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**In The Good Heart, The Dalai Lama Provides** an extraordinary Buddhist perspective on the teachings of Jesus. His Holiness comments on well-known passages from the four Christian Gospels, including the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the mustard seed, the Resurrection, and others. Drawing parallels between Jesus and the Buddha—and the rich traditions from which they hail—the Dalai Lama delivers a profound affirmation of the sacred in all religions. Readers will be uplifted by the exploration of each tradition’s endless merits and the common humanity they share.

"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."

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**The Dalai Lama** is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. A beacon of inspiration for both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, he has persistently reached out across religious lines and to political leaders and scientists in dialogues advancing peace and understanding.
The Good Heart
A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus

his holiness the
Dalai Lama

Introduction and Christian Context by
Laurence Freeman, OSB

Translated from the Tibetan and Annotated by
Geshe Thupten Jinpa

Edited and with a Preface by
Robert Kiely
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A Wish for Harmony

The lecture room in Middlesex University in North London was not grand: it was a rather narrow, cramped space with a steeply rising bank of creaky wooden seats that banged and scraped whenever anyone moved. Large posters of calligraphed sayings of John Main were patched between windows opening out to the gray English sky. A few chairs, a little carpet, and a bunch of flowers looked forlorn on a wobbly temporary platform. The whole place looked makeshift, as though it had been thrown together the night before and nothing of importance could possibly happen there.

The audience fidgeted in anticipation. Mixed in among English, Canadian, and American laypeople were Buddhist monks and nuns in saffron or crimson robes, their shaven heads still in the bobbing throng. In the front rows were Benedictine monks and sisters, some in black, Olivetans in white. Cameras and microphones were adjusted. Throats were cleared. No organ played, no horns sounded. A little group of people climbed onto the platform from a side entrance. In their midst was His Holiness the Dalai Lama, wearing sensible shoes and wrapped in his crimson and yellow habit, grinning, nodding, and waving a little shyly but with obvious pleasure.

He had made an entrance without an entrance. There had been no procession. Indeed, his arrival was a Buddhist non-procession. One moment, he wasn’t there; the next he was. Very much there.

Several welcoming speeches were made, including one by the Lady Mayor of Enfield, who described her borough as “multiracial, multicultural, multireligious.” This northern suburb of London, with a strong commitment to harmony in pluralism, was an appropriate meeting place for a Seminar gathering two great religious traditions.

Following the Mayor’s remarks, Dom Laurence Freeman, OSB, rose to welcome His Holiness. As the spiritual director and teacher of the World Community for Christian Meditation, Father Laurence had extended the
invitation to the Dalai Lama and was serving as host for the Seminar’s proceedings. Gentle and mild of manner, Father Laurence nonetheless conveyed an intellectual and spiritual energy that the guest of honor clearly found congenial and intriguing. As the conference went along, the rapport and affection between the two monks increased visibly. When Father Laurence spoke, His Holiness, as he did with everyone who addressed him, fixed his gaze and attention on him.

Father Laurence, in his very first remarks, sounded what was to become a theme of the Seminar—the reciprocal nature of the event.

It is a great honor, Your Holiness, to welcome you. You told me you would like to learn from us and we are here to learn from you as well. It is a great privilege for us that you are going to lead this John Main Seminar on the theme you chose, The Good Heart, and that you have accepted with openness and generosity our invitation to comment on the Gospels, the Christian Scriptures.

In the Christian tradition, we call the scriptures the Holy Scriptures because we believe that the presence of Christ can be found in them, even in the reading of the words. They are human words, and they are subject to understanding and, of course, also to misunderstanding. These words need to be interpreted through the mind so that the heart can see their meaning. We know that you represent a rich and wonderful Buddhist tradition which has refined the instruments of the mind for the perception of truth. And so we feel eager to read our Holy Scriptures through your mind, and, with you, to see them in a fresh way.

Just as we are sure that we Christians will be enriched, we hope that all the Buddhists here with you, and people here of all faiths, will also be enriched. We know that the search for understanding is not just intellectual but that it is about true insight, vipaśyanā, the experience of the meaning of sacred words. One of the great teachers of Christian theology, Thomas Aquinas, said that we put our faith not in propositions but in the realities that the words point to. What matters is the experience, not merely the ideas by themselves. We understand that the way of meditation we will share during this Seminar in silence with Your Holiness will be a universal, unifying way into that experience beyond words.
John Main understood the unifying power of silence to lead us beyond words. That is why, in this Seminar, perhaps the most important time that we will spend together will be the time of silence. After His Holiness speaks to us, he will lead us in a period of meditation. For each of these periods, we will be able to go beyond words into that truth that lies at the heart of reality. Meditation enriches us in so many ways. One of these ways is in the power of meditation to enable us to read the holy scriptures of the world more wisely and perceptively than we otherwise could.

We appreciate the gift of your presence, Your Holiness. If we can be open to the reality of presence—to the presence that we will experience in the Scriptures, the presence that we will experience as you open your mind and heart to us—let us also grow in a spirit of peace and friendship.

On behalf of our entire Community worldwide, I would like to assure you that we hold in our minds and hearts the Tibetan people. We feel them here with you today. The Cross and the Resurrection of Christ lie at the heart of Christian faith. Perhaps in the history of Tibet and in your own personal history, we can see that the Cross and Resurrection are human realities that belong to all people, and not to one religion alone. We have seen Tibet crucified, but we have also seen the resurrection of Tibetan wisdom and teaching, particularly through Your Holiness, as a gift to the whole world.

We are open to the mystery of reality. We hope and pray that in the silence of meditation, as well as in the words through which you will guide us, we will be able to enter into the fullness of consciousness and light.  

When Father Laurence had finished, the audience applauded enthusiastically while the Dalai Lama beamed, acknowledging the clarity of the welcoming remarks and the obvious warmth of his reception. He began speaking in English, speaking in Tibetan intermittently when it became necessary to clarify a point.

Spiritual brothers and sisters, it is a great joy and privilege for me to have the opportunity to participate in this dialogue and to open the John Main
Seminar entitled “The Good Heart.” I would like to express my deep appreciation to all those who have helped to organize this event.

I am grateful for the warm words of welcome from the Lady Mayor, and I am very encouraged by her reference to the harmony and understanding that exists among the various communities and religious traditions in this borough, which she described as multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multireligious. I would like to express my thanks for that.

I met the late Father John Main many years ago in Canada and was impressed to meet a person in the Christian tradition who emphasized meditation as a part of spiritual practice. Today, at the beginning of this Seminar, I think it is very important for us to remember him.

I am also happy to see so many familiar faces and to have the opportunity to meet new and old friends here.

Despite many material advances on our planet, humanity faces many, many problems, some of which are actually of our own creation. And to a large extent it is our mental attitude—our outlook on life and the world—that is the key factor for the future—the future of humanity, the future of the world, and the future of the environment. Many things depend on our mental attitude, both in the personal and public spheres. Whether we are happy in our individual or family life is, in a large part, up to us. Of course, material conditions are an important factor for happiness and a good life, but one’s mental attitude is of equal or greater importance.

As we approach the twenty-first century, religious traditions are as relevant as ever. Yet, as in the past, conflicts and crises arise in the name of different religious traditions. This is very, very unfortunate. We must make every effort to overcome this situation. In my own experience, I have found that the most effective method to overcome these conflicts is close contact and an exchange among those of various beliefs, not only on an intellectual level, but in deeper spiritual experiences. This is a powerful method to develop mutual understanding and respect. Through this interchange, a strong foundation of genuine harmony can be established.

So I am always extremely happy to participate in religious dialogue. And I am particularly happy to spend these few days talking with you and practicing my broken English! When I spend a few weeks on retreat in Dharmsala, my residence in India, I find that my broken English becomes even poorer, so these days of exchange will give me a much-needed opportunity to practice.
Since it is my belief that harmony among different religious traditions is extremely important, extremely necessary, I would like to suggest a few ideas on ways it can be promoted. First, I suggest we encourage meetings among scholars from different religious backgrounds to discuss differences and similarities in their traditions, in order to promote empathy and to improve our knowledge about one another. Secondly, I suggest that we encourage meetings between people from different religious traditions who have had some deeper spiritual experiences. They need not be scholars, but instead genuine practitioners who come together and share insights as a result of religious practice. According to my own experience, this is a powerful and effective means of enlightening each other in a more profound and direct way.

Some of you may have already heard me mention that on a visit to the great monastery at Montserrat in Spain, I met a Benedictine monk there. He came especially to see me—and his English was much poorer than mine, so I felt more courage to speak to him. After lunch, we spent some time alone, face to face, and I was informed that this monk had spent a few years in the mountains just behind the monastery. I asked him what kind of contemplation he had practiced during those years of solitude. His answer was simple: “Love, love, love.” How wonderful! I suppose that sometimes he also slept. But during all those years he meditated simply on love. And he was not meditating on just the word. When I looked into his eyes, I saw evidence of profound spirituality and love—as I had during my meetings with Thomas Merton.

These two encounters have helped me develop a genuine reverence for the Christian tradition and its capacity to create people of such goodness. I believe the purpose of all the major religious traditions is not to construct big temples on the outside, but to create temples of goodness and compassion inside, in our hearts. Every major religion has the potential to create this. The greater our awareness is regarding the value and effectiveness of other religious traditions, then the deeper will be our respect and reverence toward other religions. This is the proper way for us to promote genuine compassion and a spirit of harmony among the religions of the world.

In addition to encounters among scholars and experienced practitioners, it is also important, particularly in the eyes of the public, that leaders of the various religious traditions occasionally come together to meet and pray, as in the important meeting at Assisi in 1986. This is a third simple yet effective way to promote tolerance and understanding.
A fourth means of working toward harmony among the world’s religions is for people of different religious traditions to go on pilgrimages together to visit one another’s holy places. A few years ago, I started doing this practice myself in India. Since then, I have had the opportunity to travel as a pilgrim to Lourdes, the holy place in France, and to Jerusalem. In these places, I prayed with the followers of the various religions, sometimes in silent meditation. And in this prayer and meditation, I felt a genuine spiritual experience. I hope this will set an example, serve as a sort of precedent, so that in the future it will be regarded as quite normal for people to join together in pilgrimages to holy sites and share the experience of their different religious backgrounds.

Finally, I would like to come back to the subject of meditation and to my Christian brothers and sisters who practice meditation in their daily lives. I believe this practice is extremely important. Traditionally in India, there is samādhi meditation, “stilling the mind,” which is common to all the Indian religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. And in many of these traditions, certain types of vipaśyanā, “analytical meditation,” are common as well. We might ask why samādhi, “stilling the mind,” is so important. Because samādhi, or focusing meditation, is the means to mobilize your mind, to channel your mental energy. Samādhi is considered to be an essential part of spiritual practice in all the major religious traditions of India because it provides the possibility to channel all one’s mental energy and the ability to direct the mind to a particular object in a single-pointed way.

It is my belief that if prayer, meditation, and contemplation—which is more discursive and analytic—are combined in daily practice, the effect on the practitioner’s mind and heart will be all the greater. One of the major aims and purposes of religious practice for the individual is an inner transformation from an undisciplined, untamed, unfocused state of mind toward one that is disciplined, tamed, and balanced. A person who has perfected the faculty of single-pointedness will definitely have a greater ability to attain this objective. When meditation becomes an important part of your spiritual life, you are able to bring about this inner transformation in a more effective way.

Once this transformation has been achieved, then in following your own spiritual tradition, you will discover that a kind of natural humility will
arise in you, allowing you to communicate better with people from other religious traditions and cultural backgrounds. You are in a better position to appreciate the value and preciousness of other traditions because you have seen this value from within your own tradition. People often experience feelings of exclusivity in their religious beliefs—a feeling that one’s own path is the only true path—which can create a sense of apprehension about connecting with others of different faiths. I believe the best way to counter that force is to experience the value of one’s own path through a meditative life, which will enable one to see the value and preciousness of other traditions.

In order to develop a genuine spirit of harmony from a sound foundation of knowledge, I believe it is very important to know the fundamental differences between religious traditions. And it is possible to understand the fundamental differences but at the same time recognize the value and potential of each religious tradition. In this way, a person may develop a balanced and harmonious perception. Some people believe that the most reasonable way to attain harmony and solve problems relating to religious intolerance is to establish one universal religion for everyone. However, I have always felt that we should have different religious traditions because human beings possess so many different mental dispositions: one religion simply cannot satisfy the needs of such a variety of people. If we try to unify the faiths of the world into one religion, we will also lose many of the qualities and richnesses of each particular tradition. Therefore, I feel it is better, in spite of the many quarrels in the name of religion, to maintain a variety of religious traditions. Unfortunately, while a diversity of religious traditions is more suited to serve the needs of the diverse mental dispositions among humanity, this diversity naturally possesses the potential for conflict and disagreement as well. Consequently people of every religious tradition must make an extra effort to try to transcend intolerance and misunderstanding and seek harmony.

These are a few points that I thought would be useful at the beginning of the Seminar. Now I am looking forward to the challenge of exploring texts and ideas that are not familiar to me. You’ve given me a heavy responsibility, and I will try my best to fulfill your wishes. I really feel it a great honor and privilege to be asked to comment on selected passages of the Holy Scripture—a scripture I must admit I am not very familiar with. I must also
admit that this is the first time I have tried to do such a thing. Whether it will be a success or failure, I don’t know! But in any case, I will try my best. Now I’ll chant a few verses of auspiciousness and then we will meditate.

The modesty, like his smile, was genuine. When the audience laughed, the laughter seemed partly out of surprise at the lack of self-importance in the man and also a gesture of friendly encouragement. It was the beginning of a rapport that, in the next few days, would lead to a climax of shared feeling and thought in an atmosphere of respect and love.

The lights in the hall were turned out, and in the soft light coming only through the windows, the audience collected itself as His Holiness closed his eyes and intoned an ancient Tibetan prayer:

Replete with excellence like a mountain of gold,
The triple worlds’ saviors, freed from the three taints,
Are the buddhas, their eyes like lotuses in bloom;
They are the world’s first auspicious blessing.

The teachings they imparted are sublime and steadfast,
Famed in the triple worlds, honored by gods and humans alike.
That holy teaching grants peace to all sentient beings;
This is the world’s second auspicious blessing.
The sacred community, rich with learning, is honored
By humans, gods, and demi-gods.
That supreme community is modest, yet the site of glory;
This is the world’s third auspicious blessing.

The Teacher has come into our world;
The teaching shines like the sun’s rays;
The teaching masters, like siblings, are harmonious;
Let there thus be auspicious blessings for the teachings to remain for a long time.\(^{48}\)
Song: “All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well.”

After thirty minutes of silent meditation, Father Laurence rose to speak:

To conclude our first session, we are going to ask His Holiness to light one of the candles in this symbol of unity and then different members of the guests representing other traditions will light other candles from his. These candles will burn during the Seminar as a symbol of the unity and friendship of our different beliefs.