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Jesus and Buddha

A Dialogue between Laurence Freeman and the Dalai Lama



In this dialogue with the Dalai Lama, Fr Laurence Freeman discusses the evolution of our relationship to Jesus as our teacher, and the challenges of discipleship. Speaking from personal experience, he describes three levels of relationship. The first level sees Jesus as a fellow human being, no doubt extraordinary, awakening to enlightenment on the spiritual journey. He is the exemplary model for one's life in his integrity, his transcendence beyond cultural conditioning, and his renunciation of self. At the second level, Jesus is experienced as part of one's identity, one's centre of gravity in whom the disciple can take refuge. This develops into the third level in an experience of the "Inner Christ" in which Jesus is still alive and present to us in a different form, in spirit, transforming us as we awake to his divinising presence within us and in others.

Transcript of Fr Laurence Freeman's talk at the dialogue session between him and His Holiness The Dalai Lama on 12 January 2013 at Sarnath, India, where the Buddha gave his first teaching.

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Jesus, for me, is a teacher of the potential we have to transcend our conditioning, our culture, and to engage, meet with each other at the most simple and direct, human, level.

So at the first level, I relate to Jesus as a universal teacher: an exemplary human being who teaches by word, but also by example, personal, complete integrity; someone who has natural authority; someone who embodies the truth that I can trust completely. I have no sceptical questions. Essentially, Jesus is someone in whom I can take refuge with that childlike trust and complete confidence.



Introduction

DALAI LAMA

It is many years that we have known each other and really, from the first time, we developed some sense of deep spiritual brotherhood, so I really love him [Laurence Freeman], I really respect him. So I hope for him also it is the same. This is not only just about personal friendship; it also has to be closer. It is very important, very useful. We can learn from each other.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Thank you, Your Holiness. I have no hesitation in saying that I love you too. That love and respect has been growing ever since we first met in 1980 at the cathedral in Montreal. Fr John Main welcomed you to the city and you met him for the first time; and then you came to our little monastery in Montreal for meditation on Sunday, and for lunch. It was the beginning of a wonderful relationship, a wonderful friendship.

I asked His holiness some years later after Fr John had died, if he would lead the John Main Seminar in London in 1994 .To my surprise His Holiness said yes immediately. Then he said "What shall I talk about?" I had to think very quickly, and I said "Would you speak about the Gospels?"

DALAI LAMA

That's a difficult task. Strictly speaking a Buddhist is not a believer, has no concept of God, so it's difficult for such a person to try to explain the existence of God. But later, I was told my explanation helped people in their own belief. On another occasion also I gave a lecture on Buddhism at Harvard University over a few days about this philosophy. Afterwards, a lady came to see me and she told me

that after she listened to my lecture, her own faith became much stronger. So that means we have some common ground.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

I think that was true, because after the Good Heart Seminar, and the book that has been published in many languages, the Christians who listened to your commentary on the Gospels were deeply touched by both your reverence in handling these sacred words of the Christian tradition, and also by your Buddhist insight into the truth of the Gospels. And I think the Buddhists who were present were also inspired to look at these texts in a new light, in a new dimension. So it was a wonderful moment in inter-religious dialogue. It took a lot of courage to accept that invitation. You said at the time it's impossible, but you did the impossible.

DALAI LAMA

Actually, each day, I received teaching from him [Laurence Freeman] about the Gospels. Then at the meeting I explained, he also explained; then of course some Buddhist ideas, some common ground. Then he came to Bodhgaya. And I think for the first time in history, under the Bodhi tree, Christian brothers and sisters sat with Buddhists and later Hindus and I think a Muslim also joined and we spent half an hour in silent meditation. That is the way to build, from sharing emotionally and psychologically, a genuine sense of spiritual brotherhood, sisterhood. That is the foundation of the development of heart

LAURENCE FREEMAN

If you remember at the beginning of the Bodhgaya dialogues and conversations we had, you presented the World Community with a beautiful *thangka* which you had commissioned from your monks. I had to look at it for a few moments to realise what it was. Because I was expecting a Buddhist picture or a Buddhist theme, but it was actually a *thangka* painting in the Tibetan style of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. We have this *thangka* in our meditation room in London. The next time you are in London I'd love you to come to see

it. It is a permanent presence for us, in our meditation three or four times a day in this room, of this connection. I thought it was a beautiful expression of the kind of dialogue that we need in the modern world. We don't only exchange ideas but we try to look at reality from the other person's point of view, and that's what that *thangka* symbolises.



Relationship with Jesus I

I'll begin by speaking personally about Jesus, how I see and understand and relate to the person of Jesus as my teacher, and then His Holiness will respond and speak about the Buddha in the same way from his own personal perspective. And maybe we'll talk about some of the philosophical or theological ideas of Jesus and the Buddha as well, but primarily we'll just speak about how we see it personally.

The first level of my understanding, my relationship to Jesus is at the human level, simple human level. He was a historical teacher. Although many ideas and legends have accumulated around him, we know from the Gospels that he was born in a particular place, at a particular time, and he belonged to a particular culture, and grew up within a religious, social, and political world.

So I approach Jesus at this human level and relate to him, first of all, as a natural Jesus, not supernatural. An extraordinary human being, quite clearly, and one of the very few human beings who has been born who has become a universal teacher, who can be respected and loved by any intelligent person of goodwill in any tradition or in any period of time. So, extraordinary but not supernatural in that sense. In fact, I would say the longer I have been meditating, the less interested I am in the supernatural.

The supernatural is not a useful category. I think nature is full of mysteries that we cannot explain, just as the universe itself contains many scientific problems that we cannot understand or explain yet. The whole of existence is mysterious, but it's natural. So I think the first level of relationship to Jesus is in this world of nature.

We know little about his early life; the first thirty years of his life is very hidden. But then we know that he had an awakening, a spiritual awakening which is symbolized in the story of the baptism, when he was baptized by John the Baptist. Immediately after his

baptism, in the Gospels it says, “the Spirit led him into the desert” and he spent forty days of spiritual practice, of fasting, prayer, and solitude in the desert. And I think we can see this as an enlightenment experience just as monks in all traditions, lay people in all traditions, set a time, special periods, and special practices, in order to develop their spiritual journey.

The point is, I think, that we can identify with Jesus not only in terms of human social, psychological development, but also his spiritual journey. We can recognize in him the stages of personal development.

We can see that his identity was constructed, as it is in all of us, through our early experiences and through our culture. But also what I see in him is the ability to transcend that conditioning. And it’s a lesson to me, that although I have a particular culture, a particular religion, a particular frame of reference, I must also transcend that conditioning in the same way as Your Holiness just said – we relate to each other at the deepest level simply as human beings. That simple meeting as human beings is actually the goal. But because our conditioning is so strong, it’s quite difficult for us to meet at that simple level.

So Jesus, for me, is a teacher of the potential we have to transcend our conditioning, our culture, and to engage, meet with each other at the most simple and direct, human, level.

He also is a teacher for me because he teaches by example, not simply by words or propositions or ideas. We see, however, in his teaching, his life. His life is consistent with his teaching.

You remember I asked you, Your Holiness, many years ago how you managed to keep calm and peaceful in your life with the many responsibilities you carry and your concern for Tibet and your responsibilities in the world, and your answer has always stayed with me. You said: “I try to be the same when I’m on my own, or when I’m with my close friends or colleagues, or whether I’m in public at a big social event.” That is for me also the great attraction in the person of Jesus as we see him in the Gospels.

He was a person of integrity, wholeness, who was himself. He wasn’t playing a role or pretending to be something. He was simply

himself. It was this authority that impressed his contemporaries, but also often angered his contemporaries.

His teaching, it seems to me, is expressed in his life: the transcendence of the ego, that we must leave self behind. His moral teaching and social teaching is an expression of that.

When he tells us to love our enemies, this is a way of transcending our ego. When we are in enmity or in hostility with others, it is our ego that is holding on to resentment or the desire to punish or to take revenge, and so the ego becomes caught in the cycle of violence. So Jesus is a teacher of non-violence because he is a teacher of the transcendence of the ego. His word for this is the Kingdom.

His mission was very simple. His teaching can be summarized in a few words. He said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand" – now is the time to turn around, to turn your life around, to be converted, and to enter the Kingdom. And his concept of the Kingdom, his idea of the Kingdom, is central to his identity.

The Kingdom is not a place we are going to; the Kingdom is not a reward that we have for being good. The Kingdom is the reality of the presence of God. Where is it? He says on one occasion: "You cannot observe when the Kingdom of God will come. You cannot say, 'Look, here it is or there it is, because in fact the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.'" This word that we translate as 'within' can also be translated as 'among'. So the Kingdom is non-dualistic. It cannot be limited by space or time.

So, the Kingdom is, in a sense, an experience that we enter into, an experience that transforms us. It's a transmission of consciousness. How do we *enter* the Kingdom of God? That's his teaching.

I think the Kingdom of God is parallel with the teaching of nirvana. Maybe there're differences, but probably the best parallel is nirvana. And how do we find nirvana? How do we enter the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven? Well, that's the teaching. That's how he teaches us, by example and by word, by the example of his life. It was a life of engagement with his contemporary situation, with politics, with the people, with the crises of his time.

He was not remote from his contemporaries, but he also took time to withdraw from active life, from speaking, from teaching. He would retire to solitary places to pray alone in the early hours of the morning, or in company with his disciples.

So for me, he is a model of how I should live my life. To be a monk, for me, does not mean withdrawing completely away from the world, but also that I *need* time – my times of meditation as all of us, but also I need time for silence, time for quiet, time to withdraw from activity. For me, his life and the Spirit of Jesus which I'll come to in a minute teaches me that.

So at the first level, I relate to Jesus as a universal teacher: an exemplary human being who teaches by word, but also by example, personal, complete integrity; someone who has natural authority; someone who embodies the truth that I can trust completely. I have no sceptical questions. I'm open to any interpretation or question but, essentially, Jesus is someone in whom I can take refuge. As you take refuge in the Buddha, I can take refuge in Jesus with that childlike trust and complete confidence.



Relationship with Jesus II

There is a second level of relationship for me to Jesus, which is where I feel that I am a disciple. Not a very good disciple – I don't say that to be humble, but I have a sense of what it means to be a disciple and I don't think I'm a very good disciple – but I do feel it is part of my identity to be a disciple. That's where my centre of gravity is in my spiritual life. That relationship with Jesus, in whom I take refuge, straightens me out. When I get my faults, my problems, my sinfulness, my mistakes and so on, that centre of gravity is faithful, is strong and forgiving, and I feel it helps me to straighten myself out, little by little.

With this sense of being a disciple, with my centre of gravity in this person of Jesus, I see that Jesus spoke at more than one level, that we can read his words at many levels, and we can interpret his life at many levels as well. The longer I live, and the more I experience this connection or this sense that he is my centre of gravity, the more mysterious is the person of Jesus.

This leads to a third level of relationship, which is where we can begin to experience in a small way an awakening: an awakening to the Inner Christ. This is the essential mystery or the essential challenge too of Christian faith, that the historical person of Jesus, the universal teacher of wisdom, is also present in a way, in a form, within or with us. St Paul says the secret, the mystery, is Christ within you.

In the dialogue that we have shared over many years, I think the idea of Buddha nature and the Christian idea that everyone is created in the image of God, those are parallel ideas. Not exactly the same, but they touch the same truth: that at the heart of the human person there is a capacity for infinite expansion, for liberation, for enlighten-ment, and in the Christian language we would say for divinization.

For example, the theology that makes sense to me is a very ancient Christian theology, that God became human so that human beings became God. That is the destiny of the human being: that we are called to be divinized. What that means takes a long time to understand, perhaps.

So there is an experience of awakening, continuous awakening that I feel. Because of this centre of gravity, because of this sense of taking refuge in Jesus, I have a feeling of an awakening to him and in him that occurs gradually, mysteriously, over time. Sometimes there are particular moments of insight when I think I understand it a little more, but the awakening is continuous and it occurs within my life.

As I see what I feel to be in myself – Christ in me – I experience in others, in everyone I meet, whether it's the shoe-keeper at the Buddhist temple that we went to in Varanasi a couple of days ago, the very humble people, the strangers you meet on the street or in your Holiness. I think Jesus, for me, means being able to recognize him or this mystery that he opens us to of the Kingdom in each other. When we really are open to each other at the human level as you described, then this is what we see in the other person, and this reinforces what we see in ourselves.

For me, the Gospels are very important. Every day the Gospels teach me new things. I read the Resurrection appearances with a sense that this is how we see or experience Jesus in the world. In the Resurrection appearances after his death, we read in the Gospels that he just appeared; he just was there. He didn't come in a big flash of light or a puff of smoke. He was there.

When people first saw him, they didn't recognize him. But then at some moment of awakening, they did see him and recognize him. Then he would disappear from their sight. But after he had disappeared from their sight, they felt empowered, energized, and they felt they had discovered their work, their mission, their responsibility in the world. So they were filled with an energy that sent them back to their life, to their work with a feeling that he was accompanying them, that he was with them in this work. But it was

their work. He wasn't taking responsibility away from them. He was giving them responsibility. He was empowering his disciples.

That, for me, is essential to understanding Jesus – that he didn't just sit there wanting to be worshipped or venerated, because he always points away from himself. In the Gospels we see that. He points to the Father.

At the Good Heart Seminar, an American sister asked you, Your Holiness, “If you could meet Jesus and you could ask him one question, what would you ask? Do you remember?”

DALAI LAMA: Yes, yes.

And Your Holiness said immediately: “I would ask Jesus ‘what is the nature of the Father?’” It was perfect; exactly the right question. I think a lot of Christians would not have thought of that question because we focus on Jesus, certainly, but Jesus does not focus on himself. Jesus is focused, turned towards the Father, the ultimate mystery, the ground of being, however we describe it.

So to ask Jesus ‘what is the nature of the Father’ is the crucial question, and it is what he wants, I think. That is why he taught, that is why he exists, that is why he was born: to bring us to that experience. So it explains something that is very difficult to explain in a way. When we speak about Jesus in our life, for many people today that sounds a bit strange, a bit weird – somebody who died 2000 years ago – but that is the essence of Christian faith.

As you said, Your Holiness, we believe that life does not end with death, so the life of Jesus continues in a new way, with a new body, with a new consciousness; and this new body, this new life, this new consciousness, we call Christ – the Christ.

For me, the connection between the historical Jesus and the Inner Christ is the most interesting and mysterious and exciting connection in my life, and to feel that I'm connected to that makes me feel connected to everything in this world. Through that connection, I can feel and love the truth in every religious tradition, and in individuals who manifest the essence of that tradition.

And I think that means that to be a Christian, for me, is a process; it's not just an identity. It's a process; it's an evolution. But

it does mean, to be a Christian, that there is no competition. Jesus did not compete with other religious leaders, then why should Christians compete or pretend to be superior to anyone else? That would be un-Christlike, not like Jesus to do that.

Historically Christianity as a religion, because of its involvement in the political and economic empire which came out of the western hemisphere, often has become intolerant or exclusive. But that is being untrue to the way I understand Jesus at a personal level, because if we draw a line between us and I say “Jesus is here on my side of the line”, as soon as I say that, he goes over to the other side. So, any kind of exclusivism doesn’t work.

There’s a great teacher of early Christian thought, Clement of Alexandria in the second century, who says that salvation is divinization. The meaning of salvation is that we become fully absorbed in the consciousness, the life of God; and that Jesus is a medicine, not a judge, that Jesus is a medicine or a physician that brings the healing to the world that we need in order to achieve our full human potential.

Those are some of my thoughts, a little vague maybe, on who Jesus is for me: a teacher, a healer, and a way. And through this connection with him and through the interior aspect of his presence, I feel I can live my life with a sense of meaning and a sense of service to others.

DALAI LAMA: Wonderful... wonderful! Really! Now my own understanding about Christianity has become much deeper. You speak through your own experience, through using your own intelligence to analyse, so have developed deeper understanding. Wonderful... wonderful!



Discipleship I

In this session, we are going to take the theme of discipleship. The Buddhist expression for this is to take refuge in the teacher, the guru, the master.

Christians speak more often perhaps about following Jesus. In the early part of the Gospels, we see Jesus *gathering* his disciples, and he gathers them by *calling* them. He says “come follow me”, and they respond in the stories by dropping their fishing nets or leaving their desks, they immediately leave everything and follow him.

This ideal or image of discipleship is essential to the Christian identity in some way or Christian meaning. It is of course also universal. Particularly in the monastic tradition, the Desert Fathers, the early Christian monks were hermits living in the desert. The monks would be in solitary practice, but disciples would come to them to learn from them, most of all, by example. It was about living with your teacher. That was the most important way in which you learned. It wasn't so much about intellectual study or information, but seeing how your teacher responded to the situations of daily life or to moods and emotions and conflicts. So, it's by example and sharing in the life of the teacher in a very simple, basic, domestic way.

And then there was a kind of a contract between the disciple and the teacher. On the disciple's side, the disciple had to be completely open, completely trusting and tell the truth and say everything that he was going through; and on the master's, the teacher's, the guru's side, he was faithful to the disciple. He would never abandon the disciple. So there is this contract of fidelity and truthfulness that made the teacher-disciple relationship.

And this was seen as an expression of the relationship of the disciple to Jesus. The ultimate guru in the Christian vision is Jesus, although of course we have human gurus and visible gurus as well

who can guide us in particular ways. But it is always the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ who is seen to be active in that person. It was my own experience with John Main, for example.

So in our human experience of discipleship, we discover why Jesus tells us: "If you are to follow me, you must leave self behind." Leaving our self-centeredness, that was the call of Jesus. "If you wish to follow me, leave self behind." And then he says in another passage: "Leave all your possessions behind." That sounds very extreme, very dramatic, but that is the essence of discipleship. How we do that of course depends upon our calling in life, our vocation, our destiny, how we are meant to live. But it is a form of monastic renunciation, to leave everything.

I think this is what we do in meditation. At the time of meditation, we renounce everything. We were talking about emptiness at lunch. Although emptiness is a Buddhist term, *sunyata*, it is also a Christian concept in the idea of poverty of spirit. In meditation, by letting go of all the riches of our mind, imagination and thought and so on, we come to this experience where we are impermanent and where we are interdependent, and I think that is the essence of emptiness as well. So discipleship demands a radical renunciation. We may make that renunciation in different forms of life but meditation is common to all those forms of life, and I think it takes us to the essence of discipleship.

What is the bond that unites us to teachers in our lives? Do we need teachers? Do we need them throughout our life? Sometimes the guru appears in your life for a period and then is no longer there physically; but nevertheless, you would say they remain your teacher throughout your life. Then there are different kinds of teachers. There may be one fundamental teacher. For the Christian, that would be Jesus; for the Buddhist, that would be the Buddha. Then there are other teachers who have a formative influence, help to make us, form us, shape us and those who make other, maybe less important contributions to our journey.

It's a very unique and personal relationship. It carries with it a grace, an energy, a way of expanding our consciousness which is deeply personal, but also transforms us and changes us.

It's a very sensitive relationship and it has great potential. If you think of the teachers you had at school or in your professional life, the relationship with the teacher can be a negative one also. The teacher has power over the student and, therefore, if a teacher cannot handle the intensity of the relationship, the relationship can become non-productive, even corrupting, because of the ego. The ego can spoil or corrupt the relationship in two ways.

It could be on the disciple's side. The disciple becomes possessive of his teacher, doesn't want to share his teacher with others; or becomes psychologically over dependent on his or her teacher so that they don't grow into full maturity. That would be on the disciple's side.

On the teacher's side, the danger is that they are not able to use the power or the authority that they have, and the projection that is an inevitable part of the teaching process – projection from the student to the teacher. Students put them on a pedestal, too high up, and worship the teacher, and the teacher can take this too literally and abuse the relationship with the power.

So if we speak about this relationship, we have to be very honest. It can be very powerful and liberating and empowering, it can bring the disciple into maturity, but it can also go wrong if there isn't a sufficient maturity in the teacher.

Discipleship is a liberating and a fulfilling human relationship that brings the disciple into the fullness of their potential. Jesus says it is "enough for a disciple to be like his teacher". Yet he also says to his disciples before he leaves them: "You will do greater things than me" and that seems to me to be why we can *trust* Jesus as teacher because he doesn't try to possess the power that he has or possess his disciples. A good teacher is happy if the student fulfils his potential and may do greater things than the teacher. A good teacher is happy about that, and I think Jesus is a good teacher for that very reason. He sees that the accumulation of experience and energy within the Christian community of disciples produces greater things than he was able to do in his own lifetime.

The question is about discipleship in the modern world. In the ancient world and in the traditional religions, this relationship was

seen as a special grace perhaps, but also something central to the idea of spiritual growth and formation. It was a fast track to maturity and to individuation, provided that the connection between the disciple and the teacher was in a healthy place, in the disciple and in the teacher.

We are very conscious today of the psychological dimension of this relationship and of the danger of unhealthy connections, but the other question is: How does modern culture and the modern sense of individual worth and individual dignity and so on relate to the traditional idea of following a teacher?

I think it's much more challenging for modern people, certainly modern secular people, to understand the nature of this relationship. Perhaps, there is a greater awareness today of the need for the disciple to be committed to personal maturity, personal responsibility, and personal practice, and not to be dependent psychologically on the teacher. Also the social structures are very different.

But I think that this is still a relationship of grace that is universal and always present, and we have to be able to recognize, in the circumstances of our own lives, where these relationships exist. We are then responsible for how we take that opportunity, because no good teacher is going to force himself or herself onto the disciple. They may give the invitation "come follow me" or open the opportunity, but then, today especially, where we are aware of the power of choice in coming to maturity, it's up to us to respond.



Discipleship II

Discipleship means a deep listening and listening is the basis of obedience. The word 'obedience' in English comes from the Latin word *ob-audire* which means to listen. So to be obedient is to listen. The word 'disciple' comes from the Latin *discere* which means to learn, so we're learning by a deep listening.

And the essence of discipleship is, I think, a certain kind of spiritual friendship, not the domination of one person over another. In friendship, there has to be a fundamental equality; that relationship that Your Holiness was talking about at the beginning of the session this morning, of just one human being to another.

Although the differences between those two human beings may be very great, they are fundamentally equal in their humanity. This relationship, as it develops in its own unique way over time, may be a short time or may be many years, has an effect both upon the disciple and upon the teacher. The disciple experiences it as a healing and an empowerment and a liberation from fear, because in the relationship the disciple is turned towards the teacher to listen in a deep and obedient way, and to serve.

Again, this question of service has to be understood in the modern psychological sense, but that is the role of the disciple. It is to find their own empowerment and maturity in a spirit of service, and the relationship provides the opportunity for that. We see it in other forms of education – sitting at the feet of a good professor, going to their classes, and the students of that professor will be very happy to be of service in the class, or in preparatory work, or in research. But at the spiritual level, the service goes deeper and may take other forms.

Discipleship is not about belonging to a sect. The corrupt form or false form of discipleship is one that gathers around the teacher, but becomes a kind of a closed circle that is inward-looking. What

we see in both the Buddha and in Jesus, calling their disciples to them and training them and giving them the example of how to live, we see a community forming that is turned outwards to the benefit of the world, not just to the benefit of the *sangha* or the community of disciples. And that's, I think, one of the real tests of true discipleship, that through the love and fidelity and obedience to the teacher, it produces people who are turned outwards in a spirit of service to the world, to the world at large.

Community is essential to discipleship. Although the relationship between the teacher and the disciple is a deeply intimate and personal one, it happens within community, strangely enough. And this, I think, also helps to ensure the health of the relationship. It keeps the centre of the relationship away from the ego, the possessiveness or the tendency of the ego to try to control.

In my own experience with Father John, he was a strong teacher with a very clear vision and strong personality, but I don't think he ever told me what to do. Many times when I was in doubt or confused about various questions or things I should do or not do, I could discuss them with him, but he would never say, "Well, this is what you've got to do." But after the conversation, it would be very clear to me what I should do, and then I would hopefully do it.

That's a certain quality of a true teacher, I think, to help to bring the disciple to their own clarity and then empower them to make their own choice. That takes place both within the intimacy of the friendship, but also within a community.

Those are some of the elements of discipleship as I see them, from my own experience and in the Christian tradition. I think modern culture is challenging to this, largely because our idea of our self, of our personality, of what the self is, has changed; but also because in the modern world, we have become much more atomized, much more individualistic. As a result of that, the ego structure, in modern culture, is very strong in one sense, but very weak in another sense.

It's very strong in the sense that our ego is developed, through materialism and consumerism, to be very self-centred; but very weak in that it makes it difficult for us to transcend. It takes a

certain strength in the ego, a certain kind of strength in the ego, to transcend itself; and the relationship of discipleship to the teacher allows this transcendence to take place as it does in meditation.

This is why we need teachers of meditation. Nobody would begin to meditate without the example of others. The teacher, it seems to me, is an integral part of the spiritual journey and a wonderful grace and gift in our lives. An opportunity, when it comes, we should be able to recognize it and embrace it. And it's something, I think, that meditation prepares us for.

People begin to meditate today for many different reasons – to restore their hair, to improve their cholesterol, to cope with stress and so on – and that's a perfectly valid way to begin or motivation to begin. But once you've begun to feel the physical or psychological benefit of meditation, you also begin to discover there's a spiritual dimension to your being. And at this point in your development, at this point of your journey of meditation, a teacher becomes very valuable and will appear in some form, at the right time, in the right way.

Apart from the individual teacher, I've been concentrating upon that, but apart from the individual teacher, which is a special grace, I think there are other ways in which we can experience discipleship – through community, through the weekly meditation group.

Your Holiness, we have weekly meditation groups that meet in churches, in schools, in universities, in parishes, in all sorts of places, places of work, and the group develops a friendship through the practice of meditation together – many of you are part of meditation groups. I think that becomes a teacher. Let's say we experience the Spirit who is the teacher.

Jesus tells us that he will continue to teach us through the Spirit. "The Spirit will be your teacher," he says, "after I have gone." So we can experience the teacher, the Spirit, through the meditation group and, of course, through the scriptures and through any form of human activity – of art or music or science – which manifests the truth. So the central relationship with one's teacher is the guiding light through the different phases of one's life.



Discussion

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Can I ask you one question? I know there are different philosophical Buddhist positions on “Where is the Buddha now?” or ‘What is the influence of the Buddha *now*?’ Do you feel personally the presence of the Buddha?

DALAI LAMA

Oh yes!

LAURENCE FREEMAN

The same historical figure in a new form?

DALAI LAMA

No, not necessarily the historical figure, but... I don't know what to say. Buddha's spirit, soul maybe, or in other words, Buddha in a different form. Buddha is not just a physical or divine nature. Buddha is not limited just to the physicality. So Buddha is still alive. Buddha is still there. And there are a number of cases where people have actually seen Buddha, and received some teaching. This is also possible. Recently I was told one Thai monk actually received a vision of Buddha, and since then he has accepted Buddha's spirit or Buddha's being is still there.

Some Buddhist schools of thought believe that after Buddha passed away Buddha's mind was no longer there. Those schools actually believe that there is an end to the continuity of consciousness. Now there are four major different schools of thought in Buddhist tradition. But even there, in one school there are sub-divisions. In one school of thought, I think there are 18 divisions. So some believe at the time of Buddha's death Buddha's

mind's was no longer there. But the other schools of thought believe Buddha's mind is still there, and Buddha's being is still there.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

So that would be similar, essentially the same, as the Christian understanding that Jesus died physically because he was a human being so he had to die, but his consciousness continued.

DALAI LAMA

Consciousness,,, or I think *being*. Jesus as a being. As I mentioned, if you use Buddha's 'mind', then you get the impression only 'mind'. So Buddha's 'being' means the complete person, but a different form of body or sometimes a formless body. So Jesus Christ went through human, physical death, passed away, but his being is still there, present, and through meditation you can actually get an experience of it.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Very similar.

DALAI LAMA

I think the Buddhist explanation is *samsara*, consciousness based on body, brain. The brain is physical. Now this consciousness does not depend on just the physical, for example dreams. Sometimes there is a special dream body. In some cases the dream body can depart, can separate from this body. So that mind does not depend on the physical, the grosser physical faculties. And therefore there's greater chance of seeing Buddha's being or Jesus Christ's being.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

The Christian would believe that the continuation of the being of Jesus is a presence that is active in some way and, if we collaborate with it or if we open ourselves to this being in his new form, that our lives are changed.

DALAI LAMA

Oh yes, that's right.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

So there is an active, subtle, of course very subtle, but an active influence of the presence of Jesus. You would say the same is true of the Buddha?

DALAI LAMA

Oh yes. Actually the very purpose of the appearance of Jesus is to benefit or help sentient beings. The Buddhist explanation would be that if in particular sentient beings our karma is right, that means if our whole mental attitude becomes more receptive, then you can see. Similarly I think the very purpose of the appearance of Jesus Christ is not only to serve his own generation. Frankly speaking, I think during his own lifetime Jesus may not have been so popular, but after, you see millions and millions of followers. So his energy, which is his being, is among his followers, and those who are mentally receptive certainly will receive some special blessing, or some special connection will be there.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

We would say although his physical body died he still has a body in a different, more subtle, way both in his followers and in another sense with the cosmos, the whole material world. In Christian language, we would say Jesus died, he ascended, went into this other realm, and he returned to the Father, and he became reintegrated with the Father.

DALAI LAMA

The Palya Sanskrit tradition of Buddhism also says that the *Nirmanakaya* form of the Buddha in which he appeared finally dissolves into the *Sambhogakaya* form of the Buddha. That means Buddha appeared in a solid body; *Sambhogakaya* is body, but not this solid body. So the solid body is the beginning; it ends – birth and death. The more subtle body benefits from deeper *Dharmakaya*.

Sometimes I really doubt. Some people say “Father, Son, Holy Spirit, corresponds with Buddhist *Dhamma Sangha* – that I do not know. If there is too much enthusiasm, then I think the unique aspect may be emphasised. I prefer that the uniqueness must be kept, but meantime it is our responsibility to make clear that all these different philosophical views or different ways of approach are really immensely helpful to humanity. Strictly speaking, the world will never be a Christian world, will never be a Buddhist world, or a Hindu world or a Muslim world. It will be still like that – some Christians, some Buddhists, some Hindus, some Muslims, some Jews, and so on.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

There are people who would say today that religion has caused more problems and therefore science, the scientific method, scientific knowledge, is a better alternative to religion.

DALAI LAMA

Science also creates a lot of things which bring fear. Nuclear weapons, biological weapons, chemical weapons, all these things are created by scientists, isn't it? So this, I do not agree with.



There is a second level of relationship for me to Jesus, which is where I feel that I am a disciple. That relationship with Jesus, in whom I take refuge, straightens me out. The longer I live, and the more I experience this connection or this sense that he is my centre of gravity, the more mysterious is the person of Jesus.

This leads to a third level of relationship, which is where we can begin to experience in a small way an awakening: an awakening to the Inner Christ. This is the essential mystery or the essential challenge too of Christian faith, that the historical person of Jesus, the universal teacher of wisdom, is also present in a way, in a form, within or with us. St Paul says the secret, the mystery, is Christ within you.



Transcript of Fr Laurence Freeman's talk at the dialogue session between him and His Holiness The Dalai Lama on 12 January 2013 at Sarnath, India, where the Buddha gave his first teaching.

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