



Warm Heart Open Mind (5)

by

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The following discussion was held on 30 May 2002 between His Holiness Dalai Lama and a group of Academics from Auckland University in Auckland New Zealand.

My main interest, as you know, is emotional human value in order to have a better world, a more harmonious world, a more peaceful world and also a more stable environment. Then, another thing is the promotion of religious harmony. So wherever I go, I always keep these two things in my mind. Now, certainly, I always recommend peace. At the same time, I am always eager to learn from different experiences and from other people. Also, whenever I meet some religious believer I am always very eager to learn from them, from their own tradition and what their experience is. Similarly those in different scientific fields I am eager to learn from. I can accept the computer now. [laughter] I have loads of enthusiasm to learn. Also some new fields I am very eager to learn about. So, I always feel not only is it a great honour, but also I feel a very keen interest to learn from scholars, from all of the different assemblies of knowledgeable persons. So I am very happy to have this opportunity. So, perhaps the main thing is harmonization.

QUESTION: One of the things that we all recognize is that it's very often religions that have been the source of division in human history and that continues to be the case, tragically in the Middle-East and elsewhere. So the harmonization of religions is a very important topic for all of us. We were wondering, what is the right approach to achieving this? The great religious traditions of the world, should they be working to discover what they have in common? Perhaps even looking towards eventually the evolution of a single harmonious religion of humanity? Is that the direction we should be going in? Or is it more a question of accepting our differences, celebrating those differences and respecting each other in those differences. So, maybe those two approaches aren't opposed to one another. Certainly in my own work – I work within the Christian tradition – I've become more and more critical of the philosophically dominant understanding of God in that tradition; God as a supernatural creator outside the world with all these properties of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and so on. And I've been wondering whether within Christianity there's a possibility of understanding the notion of God in a way that doesn't set up this strong divide between the supernatural and the natural. After all Christianity has a doctrine of incarnation, which you might think would tend in that direction. I am wondering if there is a point of connection with Buddhism there, which tends to

have a more unified view, a more naturalistic view of the world.

HIS HOLINESS: Of the two possible avenues that you refer to at the beginning, between whether the approach is towards a greater unification so that eventually they would have only one world religion, or whether we should pursue a path where there is an explicit recognition of the differences. I personally feel that we should follow more the latter. I think over the last three thousand years perhaps, some traditions happened I think not only just for worship but some belief with philosophy. There was always one tradition already there, Buddhist philosophy. But then 2500 years ago different philosophies eventually developed. Some in different places I think within India. I think 500 years after the Buddha came Jainism. Anyway, I think they came after Buddhism. Jainism started another tradition. So anyway, they had one tradition already there, one religious faith there, but then in spite of that new religions came. So, I feel, because of the growth of humanity there are different mental dispositions, and also due to certain different circumstances including the location or environment, so then different traditions eventually develop. So in the future, in spite of our very interdependent situation, still the human mental disposition has a great variety. Therefore I think it is better in order to satisfy a variety of people to keep the variety of the traditions. And each one has its own unique good things there. So this is my view.

Then I think one very unfortunate thing, as you mentioned, in religion is the question of division, and in some cases even conflict. In the past it happened; even today it's happening. So, firstly we need different traditions. Secondly, that is also sometimes causing problems. Therefore, how can it be overcome? Now here, from my own little experience, basically I think the answer is more contact. Look at the Muslims. I found the Muslims of India, the Muslims of Malaysia or Indonesia, and the Muslims in Arab countries, are all the same. Then the Muslims of Tibet also have the same sort of faith. However, there are in lots of different environments. That means there are other traditions there, just next door to you, there are other traditions there. So that makes a big difference.

QUESTION: But these differences are used as badges of identity to distinguish one from another. I come from Ireland, so the differences are minimal between the different faiths, between Protestants and the Roman Catholics and yet it's those cultural differences that are worn as a badge as an identity to actually keep people apart.

HIS HOLINESS: The Indian Muslims or Malaysian Muslims, because in their mind there are different traditions there, it is almost taken for granted by nature. From childhood they already have this feeling or concept about different traditions. I think that makes their attitude towards other traditions more open. Now in India, for so many centuries there have been very many traditions. I think still in India on the religious level you can see one family Christian, one family Hindu, one Muslim, one Jain, (Jains are I think not very wide spread in India). Then in

the southern state, the majority are Christians, some Hindus are there, some Muslims there, then they can live harmlessly together, they are just good neighbours.

I think now we have closer contact with various traditions. So here, usually I have four points. Number one: meeting with scholars in different traditions and discovering what are the differences and what are the similarities. Secondly: meeting people from different traditions to exchange deeper spiritual experiences. This is very very helpful. Now in my own case it's come as a result of several of my meetings with the late Thomas Merton, the American Trappist Monk. Now my attitude is that our meetings have been of immense benefit to open my eyes, to open my mind towards Christianity. Christianity is an effective tradition and they have the ability to produce such wonderful people. Then thirdly: pilgrimage, group pilgrimage. Different people from different traditions, different faiths, all together in different holy places, sacred places, and if possible praying together. At least pray to what I call "higher being." Not using the words Buddha or God. If we use the word God then that immediately gives an impression of a creator and if we use Buddha then something different again. So I say "higher being." Actually there's no higher beings! But, pray to the higher being. So it's possible to pray together, if not then silent meditation. So this is I think is one very good experience.

Another example was when as a pilgrim I visited Jerusalem, and also the sacred place of Lady Fatima. Last year when I visited these places I got some sort of feeling there in that very place where thousands upon thousands of human beings, who, in many cases are passing through difficulties, including physical difficulties, come as a pilgrimage, as pilgrims, and get inspiration, or hope and almost new life. So that's sufficient reason to admire or to appreciate the contribution of Christianity.

So, yes in philosophy there are differences, but that is not important. Those philosophies happened because of the necessity to help humanity, because there are so many different people. For some people I think the concept of a creator is very powerful. For some people the concept of self creation is much more effective.

Then fourthly, like at the Assisi meeting, the Assisi gathering. The present His Holiness the Pope initiated that Assisi meeting. At that time after our prayer, the prayer of the gathering there, I expressed to him my hope that this kind of meeting might take place continuously so that it is in the eyes of the millions of followers of the different traditions. People can then see their leaders coming together and speaking with one voice. With one voice a message of peace, from one platform. I think that's very powerful. So now here usually, when I participate and speak to a religious sort of gathering, I make it clear at the beginning: Yes we have many differences, but inside that we have our own practice, and it's in our interests to work together, and to feel ourselves to be as spiritual brothers and sisters. So that's my usual sort of way. According to my belief I think that's the proper way. I think we can change. At least

the majority can. Still, some small groups, mischievous groups are always there. Even I think sometimes mischievous Buddhist groups, even in Buddha's time, yes. Similarly I think there were some mischievous Christian groups when Jesus Christ was alive. So I think some mischievous people are always there! [laughter]

QUESTION: It's easy to talk about the co-existence of different traditions and religions on an abstract level, but if you look at history, religion has been the cause of most of our most inhumane practices amongst human beings. And a holy war can be more violent than anything else, because you don't know where to stop. It's not a rational choice. You have to kill and kill and kill until you crush the other side etc.,. So I am wondering, if you look at new religions, some have been so destructive that maybe it is a better strategy for us not to focus on religion so much. Your example of different neighbours living together – that could have been possible not because they focused on the religion but the commonality between their religions. But we have different aspects of self and we can relate to another person at a different level as human beings without focusing on religion. I am not a religious person and also as soon as you say, "religious harmony will help the world to become a better place" then I have a question: What do we do with the non-religious people such as myself? So I am wondering whether it is really the only strategy to focus on religions and religious harmony, or is it possible to forget about religion and live together happily?

HIS HOLINESS: I believe, strictly speaking, that the believers are a small portion out of the six billion human beings on this planet. So that's why I always stress the importance of the secularities, not religions, and what is the way to promote religious harmony among the believers. Now the other field, the non-believers or non-religious people, I think they are the larger group. Now without religion human beings can survive. Without religion we can be successful people, happy people. Now the problem is, I feel, sometimes I think the non-believer considers the values of the human being, such as human affection, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, self-discipline and contentment, these they consider religious matters. So as they are not a religious believer therefore these are not relevant to them – that feeling or attitude. That's a mistake, I think. I feel it's very important to know that basic human values and religion are separate. I think major religious traditions are certainly helping humanity to strengthen the human values. But human values themselves are separate. I think, I believe, I feel human values survive in human affection. Without a mother's affection we can't survive. So from childhood, right from the beginning of our life we cannot be separate from human values, but we can be without religion. Religion comes later. I think for example, we learned the value of compassion, the value of affection we learned from our mother, not from a religious leader. Many years after, then we learn the deeper sort of meaning of love and compassion from a religious leader. So this is how we do it.

QUESTION: Your Holiness, on human values. You said that there are human values that are

general, like compassion and love, which we get from our mothers and so on. Now, how about human rights, what we call human rights, in general: the right to be free from persecution, from hunger, to have the right to believe in what we want to and so on? Now, would you say that these are some supreme human values? But on the other hand there are some people, political leaders mainly, who would say that there are particular Asian values, supposedly. Like for example, we need to think of the group, we need to think of everybody before ourselves. We need to think of the whole party or community or family and so the individual is not so important, whereas those people who promote Asian values tend to say that the human rights idea – which is somehow to be universal – they say it is not universal. It is actually Western. It is individualistic. So what do you say to that?

HIS HOLINESS: You know there was the World Human Rights Conference in Vienna, 1994. I believe the respect of human rights is universal. It is wrong to say we in Asia are a sort of special culture, or we have special or different sort of values. I don't know. Then for some people, I think, some nations expressed that because of their political system. In some cases maybe it's their own philosophy of thinking. That I don't know.

SAME QUESTIONER: But would you not accept that was so from really early times?

HIS HOLINESS. Even then I don't know. Even sometimes in the West people also I think are fond of making a distinction East/West. That also I do not agree with. Basically we are the same, East and West are the same. I think in the context of material development, as far as modernity is concerned, yes, the West is much more developed, the East is backward, a little bit behind. But as human beings are concerned, East and West are the same, I feel. So there are some little differences, because of the environment, because of the much more advanced material progress. Therefore there are some little differences, but that's on the surface. I think emotionally, mentally, even physically, basically we are the same.

QUESTION: Before you were talking your Holiness, about these fundamental, these very ancient traditions – for example the Indian philosophical tradition and the Christian philosophical religious tradition. Do you think these are really just little differences? Don't you think really they are very big and fundamental differences, that they make or they create different people?

HIS HOLINESS: Oh, yes. I think the concept of "the creator" – Buddhism, Jainism and some, one part of the *sangha* do not accept that. Those I think are very different, big differences.

QUESTION: But you've made very slight of it.

HIS HOLINESS: It's a rather complex issue because when we speak of similarities and differences among people, of course often we are speaking really in a relative context. In terms of certain

issues there may be a lot of differences, for example, social structure, cultural environment and so on, but in other areas there may be a much larger area of convergence and similarity than we may actually perceive. Then, in fact the moment we use the term similarity we are already implying that we are comparing two different things. I think the differences are always there but at the same time there's some sort of common things, that also is always there.

QUESTION: I was just going to say, human beings seem to have a habit of focusing on the differences and forgetting the similarities, and that goes...

HIS HOLINESS: True, yes I think to some extent that's true. This tendency is definitely true, but one thing that we need to do is to try to reflect and examine whether by highlighting the differences there is a greater benefit or whether by highlighting the commonality there is a greater benefit. For example, let's take the example of a letter, something that's a human creation, it's a construct. In the human nature, why is writing there? At the time of birth, without an education ignorance is part of our life. But then ignorance is the source of problems or suffering, so better education is one way to change this. Sometimes though better education creates more problems in our brain, [laughter] that's also possible, but generally speaking, more knowledge is the one key factor for a successful life, a meaningful life. So therefore, we deliberately try to change the ignorant mind into a more sort of knowledgeable mind. So similarly – yes there are differences – it's our natural sort of tendency to focus more on what are the differences. But then because of that sometimes we face unnecessary problems; therefore we need a special effort to promote closer relations on the basis of similarities, don't we?

QUESTION: Your Holiness, I think people now are concentrating too much on the superficial forms of differences and similarities rather than concentrating on the reality of the differences and similarities. I was very interested in your experience of Assisi for instance, St Francis of Assisi. To me I think he's closer to Buddhism than he is to the Christian faith. Actually he's accepting all creatures as his brothers and sisters and this is really in fact contrasting to Christian belief as expressed in Genesis for instance. But yet, they are considering that as a kind of Christianity while actually some of the Christian beliefs are very different from that. Just as some are very close to St Francis Assisi's ideas, Buddhist beliefs and so on, still it's a separate religion. So maybe when we say there are differences in concepts or forms only, these are really superficial ones, rather than in reality terms, in real terms.

HIS HOLINESS: I think some concepts as we have already mentioned like "creator" are obviously real differences.

QUESTION: Yes, yes, some are obviously.

HIS HOLINESS: Real differences, and also the belief in rebirth or just one life. Of course these are great differences. I think to the Buddhist, I think it is helpful. We think in the Buddhist tradition there are many different interpretations about the concept of ultimate reality and also the concept of *liberation*. Even in the concept of the continuation of life there are differences. Some Buddhist concepts say once you achieve nirvana, or self liberation or liberation, then there is no longer a continuation of mind. But some Buddhists argue that the continuation of mind is still there. So these are – again on their own level – these are fundamental differences. So within Buddhism, and I think the worst, or maybe at worst, these different philosophies each have Buddha's own quotations. So Buddha, one Buddha, one teacher taught these contradictory and different philosophies. This gives us I think some kind of new way to look and question: Oh why did Buddha make such contradictory philosophical statements? Because among his followers there are different people who have many different dispositions, therefore out of respect, out of concern, out of compassion towards his followers, he taught different philosophies. This helps to influence Buddhist attitudes towards other religions. So yes, they have these things, and it is a great potential to help humanity.

QUESTION: As we listen to the conversation around values, like compassion and love and so on and talk about differences and similarities I think it is very important for us to be able to discuss those, and see the points in common – the common element – that draws us together. At the same time I'm aware that we can share those values quite deeply and behave quite differently so that we may in fact react in not peaceful ways to each other or towards the environment in which we are living despite saying that we share peace, love and compassion as values. Do you have any reflection on the relationship then between the values that we might hold and talk about philosophically in religion and how we express those in ethics, in behaviour?

HIS HOLINESS: I think there are two kinds of philosophy, two categories. One, whether there is life on other planets or not. Yes, interesting to discuss, but nothing to do with our daily life. And the other is like compassion. Compassion is something very useful in the philosophical field or level and also all the different traditions talk about it. But this is not just talk, not just a concept, but is something we should implement. Unless we implement it, even though we repeat it a hundred times it's of no value. Implement it, then we really get some benefit. One could say that within the domain of philosophical thoughts one can see two different types, one which may have not much relevance in our day-to-day living, while there are other philosophical thoughts and concepts which will have direct relevance to how we live.

SAME QUESTIONER: So in a sense the ideas of that second kind of philosophy really only have meaning if they are lived out.

HIS HOLINESS: Yes, that's what I think.

QUESTION: Your Holiness, I have got a question I have been waiting to ask. I think it goes back to your question of religious belief and do we really need it. And I think it's something I struggle with personally as a believer because not only does it affect me but it affects my relationship to other people who don't share my belief. So what I always find in my field of interest, philosophy, is this constant attempt to scrutinize religion, to analyse: Is there a god? What does he want of us? What is the proper code of ethics? So the two questions I think I've learnt in philosophy that you apply to almost everything, is to ask: What is truth, and how do you know if you've got it? Now in religious traditions you've always got this idea that God is the ultimate divine truth, and usually there is a way to get to the truth. So what I am interested in your Holiness is, in your philosophy, how do you answer these questions: What is truth and how do you know if you've got it?

HIS HOLINESS: In your classification of the philosophical concepts there are two levels, ultimate reality and relative reality. This kind of inquiry really belongs to the first level. Of course it's important, very important. So, to respond to this question from a Buddhist point of view of course, you must bear in mind that there are these diverse, pluralities of philosophical standpoints within the Buddhist tradition. But to respond to this question from a Buddhist point of view, generally one would make distinctions between these two different perspectives: one would be a perspective of conventional relative reality and the other one would be the perspective of the ultimate reality. In both cases I think it is very difficult to give a single answer because there is a sort of underlying acceptance of the plurality of truths in the Buddhist tradition.

QUESTION: Sure, but is there a notion of an ultimate truth?

HIS HOLINESS: An absolute, unchanging ultimate reality, creator – that kind of thing in Buddhism – no. So Buddhism actually has something like, I think an individualistic sort of thing. We do not accept this central force. Each of us is independent. So, each of us has some kind of truth. [laughter]

QUESTIONER. And this is just a comment about the distinction between the two levels: the one more abstract and the one more practical. Many of the differences to do with other religions that you mentioned are differences to do with the first level. They are differences in beliefs about what kind of person God is, what God does, what truth is, whether the theory of rebirth is true or whether we have one life, these kinds of things. And many of the similarities you mentioned are similarities of practice. They are prayer and pilgrimage and, yes, these shared practices. I think – and this is to do with your comment as well – the human values, compassion and love and so forth, they are really a matter of practice as well. They definitely fall into the last thing. So I think there's a really strong coherent thread in what you're saying

about the human values and the two different levels. It's just a comment.

QUESTION: Your Holiness, I've followed the conversation and I'm unsure really about how to connect to discussions about the great religious traditions when I'm involved in a community that is trying to recover its spirituality because of our experience in being colonized. So I want to ask whether you think a project that is about recovering a tradition related to our spirituality as a people is important, or whether one should just focus on political independence. I guess my question is, whether recovering our spiritual independence and traditions is worthy?

HIS HOLINESS: In America I met with some local Indians, native American Indians, suddenly they are very much concerned about culture, and also some scholars are actually now showing respect for this. I think they have some kind of association. The local people's traditions respects Earth, and nature. Peace and nature. So therefore they are also trying to preserve their own tradition. So we had some discussions. I usually ask them, how big in number they are, how large is their community. In some cases they say two to three thousand, a few thousand. Then I think, oh, it's almost impossible to preserve that. I think they have almost no written script, just oral. Then that is very, very difficult to preserve. On one occasion in Chile, I met some people from Southern Chile. They had their own tradition. Then I suggested, in order to preserve their culture, their way of spirituality, to increase their spirituality, they need their language; they must develop a script for their language. And then within their own community – traditionally they may have different dialects – if they unify them, then it will be easier to preserve. This is practical, I think. Now the great issue is, you get to the point whether it's worthwhile to recover the original or not. Then it's up to you, I don't know. I have no idea. [laughter] That is very difficult, very difficult.

I think in Tibetan terms, perhaps I think maybe I'm the wrong person to ask. Because you see, you know in Tibet, originally we had our own tradition, Bonism. But then around the seventh century we found India's Buddhism is much more sophisticated, much more valuable, therefore we adopted Buddhism from the Indian tradition, and forgot our own religion. [laughter] Certainly that does not mean that now there are no longer any followers of our traditional religion. There are still among Tibetans, at least I think, around perhaps one hundred thousand maybe. Still, they keep their own pre-Buddhist faith. Still it is kept, but certainly since Buddhism came their old tradition has also been enriched a lot by Buddhism. So now today it would be difficult to make a distinction between the original pre-Buddhist religion and the Buddhist tradition. There are almost hardly any differences.

QUESTION: So your Holiness, are you saying that the traditional Tibetan indigenous religion transformed Buddhism in various ways and this may be the case in Aotearoa New Zealand that amongst Maori there is a sort of transformation of Christianity?

PARTICIPANT: Yes well I think Buddhism has transformed Western people. There are two concepts, which everybody will accept. These are new concepts. One is stress in everyday life. Everybody believes in stress, and the second thing is karma. Everybody talks about karma. Even without knowing where this word comes from.

QUESTION: Perhaps, your Holiness, I would like to return to this question about truth. Is there such a thing and if so how can you find it? I remember that when I listened to a tape, lectures by an English Buddhist, Sangharakshita, he referred to a Buddhist *sutra* which says that the Buddha's Aunt came to see the Buddha and she said "I hear so many different interpretations of your teaching so what is the truth, what is your *dharma*?" And the Buddha said "Anything that can help you is my *dharma*." And then I went to the *Heart Sutra*, a famous Buddhist text, and it seems to say that words are always pitfalls, so as long as we think and talk about the truth we always going in circles. So perhaps is it possible to say that the truth can only be approached beyond words and thought? Because the text basically says, "The Buddha has never taught a word, there have never been any Buddhas, there is no karma, the dharmas are empty, there is no Buddha either and there is no truth." But that is perhaps only to help us to jump over the words so that we can approach the reality, the ultimate reality, forgetting about them all. Do you think that is a good approach?

HIS HOLINESS: I think this notion that ultimate truth is in some way beyond language and thought and is inexpressible is a notion, which, in fact is not necessarily unique to Buddhism. You can find that idea I think in Christianity also. I believe that like God it is something beyond words.

PARTICIPANT: The ineffability of the divine. Inexpressible. It cannot be described.

HIS HOLINESS: However in Buddhism there is an understanding that although ultimate truth as Buddhists understand it – particularly in *Mahayana* Buddhism, there's the concept of *shunyata* – this emptiness, its inexpressibility or its ineffability is understood in terms of how the words and concepts will fail no matter how much one tries to fully articulate when an individual experiences the truth. So as the actual experience of the individual, the richness, the full richness, it can never be fully expressed in words or concepts or language, but that does not mean that words and concepts and language cannot really help approach the truth.

PARTICIPANT: Could I just make a comment on that last point? It doesn't mean that we can't use words to approach the truth but it probably does mean does it not, your Holiness, that we mustn't attach too much importance to the particular words that we use. They may be good words to use in one context and not so good in another. And maybe a lot of the religious divisions that we get – to come back to a theme that we had earlier – was when people take these tools and confuse them with the reality that they are supposed to lead us to.

HIS HOLINESS: This is very true. A Chilean scientist, a friend of mine, was saying that once he expressed an opinion that it is very important for the scientist, in whatever their individual area or specialty may happen to be, it's very important to maintain a degree of objectivity so that you don't feel emotionally attached to it. So I feels this also applies to practitioners of religion as well. I think when there is attachment, then what you call the fanatics, fundamentalists, I think these then come. But still, respect and practice, follow, but without attachment. But sometimes it's too late. [laughter] We are living beings, so once something is very close to our heart, then there's some form of attachment. So this happens.

QUESTION: Well we could be attached to each other, but not to our particular ideas.

HIS HOLINESS: Oh, that is wonderful I think. That's what we need. We have to promote that. Thank you, thank you very much. I appreciate it, certainly I do. Each of you I think have your area that you are very busy in. So in spite of that you came here. Thank you, thank you.

All contents © The Dalai Lama Trust NZ 2002.

For further teachings visit:

<http://www.greatliberation.org/shop>