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**Forging a Lasting Peace: insights from interreligious dialogue**

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We have heard many ideas the last few days, and we will be presented with many more to ponder later today and tomorrow. So I thought that instead of launching right into more ideas, we would begin this afternoon with a Buddhist meditation, to pray a bit and have some space.

The meditation I have chosen comes from the Dzogchen tradition, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in Tibet. (The Dzogchen meditation is from a book by Lama John Makransky, *Love is Our Essence: Guided Meditation the Unleash Its Power to Heal Our Minds, Renew Our Lives, and Transform Our World*. The book's purpose is to make some of the riches of Buddhism accessible to Western Buddhist and Christian audiences. Thus Makransky has already selected for us Buddhist meditations that resonate with Western audiences and given explanations that are understandable to non-specialists. ) We will do it in stages, with explanations in between. I hope that these explanations will sometimes seem to you exactly Christian and at other times quite foreign to Christianity. Note these feelings as we go along, because we will build on this in the second half of this session.

**The Meditation:**

The meditation begins in a typical Buddhist fashion by instructing the students to sit in a comfortable position with the back straight, eyes down at a 45 degree angle, half closed. Then the meditation begins:

Recall people who have extended you love in their lives: parents, aunts and uncles, teachers, coaches, benefactors of all kinds. Imagine their wish for your well-being. If you are Buddhist, include your lineage teachers and Siddhartha Gautama. If Christian, perhaps you can include Jesus Christ and some of the great saints such as Francis of Assisi.

Now, imagine these people standing behind you, all wishing you unconditional love and all blessings. Picture that love coming to you as rays of lights washing over you. Allow yourself to revel in this light as a puppy warms itself in the sun.

We are here in this room today because of the gifts and sacrifices of many people before us. We would not even exist if our mother's had not given birth to us. We would have quickly died if someone would not have cared for our every need when we were helpless infants. Someone did this for us out of selfless love, out of love for us.

In the same way, we would not be here if we were not on a path searching for the truth. Did we invent the path? As original as we might think we are, we know that we did not. Our faith was handed on to us from those who went before. Someone taught us, gave us the opportunity to learn, created the path for us to follow and guided us on the way.

It is good for us to acknowledge at this moment the people who have blessed us on our way, the people who made it possible for us to be here in this room today, because this is a good place to be. We have an opportunity to study, to learn, to become better. We have the leisure to listen to this teaching today and to consider it. Most people do not have such opportunities. Think of all of the people who are living today, and how many struggle all day every day just to get enough to eat, but we had a meal, and now we have time to spend here. We are truly blessed. Let us acknowledge that blessing, feel that blessing, and put that blessing to good use.

Here we have a basic Buddhist principle: how fortunate is this birth. We could have been born in many places, but we were all born into a life situation that brought us here today so that we could hear and understand these teachings. We are not too poor nor too rich so that we would not care about these things; we are not insects or dogs who cannot understand them. We are people on a journey who have gotten to this point because of a series of decisions—some ours, and some decisions of others who care about us. It was the Buddha who discovered this path, and teachers through the ages have preserved it for us and taught us so that we could follow in these steps to enlightenment.

Let us return to the meditation.

(Begin as before)

Now, recall people to whom you wish to extend these blessings; people you love, your children, friends, siblings, etc. Picture them standing in front of you and let the rays of blessing coming from your benefactors behind you pass through you and come out of your own hands, reaching the people you wish to bless.

We are on this path not only for ourselves, but for the sake of others as well. We work to provide for our children, our physical children and our spiritual children, and we want to give them every good thing. The blessings we have received we wish to pass on to them, and we wish to earn even more and learn even more so that we can pass on to them even more. Ultimately, their happiness is as important to us as is our own.

See and feel the continuity between those who have gone before and those who are to come. See how we have received the blessings of others and in turn become blessings for others. As children, we have received blessings from our spiritual ancestors, and as we grow we become ancestors ourselves, passing these blessings on to a new generation. Is this not where each of us are today?

Our practice and our learning are not simply for our own benefit. We seek to learn and to to gain for the benefit of those we love.

Let us return to the meditation.

(Begin as before)

Extend the circle of people in front of you to include casual acquaintances... strangers... people who have done you harm... people you regard as enemies and people you do not regard at all. Let your blessing extend to them all, equally. Let the light of your blessing extend to all beings everywhere, unconditionally.

Now the meditation has become more challenging and more beneficial. Does our love have boundaries? Are not these boundaries artificial and constricting? Could you picture the face of someone who has done you wrong and picture radiating love to them? If you could not do it in meditation, you cannot do it in life. Is this what you want? Do you wish to grow beyond this limitation? Let this meditation help you.

Repeat it every day, with the faces in front of you that you most despise: Adolf Hitler? Donald Rumsfeld? The person who raped you? If you stick to this practice, as the days and weeks and months go by you will begin to break down this hatred, trust me. Your heart will soften and your love will grow.

We are now at a fundamental teaching of Mahayana Buddhism, and one that sets it apart from Theravadan Buddhism: practice is for the sake of all sentient beings. This is the idea of the bodhisattva: that we practice for the sake of all sentient being. This is the highest religious ideal: to take a vow to become enlightened not simply for our own sake, but for the sake of all sentient beings. For all are suffering, and if we want to put an end to suffering, it should make no difference whether the suffering is our own or someone else's.

Now imagine yourself standing behind yourself, with your benefactors, and join them in their wish for your well-being. See the chain of blessing coming from others, passing through you, and extending to all sentient beings.

Finally, dedicate the merit of this meditation for the sake of all sentient beings; that the blessings you wish for the peace and happiness of all sentient beings may come to be.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have operative two more very important Buddhist teachings. First, as I imagine myself standing behind myself, I come to realize that more is going on. The "self" that is behind me is simply an illusion. Really, there is no essential distinction that can be drawn between the one standing behind me in the meditation, the "me" in the meditation, and all those to whom I am radiating light. There is no self, distinct from others. In a real way we are all one.

So the selves merge. I am all of them, and I am the blessing that flows between them. In the end, there is only the blessing, the light, and all things are merely reflections of it. This is the only thing that is: the light; radiant awareness, now unleashed and allowed to shine.

We in the West are more familiar with Buddhism from a Gelukpa or a Zen perspective – that there is absolutely nothing that ultimately exists. Of everything we see, everything we believe, everything we think and feel and touch, of all of it, none of it exists ultimately. It appears to be solid and absolute, a given that we cannot get around and cannot change. Ultimately, however, it is just a passing illusion, like a dream, and if we learn how, we can wake from this dream and see the illusion for what it is. When we do, we will see that all we thought solid and absolute will fade away. Even our very selves will disappear, the “I” that is experienced as watching this illusion will evaporate and we will be left with absolutely nothing to hold on to anymore.

This is enlightenment, a radical freedom to transcend any constraints. Ultimately, nothing exists absolutely, in its own right. Things only exist in dependence upon other things. They are said to have relative existence, not absolute existence. This lack of absolute existence is freedom. It allows us to become anything without constraint. It also breaks through the myth that “I” and “thou” are ultimately separate. We appear separate at first glance, but the deeper reality is that all that separates us one from another does not ultimately exist and can therefore be overcome. There is no stable “I” nor “thou”, just the ever-changing experiences we choose to label as such.

Along with previous Dzogchen masters, Makransky believes that this is true as far as it goes, but it is not the deepest truth about reality. The deepest truth is that enlightenment is possible because at our core, we are already enlightened. At our core is the Buddha Nature, complete with its properties of clarity and luminosity. The ability to see reality with perfect clarity has been clouded over in us due to the effects of karma, and thus our vision is obscured, the luminosity of our Buddha Nature covered over. We do not have to create the enlightened mind—and indeed could not—because it is already active within us. To become fully enlightened and free from the bonds of karma, we simply need to release the Buddha Nature that is already at our core. This differs from a Gelukpa perspective because while it is agreed that everything we see, touch and feel is relative and an illusion, it is affirmed that something exists ultimately, the Buddha Nature.

This Buddha Nature is at the core of every sentient being, and it is for this reason that we make a Bodhisattva vow. If what we seek is to free the Buddha Nature from defilement, to end suffering, we need to free it completely. We need to free it in every sentient being. The Buddha Nature is one. It makes no sense to privilege clearing away its defilements in only one place, as entrapped in my own delusions only, without also releasing it from its entrapment in every sentient being. If I want blessings for myself, then I want them for others as well. Any boundary I might draw between myself and

others, limiting the blessings, are ultimately meaningless. I cannot receive blessings if I am not giving blessings, because I have taken myself out of the stream of blessings.

The meditation gets us in touch with that luminous core which we share with all others. It is perhaps more obvious in great teachers, the Dalai Lama, the Buddha, and Jesus Christ to name a few, but it exists in everyone.

When I dedicate my practice to all sentient beings, this is more than a wish, and more than a commitment on my part to keep working for them. In some way my practice actually benefits them when it is specifically done for them. Since there is no essential distinction between this self and other selves, the good I do is not limited to one particular self. By dedicating this merit explicitly to all sentient beings, I multiply its effectiveness.

(Stop for questions and to get a sense from participants of what felt similar to them and what felt strange. Can they see this with very few modifications as a good Christian meditation? Why or why not? We will build on there exact experiences for the next section, but it will go something like the following.)

Here is a Dzogchen explanation of the meditation: The meditation works on many levels. First, by recalling those who have concretely worked for our benefit in the past, we become more aware of what it is that they wish for us—unconditional peace and love—and more attuned to its possibility. Second, recalling this fact immerses us in a sea of benevolence and luminosity that is the Buddha Nature. This places us directly in contact with this powerful reality inside ourselves, and the comfort that it gives us helps us to lower our defenses against it, to let down our walls. Third, by imaginatively merging with all those who have gone before, we experience something of the unity that is at our core because of the Buddha Nature. There is no ultimate distinction that we can make between the Buddha, our friends, our enemies and ourselves. All are ultimately manifestations of the Buddha Nature, and the Buddha Nature is one. Last, by making this wish of love universal and dedicating the merit of this meditation to all sentient beings, we further uncover the truth about our already existing unity. There is no benefactor, no receiver of blessings. There is just the luminous clarity of blessing.

As a Christian meditation, would this be “salvific”? Not directly, at least not in any of the standard ways that we think about how salvation works in Christian churches. Certainly it would be a good thing to do. Christians believe it a good thing to expand our love of others, for all people, but we do it for a different reason than do Buddhists.

Christians love all people because God loves all people. All people are made in the in the image of God, and so all are lovable and ultimately good. Even Adolf Hitler. Further, God is love, so God cannot help but love all people. As we seek to follow the path of Jesus, we seek to be like God, and so we strive to love all people and see them as God sees them. This meditation can help in this goal.

But in Christianity, salvation comes from what? Faith in Jesus Christ? What does that mean? One take is that faith is simply believing that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, come into the world to die and rise for our sins. If this is true, then we could have stopped at the first part of the meditation—perhaps simply picturing Christ radiating love will help us to believe that he came to take away our sins. Portraits of the Divine Mercy see to move in this direction.

Faith might also be defined along the lines of Matthew 25: the parable of the sheep and goats. Whatever you DO to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to Jesus. So Jesus welcomes into heaven those who have feed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the lonely. This meditation might lead one to love the poor more, so while not directly effecting our salvation, it could move us to act in a way that directly aided our salvation in this model.

But neither of these are really the model of salvation that we read of in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. In Aquinas' vision, by his death and resurrection, Jesus won an infinite merit that can save the whole world. The question then becomes, who receives this merit? The obvious answer is: Christians, those grafted onto the body of Christ in baptism. Christ's merit saves his entire body, the church, as the hand can save the whole body. For Aquinas, then, one receives the benefit of Christ's merit when one becomes a Christian through baptism, and that merit is reinforced as our connection to the body of Christ is reinforced by receiving sacraments—most notably the Eucharist. A meditation such as the one studied here, therefore, would not really effect one's salvation in this scheme.

Yet for Mahayana Buddhists, this meditation can directly effect what it represents. It can lead us directly to enlightenment, because it can set our hearts on the unity of all sentient beings. By inflaming our hearts in this way, we work on the affect's getting in touch with the unity that already exists. When our heart speaks loudly, our minds follow.

### **Seeing both the similarities and differences**

Now we can connect back to the title of this session: Forging a Lasting Peace. Peace must be forged when there are different desires and opinions pulling a group in different directions. A compromise might perhaps be found that everyone can live with, but this is not a basis for a lasting peace. By definition, in a compromise, no one gets what they really wanted or needed. Over time, the compromised desires and needs have a way of re-asserting themselves. Long-lasting peace can only be found when all groups can find a solution that they not only live with, but can embrace as truly beneficial to themselves and truly representative of their best values.

These solutions are not easy to find. They can only be forged through sustained dialogue and common life that goes beyond the surface and plumbs the depths of meaning among the different groups. While there may be surface similarities that could

suggest easy compromises, if each group understands these commonalities in different ways because of their different meaning systems, the compromises based on them will eventually break down as they are lived out in the ensuing tension of interpretations.

The above meditation can provide a good working example of this dynamic. On the surface, this meditation encourages us to love all people. It uses the natural love we feel towards people who have helped in this life to help us to love even our enemies. In this, both Christians and Buddhists can use this meditation to good effect. But the ultimate effectiveness of this prayer is understood quite differently between these two groups. As Christians begin to tease out what this meditation really signifies for Dzogchen Buddhists, they see that it means something quite different than they might have believed. The way that this meditation encourages Buddhists to experience no-self, and to see that others are in reality simply parts of themselves is not something that a Christian could affirm, especially when these other no-selves include what might be labeled as the Divine. An orthodox Christian would have to supply a very different interpretive framework to the meditation, making it an essentially different meditation.

Christians and Buddhists could share this meditation, they could meditate together, but if they then started sharing what the meditation meant for them or how it moved them, they would find great differences. The way, therefore, to find real growth, would be to do just this, share this meditation over a long period of time and share a conversation of how it was gradually changing us, making us more loving. While initially finding these great differences in interpretation, over time I think that the participants in such an experience would begin to understand each other on a deeper level. As they learned to love more broadly, they would learn to love each other more broadly as well, and they would begin to understand each other more.

With this greater love and understanding, they could forge much better bonds. Instead of compromising, they would begin to see that what each truly wanted was what was best for all, Christian and Buddhist alike. With a love that not only embraces all, but understands all, a lasting peace could be found.

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<sup>i</sup> Paraphrased.