draft democratic constitution for Tibet, and in 1992 he stated that when Tibet regains its independence he will give up his historical and political authority and live as a private citizen.

The Dalai Lama has consistently declared that while he directs Tibet's affairs, he will pursue a policy of non-violence. Any solution based on the use of force, he believes, can by its nature only be temporary. "Outer disarmament comes from inner disarmament. The only guarantee of peace lies within ourselves." His uncompromising commitment to peace was accorded global recognition when in 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

The Dalai Lama talks of human nature in a simple and moving way. His mastery of the full depth and intricacy of Buddhist thought has been so fully absorbed that he not only teaches but is felt to embody the Dharma. Buddhism, for him, is neither a dogma nor a religion but a way to live in peace, joy, and wisdom. He emphasises universal responsibility and the interdependence of all individuals and nations in the realisation of the essential goodness of human nature. For many years the Dalai Lama has travelled extensively and tirelessly as a teacher of peace and a dispenser of wisdom and joy.

Tibet since the Chinese occupation in 1950

The life of the Dalai Lama has been deeply marked by the occupation and destruction of Tibet by China, and the silent collusion of the western world. It is why I want to describe shortly this situation, as a background for what follows, also with the help of the book "The Good Heart".

Resistance in Tibet since 1959 has remained vigorous and has been ruthlessly suppressed. One-fifth of the population, 1.2 million Tibetans, have died as a result of the Chinese occupation. Over 6,000 monasteries and sacred places have been destroyed. The teaching of Buddhism is forbidden, and monks and nuns are routinely expelled from their monasteries. Tibet's natural resources and fragile ecology are being irreversibly destroyed.

Thousands of religious and political prisoners are today held in prisons and forced labour camps in which torture is common. It is a common practice for Tibetan women to be subject to mandatory sterilisation and forced abortions by the Chinese authorities. Once a peaceful buffer state between India and China, Tibet has been transformed into a vast military base where a quarter of China's missile force is housed.

As early as 1960 the International Commission of jurists found that genocide was indeed being committed and that sixteen articles of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights were being violated. The United Nations General Assembly has passed three resolutions condemning China for these violations and calling for the cessation of practices which deprive the Tibetan people of their fundamental human rights and freedoms, including their right to self-determination. The Dalai Lama continues to appeal to the United Nations and leaders of the world's nations on behalf of his country and people. The economic role China plays today does not help in the recognition of Tibet's oppression by the Chinese.

Four aspects that we found inspiring

- 1) Firstly I would like to describe a few aspects of Buddhism which touch me and how these aspects can help us as Christians. I am not capable to describe what Buddhism is, but I want only to express here a few personal impressions.
- 2) Secondly, we will talk about the meaning of differences between religions, and see how the Dalai Lama inspires us to find a way for dialogue and reciprocal enrichment.
- 3) Thirdly, we will look at what is humility and what is authority, especially when they combine as it is the case with the Dalai Lama.
- 4) Fourthly, we will try to feel how joy, laughter and humour are different things and how they can be integrated into our spiritual path. Laughter and joy are very striking characteristics of the Dalai Lama in the way he relates to others.

1) Buddhism

As I said, I can only express a few personal views, because I know very little about Buddhism.

A practical path

For me, there is an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity:

- Buddhism is very much looking at the nature of the spiritual path and gives instructions for the self-development of each one who wants to follow this path. Buddhism teaches us to observe our own behaviour and how we cope with life. It is focused on the process of life and it is very practical. While opening us to what we are and how our mind is reacting to life events, it leads us to discover what is permanent, beyond appearances.
- Christianity is more a teaching which tries to describe the nature of God. By doing so it shows us the way (the aim more than the process) and how to behave. More than a description of the way to reach enlightenment, it is a revelation of the true nature of God, which is in fact impossible to

describe. The Christian teaching is based on a strong antinomy between the Word and the Mystery, between God we cannot see and his Incarnation, God among us. This impossibility to describe God can be related with the Buddhist Emptiness. Our true nature cannot be defined.

The nature of this or that

There is an expression which is typically Buddhist and which the Dalai Lama uses all the time: “If we examine the nature of...”, it can be about the nature of suffering or of compassion or of anything else which we are confronted with in our daily life. If you carefully examine the nature of compassion, you will see that compassion is this or that... The Buddhist way is very concrete and can teach us as Christians to be very practical on our spiritual way. Everything is given here and now to help us to find the path. Religion is before all a practice. Faith without practice has no meaning. We just have to open our eyes and our ears and our mind, to see the path.

Compassion

Compassion is in Buddhism and in Christianity the core of the teaching. It is especially the case for the Dalai Lama who belongs to the Mahayana school. We will read later a striking summary of his teaching as he gave it at the inter-religious meeting I mentioned.

Heart

The theme of this inter-religious meeting was “the Good Heart”. The Dalai Lama chose this title because for him the main religions meet in this understanding of what is the core of spiritual life. Religion must express itself through kind-heartedness. If not it remains empty and dry.

Of course, we could mention still so many aspects which are very inspiring. But it is enough to show how much we can learn from Buddhism, while remaining Christian. We can even deepen our Christian faith thanks to this inspiration which remains foreign to us while it belongs to another tradition but nevertheless seems so near to our heart because of its deep link with the Christian tradition.

When we approach another tradition, or simply a different culture or a different race, we have this mixed feeling of unknown which overwhelms us and also this feeling of common destiny. The treasure of our future discovery is often hidden behind scary appearances. How not to be frightened and how to see through them?

Texts

Questions:

I invite you to go outside, for a walk, and to reflect on your attachment, on your fears of what is different, on your way of loving.

- How does your attachment to your well known world, your comfort, prevent you from interacting with life?
- What is the relationship between comfort and compassion in your life?
- The Dalai Lama says that compassion is not instinctual but has a sound base or grounding in reason and experience. How do you develop your capacity for compassion in your everyday life?

Prayer: The Way of Compassion (sutta nipata)

Sharing

TEA BREAK

Music: shakuhachi (Mdm 3)

2) Presence, friendship, dialogue and complementarity

HH the Dalai Lama shows us a way for inter-religious dialogue which combines a sense of unity but also a strong sense of the differences between religions. This dialogue means presence and friendship as Lawrence Freeman describes it in his introduction to the London seminar.

Presence

The quality of presence is important when we approach another tradition: our own presence and the one of the other. How are we present to the other? Presence is not only a physical notion, it is a spiritual dimension in our way to be with others. Presence means that we are directly in touch with what happens. Presence is experience; and our experience is the condition for our spiritual growth; it leads us on the path. Encounter with another tradition is not a negotiation. Ecumenism cannot be actualised through discussion; the root of unity is in our common experience. Harmonious experience creates the bond between us. Compassion is not theory nor dogma; it is a process in which we invest our whole being. Compassion can only exist when you have at least two people. It is an experience which links different people beyond differences. Dialogue is therefore the way to make us loving people, because we recognise our interdependency. Presence, experience and interdependency could be the three keys which foster our relationship with other traditions.

Friendship

This acting compassion is a form of openness; it is an active form of friendship which opens us to the others and accepts them as they are. In each dialogue, there is a risk. It is why we need to be confident and to trust the other. Friendship, when it is true compassion, means vulnerability. HH the DL is a vivid example of this warm friendship which can link people who meet for the first time. Friendship does not need to have a long past; it can be here and now.

Diversity

Friendship opens a space where everyone can be who he/she is. It is a space of acceptance, far from caricatures. Nobody is defined from outside. Inside the same tradition even, there is diversity, and there must be also acceptance of these differences although people believe they belong to the same group. Diversity is not a threat for unity. Each one can express his/her own beliefs without being judged. It is important to be clear about differences and to declare what one believes in, without softening the truth which remains central. Friendship can better develop where differences are expressed clearly. What a challenge! HH the DL has an incredible capacity of entering in another tradition and to consider it as if he would himself belong to this tradition. He says often: “from the Christian point of view...”, and further: “as a Buddhist monk...”. One must be able to play with different points of view, as one would do with different roles on the stage.

Complementarity

The Dalai Lama says very clearly how much everybody must remain rooted in his/her own tradition. Religions are different because they answer different needs or forms of sensibility. They fit with the cultural diversity. This diversity must remain because it is a necessity to make the spiritual path accessible to each of us. Although religions often can have many similarities, they represent also

different points of view. They are a little bit like different languages which can be understood by different people.

I understand this complementarity in the following way: Imagine a house with four walls of different colours. One will say the house is red, another one will say it is blue, a third one it is yellow, etc... each of them is right but what they say is not complete. There is only one God and each path shows other qualities of this same God. Of course we can see similarities, but we must also accept the importance of this form of complementarity between traditions. We must accept that God cannot be described. He is beyond any representation. He is mystery.

We do not know why we have chosen the Christian way. It is sure that we have been born in a Christian context and it is why we have been trained in this way of perceiving Reality. I was born as a white European and received therefore a Christian upbringing. I could have been born in Tibet and received a Buddhist upbringing or in Africa as a Muslim. In this way, the different religions seem really to be haphazardous ways of progressing on our own way. What is in fact my part in the choice? It seems to me that this choice consists more in the way I choose to follow or not the spiritual path and in the way I shape it through my own experiences than in the choice I make blankly between the different possible world religions. My choice seems more to make my tradition really mine, or not, i.e. to appropriate myself what has been taught to me and to transform it through my own way of living in a personal relationship with God. Nevertheless, although our choice seems very limited, our own tradition represents and expresses the absolute truth for us because it is made unique by the way we practice it.

Texts

Questions:

Take a sheet of paper and a pencil, and make a list of the people or of the things you learned from people who were very different from you. It should help you to see how much we are imprisoned in our habits and ways of thinking, to see how much someone who is different or someone who stands outside of our framework can help us find a kind of opening, to see how much we need each other and how much we are interdependent. Make a list of these opportunities for opening that you have experienced. This list remains yours, it remains confidential. Of course you can share what you want.

The question is: who, outside my own circle, did bring me something (what?), which I never had any clue about before?

Prayer:

We have a time of silence (10 min). Sit comfortably. Breath in and out regularly. Concentrate on what is here and now. Try to stop your thoughts or at least do not concentrate on them: let them go through your mind like clouds through the sky. Open to the richness of life. Open to what is. Abandon yourself to God and let Him transform you.

I'll ring the bell in 10 min.

Sharing

3) Humility and authority

HH the DL is probably one of the most educated and deep person of our century: he has studied the Buddhist teaching since he was a very young man. Through his status of refugee combined with his role as the spiritual leader of Tibetan people, he has been in touch with many different people, cultures, ways of thinking, social classes, etc... He has a very broad experience of life and a deep awareness of what it is. He is spiritually very advanced. Nevertheless, when he talks, he says: “as a simple monk, I...”, or “according to my own experience...”. He is always very humble because he is very conscious of the limits of his knowledge. This is a sign of his spiritual maturity. And this attitude is very natural to him; you can feel how it really is his way of thinking and feeling.

I find this deep humility very inspiring. The Dalai Lama is for me a perfect example of what an authority should be. His authority seems to be mainly based on his kind-heartedness and not at all on power. It is very rare, even exceptional.

This practice of humility is deeply connected with the practice of non-violence.

Texts

As this kind of authority is one of practice, there is no text to read about. There is no theory. This is just the way the Dalai Lama practices his authority. Nevertheless we can remember what the Gospel teaches us, with the words of Jesus, about the role of being a servant.

Questions:

Whom have you met in your life who had this combination of humility and authority?

Whom have you been attracted to who had a false form of authority?

Can you see the impact of both of them in your life?

We prepare for 10 min and then we can share.

Prayer:

We will have now a time of intercession. Please talk with a clear loud voice so that everybody can understand well what you say. Leave some time between two requests, because intercession is a form of compassion. We need time to tune into the request.

Sharing

4) Joy, laughter and humour

When you see or hear the Dalai Lama, it is striking how much he laughs. He expresses the deep joy that Buddhist monks radiate very often. What is it based on? Probably a deep peace in himself because he can look at what happens around him and in him with a clear understanding and detachment. He says himself that he experiences feelings of anger or frustration everyday like anybody, i.e. he does not escape the human condition but he has another perspective on it.

His humour is very peculiar. He knows very well how to laugh at himself or at situations which occur. He has also a joy in creating surprising situations. But this humour is never nasty to anybody.

He never takes advantage of a situation. This joy is in fact very much linked with this sense of humility and authority I described previously.

There is a lot of laughter, but laughter never comes to interrupt the density of consciousness. It comes on the contrary to help to take distance, to enable detachment to arise.

Laughter and humour can also be very disruptive when they break the concentration. With a simple joke you can take away all the seriousness of a situation or the depth of an exchange. Life is serious. Seriousness does not exclude joy but laughter and seriousness often do oppose each other. The spiritual path is something which requires a lot of concentration and commitment; it is not something light. Humour and laughter can be counterproductive. Joy and laughter are very different things. You can have laughter without joy and joy without laughter.

Texts

Here also, it is about a practice. There is no theory. The Dalai Lama inspires us by his own practice of joy, laugh and humour. He does not write about it.

Nevertheless I would like to mention that the rule of St Benedict (5th century) condemns laughter and jokes because they destroy silence.

Questions:

I propose another exercise: let us make three columns on the paper: joy, humour and laughter. And let us write in each column what are the characteristics of each of them, in order to see better the differences between these three expressions of our emotions or attitudes.

Prayer:

Blessing

Sharing