

BUDDHIST APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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UDK 291.16:001.8:294.3

I am very happy to be able to talk about the Buddhist approach to the inter-religious dialogue. I am particularly happy that my first obligation upon arriving to Zagreb, capital of Croatia, is related to an interreligious exchange of thoughts. I will try to talk in my broken English in order to save time.

Firstly, I believe that human beings have a unique quality and that is their reason. Human beings attach particular importance to studies and knowledge because human development is not possible without education and information. Academic institutions are undoubtedly among the most important elements of society, and your work is truly precious. In my opinion, contemporary academic or educational institutions pay a lot of attention to the care of brain. However, sometimes it seems that they do not pay enough adequate attention to the development of a good heart. I thought I should emphasise this at the very beginning.

Many religious traditions contribute to the development of a good heart. I think that all religious traditions undoubtedly have equal ability to assist humankind in the area of developing a good and warm human heart. In these present times, however, the majority of humankind are not believers. Although they claim they are Christians, Buddhists, Hindus etc., I think that faith has very little influence on their everyday life. Therefore, we need to promote a secular ethic that would, instead of relying on religious beliefs, rely on simple consciousness about good sides of human feelings, such as the feeling of caring for other people, the feeling of sharing with other people, and the feeling of dedication and responsibility. I call these human values because they give us an internal strength and by consequence internal serenity or peace. And a serene and peaceful mind is very important at the individual level, and at the level of the family, and at the level of the community, and even at the level of humankind as a whole. A serene mind is a very important factor in attaining a happy life, happy family and a happy society. Different traditions spread more or less the same message, the message of love, com-

* Lecture given at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Society of Jesus in Zagreb during the visit of H. H. Dalai Lama on July 7, 2002.

passion, forgiveness, tolerance, satisfaction and self-control. All religious traditions and creeds, if used properly, are an important factor in helping humankind to develop a warm heart. At the same time, when a conflict situation occurs today, as it has been frequently the case in the history, religion is abused and as a consequence, the existing difficult circumstances are made even more complicated. I have observed, for instance, when I was in Northern Ireland, that in addition to the existing political problems, people misuse religion. In a conversation, at the mention of religion, human sentiments are awakened and therefore the issue of the conflict becomes even more serious and difficult. While we endeavour to support good things and good opportunities that help humankind, we have to find ways and means with which to eliminate conflicts that continue in the name of religion. In that matter, the key factor is the attitude of a believer towards the other tradition. In the past, in the majority of cases, except in India, different traditions flourished in certain areas without having too much contact with other traditions. Now, in modern times, these circumstances have completely changed. Even in very remote areas, we frequently find multicultural, multiconfessional and multiracial societies. Owing to technology and other factors, close relations between different traditions today are practically becoming an everyday experience. I think that because of that reason, according to the actual presence of various traditions, we need religious pluralism. Let us consider my own example. While I was in Tibet, we had a Tibetan translation of the Bible, the New Testament. I remember that the quality of the translation was not very good, however, with the help of that translation and occasional personal meeting, we have acquired some knowledge about Christianity. But basically we were still rather isolated. After I had become a refugee, I had more frequent meetings and more contact, particularly personal contact, with some of the Christian superiors, particularly Christian practitioners, whereby I was able to attain a significantly higher level of awareness about this tradition, its possibilities and its effectiveness. Thus my admiration and respect for that tradition developed in a spontaneous manner. I presume that my attitude, had I remained in Tibet, without contact with other traditions, would not have been the same. Therefore, the closer relations among different traditions are very useful.

Usually I present and follow several ways, several methods of advocating religious tolerance among different traditions. The first such way are the meetings at academic level with scholars of different traditions, where we together examine differences and similarities among our respective religions. Perhaps this meeting of ours belongs to the same category.

Furthermore, there are meetings with practitioners, where we discuss deeper spiritual experiences and exchange different knowledge from the point of view of our respective traditions. I think this way holds endless benefit and endless strength. Let us again take my own example. An American Trappist

monk, the late Thomas Merton, before his sudden death in Thailand had visited India and spent several days with me during which we engaged in lengthy discussions. Through them, I reached a deeper awareness of Christian tradition and its ability to create a good human being. In any case, I think that the late Thomas Merton had opened my mind to Christianity. In my experience, the meetings and exchange of spiritual experiences among true practitioners have an infinite value.

The third way are the pilgrimages, particularly the pilgrimages where one visits various holy places. I have started this practice almost 30 years ago in India. Thus, I twice visited Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and prayed. On my first visit to Jerusalem, I was accompanied by a member of another religion, I think of the Jewish religion, and perhaps a Muslim. During my second pilgrimage, I was accompanied by one Hindu and at least five or six representatives of different world religions. Perhaps it is not known to you that several years ago I was invited to John Main Seminar in England, where I interpreted for the Christian brothers and sisters several Gospel passages. I encountered some difficulties because, you see, I am a Buddhist. We do not share the conception of the Creator, and I, as such a person, interpret to the members of Christian tradition the Gospel whose central theme or central creed is the belief in the Creator. Respecting such tradition, I tried to explain what the Creator ought to be from the Buddhist point of view. I am a Buddhist monk raised in the spirit of the Buddhist philosophy, but out of respect for Christian tradition and their interest in their own tradition, I tried to present my interpretation as best I could. Naturally, I was a little uneasy and reluctant, but after I finished, the members of the audience luckily approached me saying that, upon hearing my lecture on the Gospels, they reached a deeper understanding of their own religion and their own faith. I consider this as my own unusual contribution. As a result of that lecture, some of their members came to India, to Bodhgaya, and spent there a few days. Every morning, Christian brothers and sisters came to the Buddhists' most sacred place, the tree of *bodhi*, and sat under it for several hours in meditation. I think that was very good and truly very beautiful. In the same way, and with sincere heart, I as a Buddhist monk visited the Christian places of pilgrimage, Lourdes in France, and the other famous place of pilgrimage, Fatima. In both these places, the statue of Virgin Mary seems really alive, which is truly unusual. I was deeply touched. In those holy places, thousands and thousands of followers of that religion receive infinite benefits. That in itself is enough to recognise and build respect for the inspiration that such places for centuries have provided to so many people. Although Mary did not appear to me in those places, mentally I truly felt certain admiration and certain fullness of my heart. That is my experience. In other words, the pilgrimages to different holy places that belong to different traditions are an equally good method of promoting better understanding.

And fourth, the meetings in Assisi, where the leaders of various traditions meet and send from this place the same message, the message of peace. I think that today in general the idea of pluralism is gaining in strength, and with it, a better understanding is gaining in strength too. I feel therefore that I myself have made a small contribution to the promotion of such understanding. Several weeks ago, when I was in Australia, during a public lecture a Christian priest introduced me as a good Christian practitioner. In a certain sense that is so, because we sincerely practice love, compassion, forgiveness and similar values. That way, he in fact demonstrated to me a sincere and very strong feeling of spiritual brotherhood.

I would like to add one thing at this point. In the area of religion, the perception of one truth and one religion is very important. It is mentioned in Buddhism, and to a Buddhist practitioner the Buddhist teaching is the most profound and the best of teachings. This type of emphasis is shared by all religions because we find it in each and every one of them. The conception of one truth and one religion is present in all traditions. This frequently leads to troubles. Faith is important, but when faith slides into the extreme, fundamentalism and fanaticism occur. I mean there that there are two causes of fanaticism. One is the lack of contact with other traditions, in other words, that such occurrences are the result of ignorance. And the other case is where, despite having knowledge of other traditions and their values, faith that has crossed into its extreme enables the emergence of fanaticism. Therefore, the conception of one truth and one religion is important and significant when developing one's own faith.

But at the same time, the conception of several truths and several religions is very important and significant as well. How are they to be reconciled in their contradiction? One truth and one religion — several truths and several religions. Here we have an opposition. How do we solve this problem? Usually I say to people that religion is like a medicine we use to cure our disease. The medicine usually cures physical diseases, but *dharma*, the Sanskrit word of enormous semantic field, or in other words religion, is a cure for mental problems, mental sufferings and mental pains. For someone's particular disease, the best cure is some particular cure, it is the only cure for his disease. This is not to say that there are no other cures, on the contrary, they are many in number. However, for a particular disease the best is a particular cure, it is in fact the only cure if we want to eradicate this disease. In the similar fashion, a particular cure is more appropriate and more effective for some individual, depending on his own mental inclination, than some of the approaches advocated by different religions, because it is the only kind of religious cure that can relieve him of his mental suffering.

And now an example. For some people, the notion of the Creator who creates not only the world, but also the person itself, is very powerful. This

very life has been created by God, the Creator. Such notion shall help develop true love and true feeling of closeness to God, which in turn shall help create true desire and inspiration to follow God's message whose essence is love. I think that one of the main qualities of God is precisely love, moreover, an endless love. Thus a true follower of God, the follower of Jesus Christ, will nurture love, compassion, forgiveness and satisfaction that ought to be nurtured. The greater the faith in God, the greater the willingness to follow his teaching which may prove itself very powerful. If a person has a very strong faith in God, then he will regard even the appearance of problems in life, old age, illness and finally death, things that people usually do not wish for but which are nevertheless part of our lives, and sooner or later we must meet even with such painful experiences or some ill-timed tragedy, as creations of God which must hold certain meaning. Such view or understanding surely can greatly diminish even mental difficulty and pain. That is how powerful and how effective religion is to some people. To such a person, the Buddhist belief, according to which everything depends on ourselves, would be inappropriate. According to this belief, if we do something good, we shall enjoy good consequences, and if we do something bad, we ourselves shall feel its ill effects. If upon encountering such a belief someone feels — oh, well, everything depends on me, I want this and I want that — then for such a person this approach is less effective. Is not it so? On the other hand, in some other person the idea of God, the Creator, provokes further questions regarding the origin of God, the type of the system created, and how it happened. The ancient Indian literature, and we ought to know that in India various religious traditions have existed for at least three to four thousand years, recorded the development and occurrence of numerous discussions and researches on the notion of the Creator and the notion of the absence of the Creator. Numerous discussions and debates from different points of view have taken place regarding this rather complex and demanding issue. Thus, some people believe that after all they themselves are creators, and that therefore everything depends on their own actions and their own view. Everything depends on yourselves, the entire future rests upon your shoulders. For some people, such an approach is more effective.

The right kind of approach and the appropriate tradition should be selected like a cure, in accordance with one's own mental inclinations. I think this is important. Therefore, when we talk about one individual case, the idea of one truth and one religion is very important. When we talk about several people, the idea of several truths and several religions is the only one acceptable. If we respect other people's interest and other people's right, then it makes no sense to censure or demean their tradition. In the past, people have not only drawn on inspiration and benefit from another tradition for hundreds of years, but moreover, they continue to do so today and will continue to do

so in the future. That is the way we should consider this matter. And there is yet another reason. Why do we need so many different traditions? They are the reality, they are already here. They were not created by our generation, they have existed for hundreds of years, and as I said earlier, they have been of great help. In accordance with such reality, we need a true idea of pluralism in religious beliefs. If you respect other tradition and nurture a feeling of admiration towards it, then you may be able to learn from this other tradition.

In India, in the community of Tibetan Buddhists, for the last 30 years we have nurtured very close relations with Christian brothers and sisters, including the exchange programmes. Our monks and nuns have visited Christian monasteries, spent several weeks there and learned. They did not stay just for a few days, but actually participated in the entire 24-hour life of a Christian monastery. In a similar fashion, some Christian monks and nuns, priests, come to India and study in the Tibetan male and female monasteries. In that way, we enrich each other and acquire new experiences. This kind of activity therefore we are already engaged in. Conflicts still exist in some areas, to be sure, but if we look upon the whole, our aspiration is taking the correct course. I think that advocacy of religious harmony is a particular responsibility of those who possess belief and faith.

And now about the Buddhist type of approach to the interreligious dialogue. Buddhism has over 2.500 years of recorded history. Already in the early days, there were different traditions among the followers of Buddha. I think that in his own time Buddha taught *buddhadharma* in different places, where people spoke different languages. Finally, certain differences appeared in this single teaching of Buddha, due to linguistic differences. Eventually 18 schools developed, and around one hundred years after Buddha's death, a certain type of dispute took place among his followers. In the end, they all agreed that in spite of occasional differences, they all followed Buddha and therefore had no grounds for a dispute. Later on, in the texts written in Sanskrit, the language of scholarly expression, there appeared more pronounced differences among individual schools. Several centuries after Buddha's *parinirvana*, Sanskrit became in India the key language in the development of *buddhadharma*. The texts of the ancient Buddhist teachers such as Nagarjuna, Arya sanga, Aryadeva, Dignaga and Shantirakshita are almost all written in Sanskrit. In these new circumstances, as many as four schools of Buddhist thought developed. In Sanskrit, their names are Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Cittamatra and Madhyamaka. Among them, we find differences not only in practice and certain marginal issues, but even fundamental differences in some points of the teaching, although on this occasion I shall not discuss them in detail because in this moment they are not important. So, for instance, in the literature of these different schools we find sometimes that the followers of Cittamatra accuse the followers of Madhyamaka of extreme nihilism. And the

followers of Madhyamaka used to censure the view of Cittamatra for going to the other extreme, which is the opposite of nihilism, i. e. eternalism. Such differences in views are very serious. However, they did not create any problems, because they are all followers of Buddha and they all revere Buddha. Both these different views, the view of Madhyamaka and the view of Cittamatra, are founded in Buddha's words. In fact, Buddha himself, and not his followers, entangled the circumstances to such an extent, because there are different expressions in different types of works! A question is posed therefore why Buddha taught such contrasting philosophies. Because his followers were people of different inclinations, and Buddha taught different philosophy in accordance with different mental inclination. This clearly shows that Buddha respected different mental inclinations among his followers. He did not impose his views giving everyone to understand "this is my view, whether you like it or not". He never said such a thing.

To us Buddhists this is of great help in our consideration of other traditions. Yes, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and the Hindu traditions that regard Brahman as the Creator, are theist in their attitude. Their philosophical viewpoints are different from those of Buddhism, but nevertheless they have their own purpose, and these traditions are of immense benefit to many people. This actually helps develop a mind that is more open to other traditions, and that represents the Buddhist way of approaching interreligious harmony.

I think, besides, and I may be wrong there so I would like my Christian brothers and sisters to offer suggestions or advice regarding the matter, that once you accept the Creator and the view that the whole world is a divine creation, then the events, at least the most important events on this planet, must be divine creations as well, is not it so? From that point of view, Buddhism is also a creation of God. Buddha himself is thus a creation of God. If you are strongly inclined to Jesus Christ or God, then from there it follows that all major religions and all major spiritual teachers on this planet are a different form or different manifestation or different creation of God. In that case, even the appearance of Buddha may seem more beautiful, is not it so? Once during my visit to Canada, some local Christians held protests prior to an interreligious service that was to be held in a Christian church. They said clearly that they had nothing against me, against the Dalai Lama, they even said that the Dalai Lama was a very nice person, but his teaching, Buddhism, was evil. And they did not wish this interreligious service to take place in the said church. That is utterly understandable, because, naturally, Buddhism does not talk about the significance of the Creator, about life after life, and various other things. If we look at the problem only from that point of view, Buddhism represents — I am not sure whether it is really evil — but in any case a wrong view if considered from the Christian perspective. I would like to ask such people whether Buddha is a creation of God or not? Whether Bud-

dhism is a creation of God? In that case, perhaps they would reply that Buddha had appeared before Jesus Christ and therefore is not a creation of God. That, however, is a meaningless reply to a meaningless question. Since the entire universe is the creation of God, there is no other explanation, but that Buddha is a God's creation as well.

In any case, the more interaction we have, the more close relations and conversations, the better. As human beings, beings who have feelings, personal contact and closer relations are very important to us. Therefore, whenever an occasion arises, talk, make friends and learn from each other! I think it is the proper way of developing harmony among different traditions.

This concludes my lecture. Now I would invite you to ask a few questions.

Discussion

Question: You are the most famous world traveller, messenger of reconciliation, peace, love, forgiveness and, like in your excellent lecture today, you advocate interreligious dialogue, for which we thank you. We know that you participate in the dialogue with the Hindu brothers and sisters in India, we know that you cherish numerous meetings in the Christian world. What about other traditions, how do you evaluate their openness to dialogue, for instance, in the Islamic world? Tell us something about those experiences as well. Thank you.

The Dalai Lama: I have deep respect for Christian brothers and sisters, for the social contribution of Christian monks and nuns in the fields of education and health care. For more than 35 years, we have been trying to emulate Christian tradition in its more pronounced provision of assistance by monks and nuns in the field of education. As far as the other, Muslim tradition is concerned, to be honest, my contacts with Islamic tradition have not been as frequent as those with Christian or some other traditions. On several occasions I have met with some Muslims, and I heard that in Muslim tradition there was a very important practice of giving. On one occasion, a friend of mine, a newspaper reporter who had just returned from Teheran shortly after the Islamic revolution, told me that he discovered there that Mulas were collecting money from wealthier families and giving it to the poor. In a similar fashion, a truly great Indian teacher, now the late *, used to accept land from landowners and distribute it to those who did not own any land. These are similar ideas, and similar practices. I think that in the Muslim world there is a view according to which interest and bank profit are considered as a form of exploitation. The emphasis is on *dani*, generosity, which is certainly an important act of compassion and caring for others. A few days ago in Prague, I met a Muslim from Iraq. He was a very nice person and a very particular spiritual practitioner. Does that answer your question?

Question: *Your Holiness, I am a physician, and I do not subscribe to the idea that there could ever be a rational reason to say, this time we should distance ourselves when we come across goodness. I think that the challenge of goodness is binding. That is the message you bring to people here. The Government of this country has taken up the view that we are a small country and that in this moment we must give precedence to reason and rational thinking, and not to kindness. It is a very dangerous message. Anyone can thus say: "I am too small to help, I am too weak to act." Tell me, are human beings, every individual in this room or in this country, too small to believe in goodness? Is any country so small that it cannot put goodness in the first place? Thank you.*

The Dalai Lama: I think that generally in certain areas people do not feel the great importance of morals and ethics. Thus, for instance, in economy we find too much competition, violent and merciless competition. In some cases there is exploitation too, in both meanings of that word, in other words of human beings and of natural resources. Apart from economy, in the field of politics in general, and particular in international politics, there is no room for true ethic. I think, however, that things are changing now. In a political statement of a certain politician, we may even come across the word "compassion". It is a small change. Even in the field of economy, some businessmen or economic experts say that there is room for ethics in economy as well. Some call it the economy of compassion. With the help of one experienced expert we are working on a book about ethics in business. I do not know whether the book will ever get published or not, but we have already started working on it. I am not an expert in economy, but that person is one, and I hope that our joint effort, the effort of a Buddhist monk and a businessman will result in a book. In any case, he usually says that the chairmen of large companies are concerned about the public image of their company. So the love of truth, integrity and compassion are good for that image. Although they are not concerned about the next life or ethics in itself, for their own business it is better if they follow more truth-loving, more honest and less corrupt way of doing business. I think that the reality is forcing them to pay more attention to people. Politics is sometimes called dirty, because the people involved in it sometimes lack morality and have no principles that they follow. That is why politics becomes dirty. But politics by itself is not necessarily dirty. Neither is religion, for instance, in its essence and origins, dirty, but because of the behaviour of certain people it becomes dirty too. Therefore I think that in the world as a whole the idea of peace is gaining in strength, as well as the idea of non-violence and a certain attitude of avoidance of violence. There are new generations of leaders and politicians who are coming from such societies and who will themselves finally become better and different. If we consider the events of the 20th century, we are already witnessing certain improvement. The late Queen Mother of England, who witnessed practically the entire 20th century, was in com-

plete agreement with me on this particular matter. On one occasion, during our meeting, I asked her practically the same question, whether the world was getting better or remaining the same. Without hesitation she replied: "Better!" In the days of her youth, among the people in England there was neither the idea, nor the concern for human rights and their violation. But when I met her, and I believe that was in 1996, human rights were already a generally accepted value. That was what she observed.

The desire for non-violence and peace is growing significantly. Basically, I think that humankind as a whole has matured due to many painful experiences. Where do we start from if we want humankind to change? Not from the government level, not from the United Nations, but from the level of every individual. Let every individual try to change himself into a compassionate person. That creates a more compassionate family, that creates a more compassionate society. There will always be a certain number of corrupt people, but in that case such people will be isolated. The remainder of the people in society and community will be more compassionate and peace-loving. That makes a fertile ground for reconciliation and resolution of problems without conflict, through respect for other people's interests and openness to dialogue and agreement.

And now about the level of people. Sometimes it appears to me that smaller nations have a better opportunity to practice politics that is based in moral principles. Their involvement is, namely, smaller. Today the United States are the most powerful nation of the Earth and the leader of the free world. Although I think that, at least in the European environment, it makes no sense to continue talking about the free world in view of the fact that the division between the two blocks has disappeared. In any case, the United States have more opportunity to engage in politics that would be based, particularly in international relations, in ethical principles, but their involvement is sometimes of such proportions that it is often very difficult. That is why in Norway, the Scandinavian countries, Ireland, and in some other smaller countries I said: "You have more chances and better opportunity to abandon the present atmosphere." What I want to say is that, when it comes to domestic policy, democratic nations take great pains to make sure that it abides by democratic principles. The very same countries, however, do not show concern for those same democratic principles in international relations. They still rely on intimidation and demonstration of force. And that is the way of the past. In the early 20th century, many problems were solved by use of force. However, in the second part of the same century, the use of force often created additional problems. The only thing that remains is dialogue. That is the reality. It seems though that in the area of international relations, that old idea continues to survive. The world is not simple, it is very complex. Although I am not an expert in that field, that is how it would appear to me, complex

and full of sad things. At the same time, I think that therein lies a real opportunity and a real possibility. I usually call the 20th century the century of blood, the century of bloodshed. This 21st century should be the century of dialogue. Naturally, there will always be conflicts, different opinions and different interests. In that case, the only important thing is the manner in which these conflicts are resolved. Resolving conflicts by use of force is obsolete. A more humane way to resolve a conflict is by way of a dialogue. Although the very beginning of this 21st century has not been marked by particularly favourable omens, the better part of the century still lies ahead of us. This is why I think that our personal responsibility is to continue to work hard on building a happier human society and consequently a happier century. That is how I feel. Thank you.