The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Laurence Freeman: "The Dalai Lama has been an inspiration to me"

*On June 18th Laurence Freeman OSB met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Manchester UK. They spoke about the dialogue they will share during the next WCCM Pilgrimage to India in January 2013. They also discussed plans for a new series of Way of Peace events which they will co-lead. See **HERE** some photos of the meeting and **HERE** a video message of the Dalai Lama to the World Community with a spacial word of encouragement to younger meditators*.

You seem to have a very warm friendship with the Dalai Lama and he speaks of you warmly as his friend and spiritual brother. How did this friendship develop? When was your first meeting?

Laurence Freeman: I first met the Dalai Lama in Montreal in 1980, when John Main invited him to visit our new community there after an interfaith service in the Cathedral. I was an early professed monk at that time. The Dalai Lama visited us for midday prayer and meditation followed by lunch. Fr. John had a very positive conversation with him and as he was leaving presented him with a copy of the Rule of St Benedict. The Dalai Lama I think was very impressed and interested by the idea of Christians meditating and teaching meditation from their own tradition. In his book *Towards the True Kinship of Faiths* he describes this meeting and how moved he was by it. He and Fr. John certainly met at a deep personal level.

Some year later, after Fr. John died, I invited his Holiness to lead the John Main Seminar. He accepted in respect of this friendship. Then he asked ?What would you like to me speak

about? I was slightly taken aback and thought quickly and then said ?Would you be willing to comment on the Gospel from your Buddhist tradition?? The Dalai Lama pondered a bit then smiled and replied: ?I don?t know a lot about the Gospels but yes, let?s try it." It was a sign both of his commitment to deep dialogue - seeing from the other's point of view and letting go of attachment to one's own - but also of his personal courage and self-confidence.

And that was the beginning of *The Good Heart Seminar* of 1994. The book of that title has become something of a classic on inter religious dialogue. The Dalai Lama often says this is one of his favourite books, because he has so many letters from Christians around the world saying that his commentaries on the Gospel have helped them to reconnect with their own tradition.

How did the idea for The Way of Peace arise?

LF: During the Good Heart Seminar we decided to extend the dialogue into ?The Way of Peace? in which we would explore different forms of dialogue based in meditation. This was a three year program, beginning with a pilgrimage. His Holiness invited us to Bodhgaya, where the Buddha was enlightened. We had several days of dialogue on the meanings of salvation aan enlightenment and we began every day meditating under the bodhi tree, Christians and Buddhists together in a beautiful serene way. He was especially welcoming and it was a wonderful experience. He gave us a beautiful *thanka* painted at his request by Tibetan monks depicting the Birth of Jesus. This is in our meditation room at our centre in London where we meditate every day.

The second phase of The Way of Peace was a retreat in one of our monasteries in Italy. During it we had more times of meditation together but also some stimulating dialogue sessions on the relationship between images, silence and meditation.

The third phase was the John Main Seminar in 2000, held in Belfast. We wanted to show that if a Buddhist and a Christian monk could be friends then surely Catholics and Protestants could achieve friendship as well.We believed that the friendship that arises from deep dialogue can became a force for healing the wounds of division between people - even very deep, complex and ancient wounds.

I remember one beautiful moment during that seminar in N. Ireland when we went together into a room to meet a group of victims of violence from both sides. The mood was very tense and unfriendly; there was a very cold atmosphere as we walked in. The Dalai Lama immediately registered the emotional mood, skipped the formal introductions and went straight into dialogue beginning by telling his own story and his attitude towards the people who had occupied his country. By the end of the session, the mood had change dramatically and there was a wonderful spirit of self-discovery and openness to each other. It was actually in that meeting that he met Richard Moore , who he admired very much as an example of the human capacity for forgiveness. So over the years, and especially through these dialogues, my respect and very warm affection for the Dalai Lama have grown and deepened and enriched me.

Tell us about your last meeting in the UK?

LF: Recently I met him during his visit to the UK. We caught up with each other's news and then we discussed further dialogues on the horizon.

The first of these will be the dialogue that we will hold in India, in Sarnath, where the Buddha made the first turning of the wheel of Dharma. That will be January in 2013. It will take place during our WCCM pilgrimage to India.

We also discussed a new *Way of Peace* series that will focus on the contemporary issues and problems that have come to the foreground of modern life in recent years, especially our contemporary crisis, since the first *Way of Peace*. So we will announce more information about that 3-year programme soon.

Today, what does the Dalai Lama represent for you?

LF: The Dalai Lama has been an inspiration to me. I would even say a Christ-like figure. He has dealt with great personal loss and suffering. And he has become a human being with boundless compassion and also infectious joy. He teaches by example as well as by words. He can communicate with everyone in simple, informal ways from his own direct experience, without having to use jargon or complex ideas. So he is a wonderful witness I think to every human being on the planet of the human capacity to rise above our isolation and even our worst suffering. He reminds people of the full capacity of human consciousness. In my dialogues with him I have been always struck by the fact that the similarities and the differences in our experience and in our approaches are equally important. This coincides with the Dalai Lama?s opinion, that we must never underestimate the importance of the differences that are highlighted in the course of dialogue.

My own feeling is that there is a paradox here. We enter into the deepest sympathy and even deepest union of experience *through the differences* even more than through our similarities. So the Dalai Lama has enriched my Christian faith in a surprising and creative way. He has also spoken about how his respect for and sympathy for the Christian tradition and Christian faith has been enriched by the contact that he had with our Community and of course with many other Christian groups. I have no doubt, strange though it may sound, that he has enhanced and deepened my Christian faith.

So its always a great joy to meet with him. It refreshes my optimism for the work of our own community - The World Community for Christian Meditation - especially our recently launched *Meditatio* outreach which is bringing the spiritual fruits of meditation to the secular world - which is also deepening the much needed spiritual renewal of the Church. I travel a lot as the Dalai Lama does too. Sometimes our paths cross and that is a great happiness; but even in the times between our meetings I feel very connected to him as a fellow monk, a meditator and, as simply as that very rare phenomenon - a peaceful, joyful and normal human being!

I and our community look forward very much to the January meeting in Sarnath and the next Way of Peace and we keep His Holiness and his extraordinary work for the contemporary world in our prayer always.

Inter-Religious Dialogue

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