Words of praise for *The Good Heart*

“This is the record of an extraordinary and historic interfaith encounter. To hear the Dalai Lama reflecting on the Gospels is exciting, refreshing, and illumining, reminding those of us who are Christians that this is a living Word.”
—Diana L. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, Harvard University

“Sparkling wit and compassionate understanding mark these penetrating insights of the Dalai Lama into spiritual foundations of two of the world’s great religious traditions. Highly recommended.”—*Library Journal*

“The Dalai Lama establishes himself as an authentic presence respectful of Christian traditions. This is a fascinating book which deserves a great deal of attention in these times of multicultural exchange.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A fine addition to the growing body of literature on Christian-Buddhist discussion.”—*Shambhala Sun*

“The Good Heart models the elements of a meaningful interfaith dialogue.”—*Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*

“Arguably the best book on interreligious dialogue published to date. One does not say such things lightly, but in a very real sense this is a holy book.”
—Huston Smith, author of *The Illustrated World’s Religions*

“A stirring and revelatory commentary on the Gospels.”—*Booklist*

“An illuminating handbook for the study of both religions.”—*Utne Reader*

“A book of very profound wisdom and tenderness.”—*Parabola*
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PUBLISHER’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the Gere Foundation in helping to fund the production of this book. For many years Richard Gere has supported His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s efforts to end the suffering of the Tibetan people and regain their homeland from the Chinese. At the same time, Richard has been instrumental in helping to spread His Holiness’s message of universal responsibility, compassion, and peace through his public expressions, and by helping Wisdom Publications publish a series of important books by His Holiness. We laud his efforts and appreciate his support.

A special thanks to Dom Laurence Freeman, OSB, and the World Community for Christian Meditation for entrusting the publication of this important work to Wisdom.
A NOTE TO THE READER

This book explores the Gospels with the Dalai Lama and the participants of the 1994 John Main Seminar. In addition to capturing the proceedings of the Seminar, this book has been augmented with additional contextual material on the Christian and Buddhist traditions to enhance its use as a tool for future interreligious dialogues.

The main body of The Good Heart is organized around individual passages from the Gospel upon which the Dalai Lama is commenting. Each chapter begins with His Holiness’s reading of and comments on a particular Gospel passage. The Gospel passages used in The Good Heart are based on the New English Bible (University of Oxford Press, 1970), which was John Main’s preferred version.

Robert Kiely’s preface evokes the mood and atmosphere of the Seminar itself. Laurence Freeman’s introduction provides an overview of interreligious dialogue in general, and Christian-Buddhist dialogue in particular.

Occasionally in the body of the text, a narrator’s voice briefly appears to set the scene. This is Robert Kiely, highlighting some of the experiences of the Seminar as they occurred. These narrative interludes are set apart in italic type in order to help the reader distinguish them from the actual dialogue. The end of some chapters include the Seminar discussion periods, during which panelists shared insights and queries with the Dalai Lama. In these sections, the speakers are identified.

In the back portion of The Good Heart, there is additional information to assist and broaden the understanding of the two spiritual traditions. Father Laurence Freeman has written the section entitled “The Christian Context,” in which he offers a Christian interpretation of the Gospel passages commented upon by the Dalai Lama. He also provides a glossary of Christian terms mentioned in the dialogue.

Geshe Thupten Jinpa, the Dalai Lama’s interpreter, has written the
section entitled “The Buddhist Context” in order to provide a general understanding of central Buddhist concepts to readers unfamiliar with Buddhism. Thupten Jinpa also compiled a glossary of Buddhist terms.

Throughout The Good Heart, but especially in the back section, both Tibetan and Sanskrit terms from Buddhism are used. For the most part, Sanskrit terms have been rendered in their appropriate scholarly form, with the exception of individuals’ names, which have been written with ease of pronunciation in mind. Tibetan terms have been spelled in phonetics also for ease of pronunciation. Appropriate scholarly spellings of all names and terms can be found in the Buddhist glossary.

For those unfamiliar with the way that Sanskrit words are rendered into English, the chart below offers an easy way to approximate the pronunciation of the Sanskrit terms in this book. For more precise instructions, please see Michael Coulson’s Teach Yourself Sanskrit (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992). In all cases, remember that straightforward explanations for many terms are provided in the glossary.

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And last, we have also included brief biographies of the participants: the Dalai Lama, Father Laurence, Geshe Thupten Jinpa, Robert Kiely, and the individual panelists who participated in this momentous interreligious dialogue.
O
one of the reassuring things about Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, is that, except when he is meditating, he does not seem capable of sitting still. As he spoke before an audience of three hundred and fifty Christians and a sprinkling of Buddhists in the auditorium of Middlesex University, London, in mid-September of 1994, his face and body were a testament to the Buddhist doctrine of perpetual flux. He not only punctuated his remarks with strong-handed gestures, coy smiles, dancing eyebrows, and guffaws, he seemed constantly to be folding or flinging about the loose ends of his maroon habit, seizing the limbs of panelists sitting on stage with him, waving to friends in the audience, and flipping through the program while his translator dispatched a lengthy remark.

The occasion—it would not be an exaggeration to say, the historic occasion—of the Dalai Lama’s appearance in London in the autumn of 1994 was the John Main Seminar. This yearly Seminar is sponsored by the World Community for Christian Meditation in memory of John Main, the Irish Benedictine monk who taught meditation in the tradition of John Cassian and the Desert Fathers and founded centers of Christian meditation throughout the world. Each year hundreds of Christian meditators, from virtually every continent and many denominations, gather to hear a series of talks on ethics, spirituality, scripture, interfaith dialogue, and prayer. In the recent past, speakers have included Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher; Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine author and founder of an ashram in India; and Jean Vanier, the originator of L’Arche, Christian lay communities that are dedicated to living with the disabled.

The invitation to the Dalai Lama to comment for the first time publicly on the Gospels came from Dom Laurence Freeman, OSB, an Oxford graduate in literature and a monk of the Olivetan Benedictine priory in
Cockfosters, London. Laurence Freeman has been the most active and influential teacher in the Community since Main’s death in 1982.

The Dalai Lama was given in advance eight passages from the Christian Scriptures—including the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), the parable of the mustard seed and the Kingdom of God (Mark 4), the Transfiguration (Luke 9), and the Resurrection (John 20). He was invited to comment on these texts in any way he saw fit. And he was told that his audience was Christian (Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant), mostly English-speaking though from all continents, and that virtually all of them practiced silent meditation daily in their own lives.

Because the Dalai Lama is a head of state as well as a religious leader, many present, while looking forward to his remarks, wondered whether His Holiness would be able to break through the inevitable barriers of press, cameras, and attendants, and truly communicate what was on his mind and in his heart.

The answer came swiftly and with breathtaking ease. Early each morning before breakfast, before anything else on the packed schedule of the conference, he entered the darkened hall with his monks and, with the assembled Christians, he sat perfectly still and meditated for half an hour. In the silence, broken only by a rustle or a cough, anxiety fell away and a bond of trust and openness for what was to come took its place. Then, at last, he bowed his shaved head over the text and, tracing the script with his finger like a rabbi, read, “How blest are those of a gentle spirit…. How blest are those whose hearts are pure…. How blest are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of right.” And as he read, it was impossible not to be moved, almost stunned, by the power of these familiar words recadenced and re-keyed by a Tibetan voice and a Buddhist sensibility.

Conscious of the devastation of the Tibetan culture and people by China and of the Dalai Lama’s own suffering as a refugee and exile, the audience could not help hearing a poignant resonance in the reading. But striking as the political moment was, something else carried the significance of the three-day meeting deeper even than history. There was little doubt in the minds of those present that they had come to hear a spiritual teacher and that what they were experiencing was a profoundly religious event that encompassed history but was not circumscribed by it.
The actual framework of the Seminar was flexible and simple enough to provide an informal atmosphere to the proceedings. It began with meditation, then proceeded to a reading of the Scripture passages in English by His Holiness, commentary, panel discussions, closing chants and prayers, breaks for meals, and back again for meditation and more of the same. But such a description does not really convey an accurate or full sense of the mood or atmosphere at these proceedings. During the readings and commentaries, the Dalai Lama was seated behind a low table, with a person seated on either side of him. On the left sat Laurence Freeman in his Olivetan Benedictine white habit taking notes, nodding agreement, smiling, and looking quizzical—in short, unconsciously acting as a mirror of the audience at large. On the right sat Geshe Thupten Jinpa, the young, slightly built Tibetan Buddhist monk in crimson robes who was acting as interpreter. Serene, collected, focused, and incredibly proficient, he translated His Holiness’s Tibetan almost simultaneously into fluent English. His own modesty and grace, attentive to the master but never servile, was a constant reminder and example to the audience of near-perfect concentration and selfless dignity.

Because of this arrangement, and perhaps also because of the Dalai Lama’s way of being and expressing himself, an apparent monologue was really a dialogue and, more often, a three-way conversation. Neither Dom Laurence nor Jinpa interrupted the discourse, but they were incorporated into it spontaneously as His Holiness excitedly moved in one direction or another, seeking a reaction, correcting a phrase, raising a questioning eyebrow, and releasing tension with a laugh. During the panel discussions, when two members of the audience were invited to sit on the platform and raise questions, the neat format tended to melt down into interconnecting streams of thought, language, accent, age, gender, temperament, and religious persuasion. Yet there was never confusion. The Dalai Lama, as a Buddhist teacher and exile, is at home with change, and he has the ability to calm Western nerves afloat in unfamiliar and shifting currents. Like all great teachers, he also has a talent for seizing and salvaging a good idea that is drifting unobserved beneath the surface.

It has been said that the Dalai Lama is a simple man. Though this may be meant as a compliment, it is difficult to dissociate such a label from a Western tendency to condescend to the religions and cultures of
the East, treating them as exotic but philosophically primitive traditions. Insofar as he is earthy, direct, warm, and *simpatico*, the Dalai Lama may be called “simple”; but in every other sense, he is a subtle, quick, complex, and extraordinarily intelligent and learned man. He brings three qualities to a spiritual discourse—traits so rare in some contemporary Christian circles as to have elicited gasps of relieved gratitude from the audience. These qualities are gentleness, clarity, and laughter. If there is something Benedictine about him, there is a Franciscan side as well, and a touch of the Jesuit.4

From the outset, he gently and quietly reassured his listeners that the last thing he had come to do was “sow seeds of doubt” among Christians about their own faith. Again and again, he counseled people to deepen their understanding and appreciation of their own traditions, pointing out that human sensibilities and cultures are too varied to justify a single “way” to the Truth. He gently, but firmly and repeatedly, resisted suggestions that Buddhism and Christianity are different languages for the same essential beliefs. With regard to ethics and the emphasis on compassion, brotherhood, and forgiveness, he acknowledged similarities. But inasmuch as Buddhism does not recognize a Creator God or a personal Savior, he cautioned against people calling themselves “Buddhist-Christians,” just as one should not try “to put a yak’s head on a sheep’s body.”

In the course of long sessions, reading and commenting on theologically complex texts and responding to challenging questions from panelists, the Dalai Lama never lost his astonishing mental clarity. At one point, he described Mahayana Buddhist meditative practices as disciplines to keep our consciousness alert and focused rather than “scattered” or “sunken” in torpor. One of the forms of respect he paid to his audience was to give it his attention. It is rare for a public figure, even a religious one, not to have “prepackaged” remarks at hand. There are, most likely, occasions when the Dalai Lama is no exception. But it became evident that his moment-by-moment engagement with the Gospels and the people in his presence had a constancy and intensity of mind and heart of which few people are capable. When asked what adherents of different faiths could do together without mixing up yaks and sheep, he recommended scholarship, meditation, and pilgrimages.
And then he told of going to Lourdes and finding there such an aura of the sacred that he bowed down and prayed to “all holy beings” for the sustenance of its healing powers. At moments like this, one could hear the audience catch a collective breath, perhaps of pleasure and surprise at an expression of reverence at once so pure and yet so uncompromising of the Buddhist tradition from which it came.

In his reflections on the Transfiguration, he offered a learned discourse on Buddhist views of miracles and supernatural emanations. Without a hint of dogmatism or sentimental piety, he evoked an ancient tradition that has long accommodated a highly rational system of self-discipline and psychology with accounts of experiences beyond the usual limits of reason and nature. He modestly disclaimed having had such experiences himself, but did not see that as a cause to doubt their authenticity. Somehow, listening to him made all the centuries of Christian quarreling over miracles and the possible explanations for them seem foolish.

His reading of the meeting between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in Saint John’s account of the Resurrection brought many to tears. It would be hard to say exactly why. Some said later that it was as if they were hearing the words for the first time, as though their tenderness and mystery and beauty had been taken for granted and were brought to life again, like a gift from an unexpected courier.

When faced with a philosophical or religious paradox or the inexpressible, Westerners tend to grow solemn. Buddhists undoubtedly have a rich array of reactions, and one that enlivened the spirit of the conference was laughter. The Dalai Lama likes to crack jokes about monks, yaks, reincarnation, and visions, but often a gesture, expression, or pause in the flow of discussion—a moment of potential awkwardness—sets him off into infectious gales of laughter. Toward the end of the Seminar, when nearly everyone was beginning to feel the fatigue of so much concentrated emotion, his superb interpreter, Jinpa, the young monk who had maintained superhuman composure day after day, burst into uncontrollable body-shaking laughter while trying to translate an anecdote told by His Holiness. In answer to the observation that some people say they do not meditate because they are too busy, His Holiness told the story of a monk who keeps promising his pupil that he will take him
on a picnic but is always too busy to do so. One day they see a procession carrying a corpse. “Where is he going?” the monk asks his pupil. The punch line, delayed for at least five minutes until the translator, the audience, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama could control themselves, was, “On a picnic.”

For many Christians, attending ecumenical conferences, like going to church, is “no picnic.” But, of course, feasting and celebration are as much a part of the symbolism and reality of Christianity as they are of all religions. Hearing the Dalai Lama comment on the Gospels was definitely a feast. What impressed and surprised everyone was how much the “outsider” touched them. The exile, the person with no authority over Christians except that which was given by the Spirit, was able to show people of every faith the riches of their own banquet.

Robert Kiely
Cambridge, Massachusetts
INTRODUCTION

In September of 1994, in London, His Holiness the Dalai Lama led the John Main Seminar, an annual international spiritual event held in honor of the Benedictine monk John Main, whom Father Bede Griffiths once called the most important spiritual guide in the church today.

The Dalai Lama and Dom John Main met on only two occasions. The first took place in 1980 at the Catholic cathedral in Montreal, Quebec, where Dom John had been asked to welcome the Dalai Lama as a fellow monk at the opening of a large interfaith evening. During the preparations for the evening, I remember how strongly Father John argued for the inclusion of a substantial period of silent meditation. Religious leaders were present, from archbishops to Native American medicine men, making speeches of goodwill and reciting beautiful prayers. There were choirs, chants, and in the cathedral itself all the visual beauties of Christian art and culture. The organizers were frightened at the suggestion of a twenty-minute period of silence in the middle of such a large and public ceremony. Father John insisted, and Father John got his way.

After the ceremony, the Dalai Lama sought out the Benedictine monk who had welcomed him and remarked how impressed he was with the unusual experience of meditation in a Christian church. Standing beside them, I could sense the affinity between the two men. While they may have been speaking rather superficial words, I felt they were also exploring a deeper, silent level of dialogue. Father John then invited the Dalai Lama to visit our small, recently started Benedictine community that was dedicated to the practice and teaching of meditation in the Christian tradition. We resided in a small suburban house at that time, and an extended lay community lived in apartments around us. It was a new kind of Christian urban monasticism that derived its life and vision from the rediscovery of meditation in the Christian spiritual tradition.
One of the reassuring things about Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, is that, except when he is meditating, he does not seem capable of sitting still. As he spoke before an audience of three hundred and fifty Christians and a sprinkling of Buddhists in the auditorium of Middlesex University, London, in mid-September of 1994, his face and body were a testament to the Buddhist doctrine of perpetual flux. He not only punctuated his remarks with strong-handed gestures, coy smiles, dancing eyebrows, and guffaws, he seemed constantly to be folding or flinging about the loose ends of his maroon habit, seizing the limbs of panelists sitting on stage with him, waving to friends in the audience, and flipping through the program while his translator dispatched a lengthy remark.

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ary critic Robert Kiely; the psychologist and Sister of Saint Joseph, Eileen O’Hea; the scholar John Todd; the founder of L’Arche, Jean Vanier; and the Jesuit scholar and theologian William Johnston.6

To my surprise and delight I received a quick personal response from the Dalai Lama. He remembered his meeting with John Main thirteen years before, was pleased by the growth of his community worldwide, and would be happy and honored to lead the latest Seminar. The brief meeting of the two monks long before had brought us to a wonderful opportunity. The question was, how were we going to grasp it?

We had invited His Holiness to lead the Seminar, the first non-Christian to do so, for a number of reasons. His meeting with Dom John Main, although brief, had been highly significant. It had illuminated the importance of developing the necessary dialogue between the two religions at the deeper level that is made possible and widely accessible through meditation. Something is touched in sharing deep silence together that words can point to but never quite express. His Holiness, as an individual, has also become one of the most loved and accessible spiritual teachers in the world today. Tibet’s agony, which he carries constantly with him, has elevated him to a global spiritual role in which the universal religious values of peace, justice, tolerance, and nonviolence find a joyful and yet profoundly serious embodiment. This was evident the moment His Holiness read aloud the Beatitudes at the first session of the Seminar. Everyone felt they were more than words in his case; they were insights he had personally experienced.

In searching for a way to grasp this opportunity, the answer seemed clear: by letting it go. It seemed to me that this was an unprecedented opportunity. A Seminar in which the Dalai Lama would spend three days with a group of spiritually committed Christian meditators and their equally committed non-Christian friends was too unique to use as just another interfaith discussion group. I had already informed His Holiness that our Seminars included times of meditation as well as times of vocal dialogue. We would have three periods of meditation together each day, and these periods would not be squeezed in; they would be central to the whole event. Naturally, he had no problem with that. The problem now was not that we would be silent, but determining a topic of discussion.
We considered the usual kind of philosophical and religious themes for such a Buddhist-Christian event and felt they did not do justice to the uniqueness of the opportunity. Then we decided to really let it go. We would make a gift to His Holiness of that which is most precious, holy, and profound for us as Christians: we would ask him to comment on the Christian Gospels. He accepted without hesitation, remarking only that, of course, he knew little about the Gospels. His comment struck me as a most impressive sign of his self-confidence, and of his humility.

Two or three years earlier he had stunned his audiences in London by his learned and scholarly presentations of Buddhist philosophy. Any academic would have been proud of this achievement. Now he was willing to come before a Christian audience, albeit a sympathetic and contemplative one, and talk about what, he said smilingly, he knew very little about. Once he had accepted this idea, the Seminar became an event of great anticipation. It was a gamble, a risk of faith on both sides. We had no doubt that the time of meditation and presence together would be worthwhile in its own right. Anyone who has spent any time with the Dalai Lama knows that his presence bestows peace, depth, and joy. But, even with the Dalai Lama, there was no guarantee that the Seminar would succeed as a dialogue.

Instead, the 1994 John Main Seminar, The Good Heart, succeeded in a way no one could have anticipated. And I would like to reflect now on the success of this historic event. The Dalai Lama’s commentary on the Christian Gospels constitutes the heart of this book, and the implication of these words reach far forward into the continuing dialogue in the coming millennium between the religious traditions of the human family. This book suggests the importance of this dialogue for the future of the world and offers a much-needed strategy to meet the challenge of creating world peace and universal cooperation in the decades ahead: it offers a model of dialogue.

**Presence**

In a way, the John Main Seminar originated many years before in the special way that the Dalai Lama and Dom John Main were present to each other during their meetings. The Dalai Lama has also spoken about
this factor of presence in the description of his meetings with Thomas Merton. It was this same chemistry of presence that ensured the meaningful dialogue at the 1994 John Main Seminar. (Afterward, the Dalai Lama remarked that he had learned more about Christianity during the Seminar than at any other time since his conversations with Merton thirty years before.)

Presence is one of the most important lessons The Good Heart has to teach us—Buddhists, Christians, and the followers of all faiths—if we are to learn a better way to respond to the contemporary challenge to dialogue. As this presence in dialogue is nonverbal and nonconceptual, it might sound vague or platitudinous; but it is nonetheless a hard fact. It is difficult to describe, but it is the first thing we experience in dialogue. How are we perceived by each other? The success of the verbal dialogue depends upon and builds directly upon this foundation of mutual presence. Words cannot achieve a successful dialogue if presence is not there. And without this insight, words can go wildly wrong.

In his opening remarks, the Dalai Lama spoke about the importance of all the different forms of dialogue being practiced today between religions. He affirmed the importance of scholarly dialogue. But he also said that he felt the most important and—to use a characteristic term for a Buddhist—the most effective dialogue was not intellectual exchange, but a conversation between sincere practitioners from the position of their own faiths, a conversation that arises from a sharing of their respective practices.

This idea is common to Christian and Buddhist thinkers. In the early Christian monastic tradition, the Fathers spoke warmly about the importance of praktike, the knowledge born from experience rather than conceptual knowledge. Cardinal Newman spoke of the danger of living your faith simply from a position of “notional assent,” lacking experiential, personal verification. John Main’s insistence that it was necessary for Christians to recover the contemplative dimension of their faith was based on the assertion that we must “verify the truths of our faith in our own experience.” What is new about this idea in the context of The Good Heart is that the concept is applied to dialogue between different faiths, and not just to the deepening of the discovery of one’s own traditional religious beliefs.
This is very challenging and, to many sincere practitioners, also disturbing. It suggests that there exists a universal, underlying level of common truth that can be accessed through different faiths. When people of different faiths are in experiential dialogue with one another, the truth can be experienced through their willing suspension of exclusivity toward one another. If this is true, then does it follow that each particular faith is no more (no less?) than a particular door into the great audience chamber of Truth? As we will see shortly, the Dalai Lama addresses this challenge very subtly and directly.

It is important here simply to note the relevance of presence for this kind of new and indeed pioneering dialogue. This presence is human, ordinary, affectionate, friendly, and trusting. All four hundred people felt this the instant His Holiness walked into the hall at the opening of the Seminar. This quality of presence should not be underestimated when we think about modern interreligious and intercultural dialogue. It should certainly not be dismissed as an emotional element subordinate to the realm of pure ideas. If, as the Dalai Lama believes, the proof and authentication of all religion is the realization of a good heart, a human being’s innate qualities of compassion and tolerance, the same standard can be applied to dialogue, which has today become an important work and activity of all religions.

In the past, religious action could be viewed more narrowly in terms of the celebration or exploration of one’s own beliefs or rituals. Today an additional element has entered human religious activity, as we enter with empathy and reverence into the beliefs and rituals of other faiths without adopting them as our own. The fruit and authentication of this new activity, largely unknown to earlier generations of humanity or even regarded by them as disloyal and blasphemous, is the same as that of all religions: compassion and tolerance. Dialogue should make us not only feel better about others but also make us more conscious of ourselves and more true to our own essential goodness. Dialogue makes us better people.

We cannot achieve this in the abstract. Dialogue demands not just clarity of ideas and a certain degree of knowledge about one’s position and the position of other people; it demands a personal involvement. The objectivity, detachment, and intellectual organization needed for dialogue
are not ends in themselves—any more than efficiency or the profit motive should be ends in themselves for any business or social group. The intellectual discipline required for dialogue allows the natural tendency toward egotism to be filtered or contained. This releases the individuals involved in dialogue to find the deeper levels of their own consciousness where dialogue opens onto a common window of truth through an experience altogether beyond the conceptualizing mind.

**Friendship**

The Dalai Lama’s openness to presence was crucial for the success of the Seminar. His self-confidence and ease, despite the risk he was taking, set others at their ease and gave us all confidence that we had nothing to lose except our fears. It became, too, the basis of a friendship that was also the bedrock of fruitful dialogue. Dialogue will certainly reduce our fears and suspicions of one another. It will make us better friends, even with people we regard as enemies or threats. Yet friendship, or at least the readiness to be real friends, is also a precondition for good dialogue. To be friends is to trust and to be vulnerable. It involves running the risk of sharing something precious and then, perhaps, of being disappointed that this precious gift is not being valued or has been treated badly. As the days of the Seminar passed, the intensity of human friendship among all the participants grew. It radiated, so people remarked, from the Dalai Lama and his Christian interlocutors, who sensed that the risk they had taken in coming together was entirely justified—and was even becoming highly enjoyable in itself.

Friendship occupies a central place in Christian thought and tradition. The Christian ideal of friendship is built upon a long classical Western tradition that did not understand friendship, as we often do today, as a diluted form of intimacy. Cicero or Saint Augustine would not have understood modern journalists who say that a couple are “just friends” as if the only really interesting relationship is that which progresses “further” than friendship. For them and for many of their preceding and succeeding generations, friendship was the goal of all the formative experiences of human relationships. Education in the widest sense was a preparation for the achievement of friendship which allowed one to share the deepest and truest part of oneself with another.
Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, a thirteenth-century Yorkshire monk, wrote a treatise called *Spiritual Friendship*. This work focused on the Christian understanding of this classical ideal of friendship and was based on Cicero’s great work *On Friendship*. Aelred speaks of the disciplined preparation and mutual testing that precedes the full flowering of friendship, when the ineffable sweetness of trust and confidence, intimacy and openness, between the friends flows out through the friendship to the world around them. Significantly, he says that such friendship cannot be based on anything less than the essential goodness of each friend. There cannot be friendship based on exploitative desire or hatred of others because these negative qualities betray human nature. Partners in crime do not make good friends. Friendship is the perfection of human nature. “A truly loyal friend,” says Saint Aelred, “sees nothing in his friend but his heart.”

This leads Aelred to describe without embarrassment particular instances of personal friendship in his own life, as well as the joy he feels as he walks around his cloister knowing that there is none there whom he does not love and none whom he does not feel loved by. For Aelred, the perfection of human friendship is an epiphany of the real presence of Christ. Christ, he says, makes the *third* between us. In this Christian vision, all true friendship will “begin in Christ, continue in Christ and be perfected in Christ.” It is a beautiful and profound understanding of the humanity of the Risen Jesus.

Christ does not, in this view of human nature, represent an obstacle or intellectual barrier separating us from others. He is not some thing we speak about and dissect. He is the unobtrusive presence in which we become really present to one another. He can be named, or he can remain unnamed; in either case his reality is neither increased nor diminished. Theologically, too, the idea of friendship is also central to Christian faith. Speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus declared himself to be their friend: “I call you servants no longer. A servant does not know what his master is about. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father.”

The Holy Spirit, which flows into the realm of human consciousness from the glorified Body of Jesus, is also described in the images of friendship. She is an advocate, someone *on our side*, to remind us of that which we have forgotten, to repair the ravages of our mindlessness.
Modern feminist theology has recognized the centrality of the symbol of friendship in Christian faith and rescued it to serve as a foundational metaphor of the human relationship to the divine.

What is so powerful about this ideal of friendship is the way it can reconcile the absolute and the personal. You can disagree about the choice of carpet color and remain friends. A Buddhist can be friends with a Christian without either trying to convert the other. In friendship differences can be respected and even enjoyed. In relationships lacking friendship, differences can zoom out of proportion and become ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions. We demonize the threatening other, project our shadow upon them, and find conflict. Friendship is the supreme expression of compassion and tolerance with a respect for the primacy of truth over all subjective tendencies. But friendship reminds us that the objectivity of truth does not reject the subjective. It integrates the particular and the universal, achieving the coincidentia oppositorum, the reconciliation of opposites. Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth-century cardinal, statesman, mathematician, and mystic, said that God is found “beyond the coincidence of contradictories.”

There is a simple test to determine whether one’s pursuit of truth has lost contact with this touchstone of friendship. When we hear on the news that a Catholic person has been shot in Belfast, or an Israeli soldier has died on the West Bank, or so many Chinese baby girls have disappeared from an orphanage, or so many Tibetans have been killed—are we hearing a news item about individual people, or about ethnic or religious groups? Do we perceive the murdered Israeli soldier or Palestinian demonstrator as a Jew or an Arab, or as a human being who happens also to be a Jew or an Arab? How do the figures strike us—as individual tragedies or as statistics that are being used as political weapons?

In the course of the Dalai Lama’s comments at the John Main Seminar, as in all his spiritual teaching, His Holiness did not use the occasion to speak of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. However deeply he must carry the crucifixion of Tibet in his heart, his personal grief does not intrude on others. Nevertheless, all the participants of the Seminar gave their unreserved support to the Dalai Lama’s cause for Tibet, and they did so all the more freely because he joined them in personal friendship. He does not turn friendship into political expediency. I suspect this is one of
the qualities that makes him such a refreshing politician and exemplary spiritual leader. It is because he has such a powerful gift of friendship that the Dalai Lama is so beloved and respected around the world. This gift of friendship may also be the key to his great gift for dialogue and his respect for differences while seeking unity. In this perspective, the warmth of human friendship does not water down the concentration of pure Truth. Truth is not merely the right ideas well expressed. Truth without the human warmth of friendship is a pale shadow of reality.

Model of Dialogue

The success of dialogue is especially dependent upon the spirit of friendship as we converse with one another in so many particular dialects. Even within our mother tongue, we may find that dialects and accents seem strange at first but learn to understand and respect them. These widely spoken dialects of the common language of truth are today learning to communicate. The Good Heart Seminar was a model of dialogue as mutual listening.

Shortly after the Seminar, the dialogue taking place between Christianity and Buddhism suffered a setback. This arose from the controversy sparked by the general remarks on Buddhism of His Holiness Pope John Paul II in his best-selling book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. These remarks expressed a view of Buddhism that was vehemently contested by many Buddhist monks and teachers. Feelings ran high. Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders boycotted the Pope’s visit to their country. Thich Nhat Hanh expressed his own feelings in his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Friendship seemed to stumble everywhere. The Vatican issued statements saying that the Pope did not mean to dismiss Buddhism as a life-denying philosophy.

It looked as if the Pope, representing a long tradition of Christianity, was caricaturing and dismissing Buddhism without attempting to understand it. Buddhists tried to be compassionate, but many could not avoid the opportunity to lump all (or most) Christians together and caricature them as intolerant, arrogant, and exclusivist. The feelings of some Western Buddhists toward their own Christian upbringing were plainly aroused as well. This is what happens to dialogue when friendship breaks down. Until goodwill, trust, and friendship have been restored there is
little point in trying to discuss the meanings of the terms in question—such as nirvana, void, and enlightenment. Maybe *The Good Heart* can contribute a little to this restoration.

Caricature is always based on the exclusion of qualifying detail in favor of one easily identifiable feature. Religions do this to each other just as cartoonists do. For many Christians, Buddhism is caricatured as a religion that believes in rational moral behavior motivated not by love of a personal God or fear of punishment but by the desire to achieve a better rebirth in an apparently endless series of reincarnations. This is achieved, so the summary goes, by denying the world and one’s own feelings. The immensely subtle and highly intricate philosophical arguments on these and all other elements of Buddhism are ignored by such a caricature. And this view certainly glosses over the central place of compassion in Buddhism.

Behind the caricatures, Buddhism is, philosophically, one of the greatest achievements of the human mind. Yet despite a general body of agreed principles, such as the Four Noble Truths, Buddhist philosophy, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, falls into many schools and complex dialogues between the schools; thus, it represents one of the highest achievements of the diversity of human opinion. The Dalai Lama is one of the most accomplished of modern philosophers in many of these Buddhist schools. And, as his book *The World of Tibetan Buddhism* (Wisdom Publications, 1995) illustrates, he has the gift not only of understanding but of lucid exposition. On several occasions during the Seminar he stated that his comments represent a particular Buddhist view, but he also pointed out that there are other Buddhist perspectives to take into account—some of them quite complex and opposed to his own position. Among other ways in which *The Good Heart* will help dialogue, it draws attention—with simplicity—to the many different traditions within every religious tradition.

Christianity certainly has no fewer internal dialects of belief. Any religion that can contain a movement like Opus Dei and a minister like the Reverend Ian Paisley will never risk uniformity. Even more, however, *The Good Heart* should remind Buddhists of something many Christians have now discovered—that “the Church” is a very general term. It can mean many things: a cold building on a wet Sunday morning; a global
religion; a mystical tradition; a spiritual body extended backward and forward in history from the birth of Jesus; or the cultural group I was born into, brought up in, and now have mixed feelings about. Perhaps one cannot entirely separate institutional and spiritual Christianity, any more than one can separate form and content, or body and mind; but it is important to preserve the distinction. There are many examples in history of Christians who have remained outside the institutional church but who knew with the full force of their being that they belonged to the Church.

Who, therefore, really “speaks for” Christianity? Who “speaks for” Buddhism?

And given this diversity, how does The Good Heart suggest a model for the resumption and redirectioning of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

And indeed, this model is applicable for dialogue in general: between Catholics and Protestants, Mahayanists and Theravadans, Republicans and Democrats, men and women, and people of every ethnicity and culture in the world.

Modest Ambitions

Above all, we must have modest ambitions as we set forth in this dialogue. In The Good Heart, the Dalai Lama does not try or pretend to give a complete or exhaustive commentary on the Gospels, Jesus’ teaching and life, or the deeper truths of Christian faith such as the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit. The Dalai Lama’s approach is exploratory rather than definitive, and he expands this method to his dialogue with the Christian panelists. It is in seeking truth that we find enlightenment, not in declaring it. Just as Saint Benedict says that the monk is one who “truly seeks God.” And in the process of seeking, something is always found. “Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.”

Reading the Scriptures with a good heart takes us beyond the bleakness of today’s deconstructionist pessimism about meaning. There is something to be found, but it is only found in the seeking. Saint Gregory of Nyssa put it this way: “To seek God is to find him; to find God is to seek him.”

One of the earliest Christian thinkers, Saint Irenaeus, said that God can never be known as an object, or as a reality outside ourselves.
We can know God only through our participation in God’s own self-knowledge. These early theologians were writing their thoughts about God and the mystery of Christ from the mystical experience of the inclusivity—or non-duality—of God. The first theologians were, and today the best ones still are, expressing their experience of prayer, not just of thought. Dialogue in such a context and among such people becomes fluent, fluid, and dynamic. Truth is sensed as something that emerges as we enter a clearing where the obscuring clouds of ignorance, prejudice, and fear have, at least momentarily, been lifted. The Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, means precisely that, a “clearing.” This is something that can only be done step by step, moment by moment. It means staying in touch with the delicate balance that friendship requires, above all the balance between speaking and listening. Great schemes to translate Buddhism into the Christian dialect and vice versa lack the modest ambitions with which the Good Heart Seminar began and ended. Dialogue has little to do with translation. But a good translator, such as we had in Geshe Thupten Jinpa, helps to remind the partners in dialogue that they are not trying to write a dictionary.

Another aspect of modesty in regard to the Dalai Lama’s approach was his saying that he knew little about Christian Scriptures or theology, but that he was eager to learn. He hoped he would give no offense, and he certainly did not want to shake the faith of the Christians taking part in the Seminar. It is not easy to admit a lack of knowledge because it makes us seem vulnerable, less interesting or less powerful. If knowledge is power, ignorance is weakness. But when we do admit the limitations of our knowledge at the beginning of a dialogue, several things are set free. One of them is trust. People are not afraid of being manipulated or persuaded; they can begin to let down their defenses. An admission of inexperience must, therefore, be one of the first steps in nonviolence. Another quality liberated by this humility in dialogue is spontaneity. If you are free from the need to show how clever or learned you are—the temptation of scholars in dialogue—then you are free to respond immediately and freshly to what is before you. This is precisely what happened at *The Good Heart*. The Dalai Lama did not know much “about” the Gospels. But he did know a great deal through his Buddhist learning, his monastic training, and his own spiritual evolution. And this knowledge allowed him to
respond to Christian symbols and ideas as if he actually knew them very well indeed.

As a result of this, the Christians at the Seminar were surprised to discover that a Buddhist was helping them understand and discover in new ways the stories and texts that had been familiar to them perhaps since childhood. The Dalai Lama has often made it clear that he does not advise anyone to change their religion—although he does respect an individual’s right to make this choice. Better, he says, to rediscover the deeper meaning and power of your own religious tradition. It was surprising to find that a Buddhist could help Christians deepen their faith, and clarify it in the very process of contrasting it with Buddhist belief—even when there were clear conflicts or untranslatable ideas between the two. This was only possible because the dialogue was exploratory, not declamatory. The Dalai Lama was sincerely curious and stimulated by the intense dialogue. He listened deeply to the questions that were raised in the panel discussions. Above all, people saw that he was listening, that he was curious, that he was sincerely interested. Dialogue is more like a piece of experimental theater than a highly polished Broadway musical. Sometimes it works, other times it is less successful. It requires commitment. It demands maximum participation by all concerned. It is not mechanical. It is not dogmatic. The ideas must be bartered and wasted if they are to illuminate.

The Dalai Lama asked many questions. Before each session, I spent some time with him in a quiet room preparing the Gospel texts on which he would then comment for an hour or so. He listened to the background I gave on the texts and my explanation of some of the key terms and ideas. If, as he said, he was “unfamiliar” with the Gospels, his phenomenal receptivity and the alacrity of his mind in constellating new ideas more than made up for this lack of knowledge. I was reminded of a phrase Saint Gregory the Great uses in his Life to describe Saint Benedict. Benedict, he said, had dropped out of school in Rome and betaken himself to a hermitage in a state of wise ignorance.

The Dalai Lama’s intellectual training and brilliance are unobtrusive. He does not flaunt them. But he employs them skillfully in the pursuit of truth. Christians were particularly aware of these gifts as he uncovered meanings and subtleties in the often overfamiliar Scriptures. Through
him, they enriched and renewed their faith in ways that filled them with wonder and gratitude. If knowledge is power, the Dalai Lama’s knowledge trained onto the Gospels created a power of insight—an insight that he never used in any manipulative way. He was not arguing with Christians about the meaning of the Gospels. He was, with great detachment, giving them the benefit of his reading, discussing this view with them, and then leaving the use of it entirely up to them.

Like and Unlike

One of Saint Benedict’s “tools of good works” (the Christian equivalent to a Buddhist’s skillful means) is the injunction “never to give a false peace.”17 It is just as important to avoid the danger of false friendship in dialogue as it is to avoid the traps of caricature, misrepresentation, or dismissive judgment. Professional translators refer to certain words in two different languages that have a formal likeness but very different meanings as “false friends.” The Good Heart Seminar stayed faithful to the principle of true friendship and respected the differences as much as the similarities between the participants’ beliefs and attitudes.

It is very tempting in dialogue between two religious traditions to opt for a safe zone of generalities. By doing so, both sides avoid conflict and leave with a glowing feeling of mutual congratulation. This struck me strongly a few years ago when I took part in a dialogue with Buddhist and Christian meditators in Canada. We discussed how we had each come to the paths we were on and the ways we dealt with the difficulty of persevering on those paths. It was useful and in its way inspirational. But I felt that we were sharing too safely. We were not risking with each other what was most precious and particular to us personally.

So at the Good Heart Seminar, instead of proceeding with my scheduled afternoon talk, I asked permission to speak about Jesus. I could sense there were suspicions and fears that this would spoil the good atmosphere. I felt a twinge of the post-imperial guilt18 that Christians today can hardly help but feel, especially when they are talking to people with whom they may share much common ground but who have “left the Church” in anger or disappointment at its human faults and failures. However, I did not think I could express what meditation means for me as a Christian if I did not also speak about what Jesus means for me.
Meditation is such an important part of the way I explore the mystery of Jesus’ real presence in my life that it seemed right to speak about a Christian’s feelings about Jesus in particular, not just about God or Truth in general. I realized that to stand up and proclaim that “Jesus Christ is my personal savior” might cast a gloom over the proceedings. In any case, I did not feel inclined to present it this way.

What I went on to share was the value and meaning of the person of Jesus, not only the ideas of Christianity. In doing this, I knew I would throw a spotlight on one of the main differences between Christian and Buddhist meditators. But I sensed that seeing and acknowledging the distance between us would actually bring us closer. Consequently, the atmosphere of friendship that we had risked was actually deepened and strengthened. As Saint Aelred had said, friendship must be tested continually if it is to grow to its full potential.

The Value of Difference

At the Good Heart Seminar, the Dalai Lama led us into this awareness of the value of difference immediately and without hesitation. He said from the beginning of the Seminar that the purpose of his commenting on the Gospels was not to assist in the construction of a synthetic universal religion. He does not believe in creating a single universal religion but does believe in respecting, and indeed reverencing, the unique characteristics of each religion. While a number of Christians maintain a more fundamentalist view, many other Christians are in touch with the broader tradition and would agree with this idea of respecting other religious traditions. But the Dalai Lama and these Christian practitioners would believe in this for very different reasons.

The Dalai Lama affirmed several times in the course of the Seminar that he was a Buddhist. There were moments that he needed to remind us (and perhaps himself?) of this. I do not mean that he ever felt he was anything but a complete (a very complete) Buddhist. But, when recognizing some of the real, strong parallels between the teachings of Jesus and of the Buddha, he smelled the danger of certain words intruding as “false friends.” Then he would say how important it was to recognize the significance of both parallels and differences. He said that the meaning of these points of convergence and departure between religions is to be
found in the spiritual and psychological needs of their respective practitioners. People have different needs, which are met by the unique particularities (the “differences”) of each religion. This sounds quite acceptable, tolerant, and liberal. For most people, it would seem an appropriate attitude for the global pluralism of the next millennium. But it raises difficult questions.

Maybe a highly realized practitioner, a very holy person, can practice this degree of tolerance genuinely. For many of us, however, there will always be, in practice, a danger of splitting what we think we believe from what we actually feel and believe. If, after all, the truth of different religions is valued only by its psychological suitability for an individual’s needs, where does that leave the integrity of absolute Truth? If Buddhism and Christianity are relevant only to the subjective circumstances of individual Buddhists and Christians, what is their claim to be truth-full or even universal? I raised this question of religious relativism with the Dalai Lama, and he responded by saying that even within Buddhism there are schools of thought that acknowledge the possibility of different absolute truths existing simultaneously. We did not go into this further, perhaps because we all realized that we were entering upon very technical philosophical territory which was not necessarily an appropriate path for our dialogue. So we laughed and moved on.

However, the question lurks disturbingly at the heart of our dialogue. Christians, for example, are often concerned that total tolerance edges over the borderline of faith. Does acknowledging the truth of the Buddhist’s taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha compromise our belief in the nature of Christian faith as a call to discipleship of Jesus? Is faith in Christ one way to find Truth, while belief in the Buddha represents another path? Jung thought so when he said that each represented the True Self for West and East respectively. But, Christians might ask, does this not challenge their central idea of the completeness of the Incarnation of God in the human being of Jesus, in whom the “complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied”?20

But does it challenge Christian understanding of Jesus to acknowledge that truth is also to be found in the Buddha, or Moses, or Lao Tsu?21 The early Christian Fathers were the first practitioners of dialogue between the Gospel and other faiths, and they had to wrestle with this...
question of “uniqueness” from the start. Dialogue was the anvil on which they formulated their faith in conceptual terms. Because their faith was the new arrival among the already established Jewish and Hellenistic faith systems, and also because they deeply respected the achievements of the pre-Christian philosophers, dialogue was the necessary way to deepen faith, not dilute it. Unfortunately, history did not provide an opportunity for them to dialogue with Buddhists: for Christians the partners in dialogue were the Greeks and Jews. The Christian approach was not to deny or to undervalue the truth that had been discovered and expressed in these other traditions. Instead, the Christian Fathers pondered how these faith systems related to the truth they saw embodied in Jesus. This question, the dialogue of their age, deepened and clarified their insight into Jesus and the Gospels and led to the great theology of the Logos.

Long before Plato, Heraclitus said that the Logos is the wisdom that shapes and governs all things. It is the unified field theory that makes everything fit. Saint John’s Gospel, in particular, allowed the early Christians to respond to this view, and they came to see that the Incarnation of the Logos in Jesus need in no way diminish or invalidate other, pre- or non-incarnate epiphanies of Truth. Quite the reverse, a clear perception of Jesus opens windows of insight that permit one to see the Logos more clearly, perhaps where one had failed to see it before. There are, therefore, differences in the manifestations of the Logos, different expressions of the Truth, dialects of the same language. The acceptance of differences (tolerance) and the assertion of uniqueness (faith) may seem contradictory. But they are both integral to the achievement of peace and unity between all people. Uniformity suggests falsehood. The different paths human beings will always follow express, in their very diversity, the unity of Truth. There is one Truth, one God. One Word, but many dialects.

The Problem with Tolerance

One may accept the notion of parallel absolute truths, but this is an idea that does not make the daily work of living with people of other beliefs much easier. Even with this accommodation to the problem of tolerance, difficulties remain.
It can seem to non-Christians that Christianity is smuggling all other faiths under its wing by insisting on the uniqueness of the Incarnation. Judaism is true, but it is prophetic. Krishna is true, but he was mythical. Philosophy is true, but it is cerebral. Buddhism is true, but it is psychological. Christ is true because he is the completely human embodiment of the divine. Many Christians use these precise terms when expressing their faith, or believe in the concept whether they actually express it or not. That is, in fact, part of the uniqueness, the difference, of orthodox Christianity: it does believe that Jesus is the embodiment of the divine. The forms of language in which these beliefs must be expressed are renewed constantly through dialogue between people who believe and speak differently. But in that dialogue the Christian hears the Logos sounding, and respects and reveres any manifestation of Truth as an epiphany of God’s love. Beyond these exchanges in language, however, there is a deeper experience beyond language and thought. In that experience, which is silence, uniqueness and difference, along with all other dualities, coincide: they meet in a unity that respects and fulfills difference and at the same time transcends division. This is love.

Buddhism is also challenged by tolerance and dialogue. It also accommodates to the problem of tolerance in its own unique way and runs the same risk of subtle intolerance in doing so. When a Buddhist, perhaps especially a Western Buddhist, says that all religions are compatible because they represent the different personal or psychological needs of individuals, many may add or think “at different stages of their development.” Behind this may be the feeling—which I never sensed at all in the Dalai Lama in either private or public discussion—that the notion of a personal God is acceptable, but that it represents a more immature, perhaps an earlier, stage of spiritual development, a kind of balancing third wheel on a child’s bicycle.

Christian theology also recognizes the danger of this kind of infantilism—it calls it anthropomorphism. It recognizes that there are indeed stages of faith in which the symbol of God is understood more maturely. Every believer in God wrestles with idolatry and superstition before coming to the mystery of the divine Other. The Dalai Lama seemed to accept this quite naturally while leaving the question open
about, as he called it laughingly in one exchange, the “nature of the Father” which seemed to be causing so much confusion among us. In the same open way, he did not mind using the word God, and the term remained flexible during our discussions.

The Purpose of Dialogue Is to Become Silent

If the purpose of dialogue is to get at the answers to these problem areas of difference and similarity, the Good Heart Seminar failed. But the purpose of dialogue is something else. Dialogue is meant to illuminate both the parallels and the divergences of belief in order to dispel the dark forces of delusion, fear, anger, and pride that can lurk in the spaces between people and their religions. To this degree the purpose of dialogue in religion is different from, say, dialogue between political or economic rivals in which some kind of practical answer acceptable to all the contestants is being sought. In religion, when answers of this kind are reached, they are often dangerous achievements. They are like false friends who run out on you as soon as real difficulties start.

Dialogue exposes not only the areas of coincidence and departure between religions, but it also uncovers the hidden inner forces that so readily make religions the most implacable of rivals. In the history of religious intolerance and persecution, Buddhism, like Jainism, has a better record than Christianity. Nevertheless, there are different forms of intolerance, some more political, others more psychological. And they all have their root in the tyranny of the individual ego that clings to its obsession with being special yet shirks the challenge of accepting its uniqueness. The powers at work are ignorance and fear. The less we know about another person or group, the more likely we are to project our worst feelings and prejudices onto them.

When Saint Francis Xavier first landed in India to preach the Gospel, he regarded all Hindus as devil worshipers. He knew nothing of Vedanta or the mystical experience underlying the popular religion of the country. A Westerner can still find it a little scary to be led into the heart of a Hindu temple and witness the chants and rituals of worshipers that have such overwhelming sensory power. On the other hand, when Francis Xavier’s contemporary and fellow-Jesuit Matteo Ricci went to China, he soon realized that dialogue and inculturation
were the best ways to achieve his mission. Matteo Ricci’s superiors in Rome disagreed and removed him. One of the great opportunities for East-West dialogue was thus lost. Today, we see the same kind of diverse situations in which people must deal with a very different culture or religion, and we see the same variety of responses to these situations as well. But by recognizing the value of dialogue and minimizing the egotistical arrogance of a biased belief, it is perhaps easier for us than it was for our ancestors to identify prejudice, which is often unconscious, and to correct it with silence. It is easier for us today because we know more about each other. It is also more necessary than ever before in humanity’s history to dialogue—and to dialogue in silence.

Certainly, if a more widespread tolerance between religions is to take place, more Christians need to develop a better familiarity with the major texts of other traditions. Reading the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Dhammapada* might also help to transform the way many Christians read (if they do so at all) their own scriptures. On the other hand, the same determination to overcome ignorance or prejudice challenges Buddhists. In Asia, Christianity is still sometimes negatively identified with memories of Western imperialism or modern economic imperialism. Many Buddhists in the West, especially those who were raised as Christians, have an image of Christianity that may be sadly uninformed or misinformed. And in these cases, it is very easy to attribute the faults of individual denominations to the Christian faith itself.

**Some Terms of Reference**

We are Buddhist or Christian in a meaningful sense, not only because of what we believe, but also by how we act and what we are like. In this way, there will be Christians who are better Buddhists than Buddhists, because they practice mindfulness more seriously or have sharper insight into the impermanent nature of things. And there will be Buddhists who surpass Christians on their claimed turf, because they practice rather than just mouth charity. At this level of authentic religion, it is personal experience and holiness that count rather than objective systems of belief and philosophical or theological niceties. A great deal of (to some people) fascinating conversation can take place over the question, for example, of whether the *triratna*, the Three Jewels of Buddhism, can be compared...
with the Trinity; or whether the dharma\kya expresses the Christian’s Holy Spirit. But this sort of philosophical conversation may bear no relation whatever to the personal behavior or attitudes of the people engaged in it so passionately.

Anityatā (impermanence), duḥkha (suffering), anātman (no-self), dharmatā (naturalness), śānyatā (emptiness), and tathatā (thusness) can all be paralleled with Christian terms such as poverty, repentance, loss of self, in-Christ, simplicity, Spirit, and mystery.29 One of Buddha’s parables reminds us, however, not to divert the energy of our spiritual practice to theory for its own sake. We will be no closer to nirvana if we achieve philosophical certainty for just a few blissful moments before self-questioning resumes. In the story, the Buddha responds to a challenge from Mālunyaputta\30 regarding his not having taught about speculative issues. If, the Buddha responds, a man is shot with a poisoned arrow, is he likely to waste time asking who shot it, where it came from, and what kind of poison it is? Is he not more likely to remove the arrow as quickly as possible?

Jesus, in an ecstatic moment in the Gospel, lifts his eyes to heaven and thanks his Father for revealing the mysteries of the Kingdom to the simple and unlearned and for hiding them from the learned and the “wise.”31 Saint Paul berates some of the early Christians for their interminable wrangling over words and for splitting hairs when they should be living out the meaning of the terms they are arguing about.32 He himself, he says, speaks of the folly of the Cross, and even with learned Greeks he avoids philosophical argument. His authority is Spirit, not logical artistry. “We demolish sophistries,” he says proudly, “and all that rears its proud head against the knowledge of God.”

Buddhist and Christian perspectives here are fundamentally the same. There is experience and there is reflection on the experience. If you are going to reflect, they both suggest, at least make sure you are reflecting on your own experience directly, rather than on someone else’s reflection on someone else’s reflection on…and so on.

Nirvana and the Kingdom are not interchangeable terms, yet they both refer to an event-in-life, not to an after-death experience. Salvation and liberation are not exactly synonymous either, but both concepts indicate a goal of human life that demands commitment and perseverance.
Both Buddhists and Christians must work it out for themselves “with diligence.” The hindrances or vices that they confront along the way—in their own personalities, as well as in the collective *karma* or *sin* in the universe—are existentially the same but conceptually different. After all, a proud or angry Buddhist is very much the same as a proud or angry Christian.

*Differences Need Not Be Divisions*

To express the meaning of these existential realities, we require many different languages, certainly between traditions, and even within the same tradition. In a sense, these different languages then create their own divisions within a common tradition. Even the Catholic Church, compared with its pre-modern self, does not offer a very united front to the world today. Its diversity is in painful tension with its unity: this is the precise challenge of catholicity. The debates in Buddhism may be less public than those sparked by papal encyclicals, but they are no less intense. For instance, there are tensions of intolerance and stereotyping between the Mahayana and Theravadan schools of thought. Even within the same national tradition, tensions of belief are felt deeply. In Thailand, the great teacher Buddhadasa Bhikkhu shocked the establishment by rejecting the whole question of rebirth, declaring that it was foolish and had nothing to do with Buddhism at all. Buddhists argue whether *nirvana* (liberation) is the goal of mind or the original mind, just as Christians argue about the meaning of Original Sin or the divinity of Jesus.

God was not a part of the Buddha’s idea of liberation. He felt that questioning and pondering the existence and nature of God did not help the practical work of freeing oneself from ignorance. Like Jesus, he attacked ritualism and the empty religiosity that requires intense beliefs and polemic about God for its survival. Still, the Buddha did not reject the concept of God. He was simply silent about it. His silence was neither agnostic nor atheistic. It is a significant approach to the question, the mystery, of God.33

The Buddha’s approach may be somewhat different from that of many Christian saints, mystics, and theologians, but it would certainly be understandable to many of them. Saint Augustine doubtlessly believed in God, but he was also sure that God is unknowable to the thinking mind alone. “If
you can understand it,” he said, “then it is not God.” His contemporary Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a great mystical teacher of the Eastern Church, said that all ideas about God run the risk of becoming idols.

The *apophatic* traditions of Christian prayer—prayer without thought or image of any kind—are profoundly and existentially true to the basic biblical idea of the mysteriousness of God. As expressed in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval English treatise on contemplative prayer, we can know God not by thought but only by love. The most systematic and *cataphatic* of theologians, the great Thomas Aquinas, said that all we can say about God is *that* God is, not *what* God is. Toward the end of his life, after a transforming mystical experience, Aquinas dismissed all he had thought and written as straw. Nicholas of Cusa also spoke of a “learned ignorance,” stating it was a form of awareness that does not have an intellectual root but has the greatest power to lead us into truth. Meister Eckhart, a friend to Buddhism, emphasizes the unknowability and no-thingness of God, at times to a delightful excess: “Let thy soul be de-spirited of all spirit; let it be spiritless. Love God as he is: a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-Person, a not-image; as sheer, pure, limpid unity, alien from all duality.”

Paradox rather than simple logic thus becomes the key to mystical theology as well as to a dialogue between theists and nontheists on the meaning of God. What may seem like the crude, offensive dualism of theism to the Buddhist perspective is actually just as unfaithful to the heart of Christian theology, which seeks to reconcile the absolute otherness of God with the divine universality as the ground of being, the transcendence with the immanence of God, the Creator with the Creation. “With Thee Creation and existence are the same” is a key Christian insight into the meaning of God.

The eightfold path and the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes illuminate the path of daily practice we all tread toward this time-devouring and thought-transcending experience. As the Dalai Lama frequently points out, it is in the nature of these paths to require deep personal commitment and concentration. The paths themselves are the external training required for an even deeper commitment—that of the practice of meditation itself. While each path can help to illuminate the other, and while each leads to the silence inherent in a mind whose
activities have been stilled, they are still separate ways to be followed with dedication, fidelity, and single-mindedness. Beyond a certain point in one’s practice, one cannot be authentic and continue to straddle different paths. One cannot ride two horses at the same time. In time, one’s steady practice must settle into a single-minded dedication. This single-mindedness, however, is not narrow-mindedness. It actually strengthens tolerance and receptivity toward other paths and thus fosters equanimity of mind. Jesus said that the road that leads to life is narrow, and few there are who find it. The narrowness of the path to life is not the result of exclusion but of convergence and concentration. There is even a genuine tolerance, actually fostered by single-mindedness, that is bursting with curiosity about other ways and paths.

To love one’s own tradition and religion is perhaps a requirement of the spiritual life, and it is certainly a prerequisite for loving other paths and traditions. It is no more fanatical to love your own Christian or Buddhist tradition than it is to love the place where you were born or the home in which you live. However, love of country can become a jealous and exclusive nationalism, fearful of foreigners. And love of religion can create bigotry. But neither has to degenerate in this direction. The serious inner practice of silence and stillness, overcoming the egotistical forces of self-centeredness, allows us to remain deeply rooted in the soil of our tradition, while openly branching outward and upward into the great spaces of truth.

Holy Scriptures

The scriptures of a religion obviously belong to their particular tradition. They have a “nationality.” But they also constitute a meeting place between neighbors of distant traditions, like the duty-free zones in airports where all nationalities mingle equally. They are the space of symbolic truth between the land of philosophical or theological debate and the realm of the pure experience of truth where thought is subsumed in vision. Philosophers and theologians may delve into their scriptures in order to find the material for their craft. Ordinary practitioners feed off scriptures as spiritual food, ingesting and assimilating their wisdom.

Christians revere the Holy Scriptures of the Bible—the Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament—not only for what they say but for
what they are. If the Word became flesh, as the Gospels affirm, there is also a sense in which the flesh becomes Word again in the Holy Scriptures. When they celebrate the Eucharist, for example, many Christians believe and feel that the presence of Christ is not restricted to the bread and wine. It is also accessible in the faith of the worshiping community, in the way we are present to each other, and in the reading of the Scriptures, which forms the first part of the sacramental rite. Early Christians attributed great importance to the *breaking of the Word* in the private or communal reading of the Gospels. The act of interpretation was sensed to be something far richer than a merely intellectual achievement. It was a work of wisdom. It led to insight.

Insight is an experience of the truth that cannot be simply given to another person in the way that one may communicate ideas or beliefs. Insight is spontaneous and has the nature of a gift. It is surprising when it comes and yet obvious. It is joyful and yet calm. The monastic tradition practices a form of spiritual reading (*lectio divina* as Saint Benedict called it), which is not the same as study or analytical reading and which is dedicated to the progressive awakening of insight in the practitioner. Like the Jewish tradition of reading the Bible, quality is preferred to quantity, depth to breadth. Reading in this way, one chooses a short passage and then continues to ruminate or “chew” over it. You go back over it many times, homing in more and more until you are left with a single word or short phrase, simultaneously arresting and awakening the mind to meaning. In this way, as the mind is stilled, one is brought to the threshold of meditation.

*How to Read the Word*

Origen, a third-century Christian teacher in the Alexandrian school of Christian philosophy, was the first to systematically describe the act of reading and interpreting Scripture as well as the first to describe how the mind’s encounter with the Scriptures lifts the mind above itself. He identified the different levels of meaning (an exercise that was anathema to fundamentalists then as it is now) waiting to be experienced in the Scriptures.

He saw the reading of Holy Scripture as a process of deepening consciousness and insight. The process begins with the literal meaning of
the text, a meaning that requires both a sense of grammar and of history. But, beyond the “letter that killeth,” which goes no further than its surface meaning, Origen pushed on toward the level of moral meaning. This level is reached by seeing the stories and characters of Scripture as “types” or symbols that teach us lessons within the context of our personal or social circumstances. Then, Origen said, the “allegorical” or mystical meaning waits to be discovered as we are lifted above ourselves and absorbed into the Logos itself. A good example of how this process works can be seen by exploring the different levels of meaning in the Bible of the term “Jerusalem”: the word, the place, and the symbol. Jerusalem has a literal historical meaning. As the center of sacred presence and worship for three religions, it symbolizes the spiritual realities of the pilgrimage of our lives. As the “heavenly Jerusalem” it represents the goal of the spiritual journey.

Origen applied his method to many passages of the Bible. “You must not think,” he said of the stories from the Old Testament, “that all these things happened only in earlier times. In fact, all these things come true in you in a mystical way.” The Book of Joshua, for example, tells the story of Rahab the harlot who made it possible for the Israelites to capture the city. In Origen’s imagination she becomes a type or symbol of the Church, a harlot turned virgin. The blood of Christ, which saves us from damnation, is foreshadowed in the scarlet cord that Rahab tied to the window to identify her family and protect them from the attacking Israelites. In another example, the crossing of the Jordan was a prefiguring of Baptism—and Baptism, as a rite of passage, is a symbol in its turn of something yet to be achieved: “We have been promised a passage through the very air itself.” The goal of reading the Bible is for the reader ultimately to be incorporated into the highest reality into which the humanity of Jesus has already been assumed. And so, as Origen said, in reading the Gospels and being open to all levels of consciousness and meaning, we come “to gallop through the vast spaces of mystic and spiritual understanding.”

Saint Bernard, a twelfth-century monk and teacher, was another major influence on the Christian tradition of reading the Gospels. He spoke of Scripture as a window through which we glimpse the divine reality. In reading Scripture, we pursue the timeless Word of God back
to its source: what Saint Bernard called the “endless following of the Word.” On the way, we undergo the experience of *inverbation* by which the Word actually becomes part of us and we of it.

And so, in the Christian tradition, we see that one does not read the Gospels merely to learn about the facts of the life of Jesus or the answers to catechism questions. It is an awakening of the mystical intelligence. One could say that reading the Gospels in this way is the strengthening of *buddhi*, spiritual intelligence. And this strengthening is not limited to times of formal spiritual practice, but enters into and transforms all the activities and situations in our lives. Concentrating on the swirling patterns of scriptural meaning can also be seen as a practice of focusing consciousness that is similar to the visual attention employed to center the mind with a mandala.

*Attention Leads to Wisdom*

Reading the Gospels requires the work of attention and concentration. It can be immensely rewarding and enriching. But there is more effort asked from us in reading Scripture than is required of us by many of the ancient systems of divination and prediction, some of which—such as the Tarot, Runes, or the I Ching—have again become popular today. There is additional work demanded from us in reading Scripture, including an interaction with the text and its many meanings. We are not passive before the Word. Hearing the Word energizes us and causes us to spring to our feet, ready for action. Through the Word we win a more personal ownership of the meaning of the texts, as well as of the process and its fruits. The wisdom we seek in reading the Gospels is no longer felt to be located magically in the actual process of reading. The words of the Scriptures are not spells; the Word is not magic.

Wisdom is found to reside within the person who follows the practice of reading Scripture. The inner Spirit is realized by interacting with the accumulated wisdom of the tradition that supports the reading. When people in therapy want the therapist or their therapy session to do the work for them, they have lost their own authority. An egotistical therapist can encourage this, and so promote a dependency that traps a patient in an infantile awareness. However, the Spirit, who is the guide, the real therapist, in the act of reading Scripture, encourages the reader to do the work.
We are only asked a simple registration fee to read Scripture well: we are asked to give our undivided attention to it. Attention alone is necessary to build our journey, our practice, on the twin pillars of spiritual authority: the authority of personal insight and of the living, transmitted tradition.

We develop mystical intelligence by reading the Gospels in this way. Progressively, this intelligence illuminates and enriches ordinary life. This is quite different from attributing magical power to the literal meaning, a mistake that can distort and disrupt ordinary life rather than enhance it. A fundamentalist reader of the Bible once appealed to his well-thumbed book for advice in a dilemma. He flipped the pages and placed his finger blindly on a verse. It read “and Judas went and hanged himself.” Thinking something had gone wrong with his divination, he thought he would try again. This time the verse he alighted on read “go thou and do likewise.” It was perhaps the beginning of his learning the true way to read the Holy Book.

Reading the Gospels is an artistic activity of the heart. Recovering the lost art of reading Scripture is one of the great tasks for Christianity today. When I thanked the Dalai Lama at the end of the Good Heart Seminar for his gift to those present as well as, in some way, to the Church in the West, I was thinking partly of our need to recover this art of reading Scripture. His Holiness restores to religion a self-confidence and integrity that has been lost for many Westerners. And in addition, he shows how many of the traditional practices of religion, such as the reading of Scripture, can be regained even at this late stage in our Western alienation from the spiritual.

Meditation

Discovering how to truly read and experience the Gospels is one of the first fruits of meditation. Even people who have no habit of spiritual reading develop an unexpected thirst for the Word in Scripture as a consequence of their meditation practice. Others who have been reading Scripture for many years become aware of a substantial change in the quality of the reading, in the way they are now read by Scripture.

Meditation is a way of faith, and so it strengthens faith. With the eye of faith opened and clarified, an entire other dimension of consciousness is awakened. We read the Gospels, the sutras, and all the sacred scriptures of humanity with this eye of faith. The dimension of
consciousness that it opens does not compete with scientific reason or philosophical logic. But it is distinguished from them by its air of freedom. Faith is not logical certainty. With logic there is no personal freedom. The mind must impose the truth of a logical statement. But with faith, the deeper levels of truth call forth a personal response that we are eternally free to give or to retain. If, with your rational mind, you see that ten divided by five equals two, you are not really free to believe it or not. To deny it is absurd. If, however, with the eye of faith, you realize that you are in love, then you are confronted with the vast space of human freedom in which that truth can be lived or denied, accepted or evaded.

What I have just written is a very Christian way of putting it. The word faith may make some Buddhists uncomfortable. But it is important that we share an understanding of this word if meditation together is to be the common ground from which dialogue can penetrate deeper than merely scholarly or diplomatic encounters. Jesus said that faith saves us, that it moves mountains, and that by faith we are healed. An act of faith, such as one we make toward another human being or a community, is an act that advances the healing process of human integration. Without acts of faith to nourish and challenge our lives, we feel less alive, less whole.

It is in this sense that I say meditation is a way of faith. Because we were meditating together three times a day, it was possible for the Dalai Lama’s commentaries on the Gospels to be delivered and shared in an atmosphere of a common faith. From the beginning it was clear to us all that these periods of silence were crucial to the success of the experiment. The Dalai Lama showed this by agreeing, as I think only a few major religious leaders would, to come over to the meditation hall early in the morning each day—a trip that necessitated his returning to his residence for breakfast and making the same long journey back for the first session an hour later.

We meditated each in our own way. There was no discussion about methods or techniques and, of course, no analysis about what happened (or did not) during the meditation. This experience of silence and thought-free being together, for each other, was the underlay of the dialogue. I think that this was the essential act of dialogue that took place during the Seminar. This book conveys the words we used, but I hope it
makes clear that the words were charged with the power of silence. Maybe it was due to this silence that there was also so much laughter and goodwill. The Good Heart Seminar was a remarkable lesson in the nature of silence as a medium that penetrates language and discourse. Ramana Maharshi, a great Indian sage of this century, once said that silence is not turning off the tap of communication but turning it full on.

If *The Good Heart*—as seminar, video, book, or living tradition—has a single, crucial point to make, it is the value of silence.

In the United Nations building in New York, a Christian Meditation group has established weekly meetings that welcome people of all faiths and cultures. The building itself is one of the great modern icons of hope. Its architecture and spaciousness express the desperate human longing after a millennium of war for a time of rest, when swords can finally be beaten into plowshares. The building is also a labyrinth of bureaucracy and talk. Everyone is talking, and talking about talking. It is all necessary. But it is also incomplete. There are some there, like the woman who started the meditation group, who sense that silence would not be a suspension of dialogue between nations. Silence would facilitate dialogue and the understanding and friendship that we need for peace.

And why do we need peace? Why not fight each other and make an art of war, as we have done for so long? The answer to that, of course, is beyond words. It is found in the meditation itself. Buddhists and Christians and people of all faiths would agree that the reason for peace is not badly described as love or goodness. If the human heart is basically good—what hope is there if we think it is not?—it is good because it can love.

This book is an expression of that love, a love that is unsentimental and unselfish. The dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism can be a model of how it is possible for human beings to love each other because they are different, not just despite their differences. This goal will be enriched and strengthened for the next century by meetings of mind and heart—such as the meeting of mind and heart that occurred when the Dalai Lama laughingly accepted, with deep reverence, the challenge of reading the Gospels with a group of contemplative Christians.

This book expresses a generous experience of friendship shared by many people whose unique talents and energies facilitated the Seminar,
the videos, and now the book. From the beginning of *The Good Heart*, Mrs. Kesang Y. Takla and her team at the Office of Tibet in London have been exemplars of positive cooperation. Robert Kiely generously took on the whole task of editing the transcripts, which derived from the masterly recordings made by Peter Armstrong of WordPictures and Mark Schofield of our Community. Gregory Ryan’s transcription of the Seminar gave a clear and accurate record from which to work. Giovanni Felicioni, director of Medio Media, and Judith Longman, a friend and advisor of its work, gave valuable time and insights at all stages. Teresa O’Neill and Sadie Summers at our International Centre in London contributed secretarial skills and kept in contact all the far-flung parties involved in the book. Thupten Jinpa’s precise but human translation at the Seminar lies behind his contribution to making the Buddhist terminology of the book accessible to the general reader. Timothy McNeill of Wisdom Publications has been a delight to work with and has led the coordination of the project with eponymous wisdom and prudence. Susanna Ralli’s editing and John Dunne’s reading of the translations and his own translation of the Tibetan prayers have also added inestimably to the accuracy and usefulness of the book. Connie Miller of the Wisdom staff has made a valuable contribution in helping to develop the glossaries and read the Buddhist references for the precision and clarity of their meaning. All these people, inspired by various traditions, have made the book of *The Good Heart* something more than a book: it is a sign of friendship between people who have discovered that, in the modern world, differences need no longer be divisions but sources of a greater unity than human beings have known so far.

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