



The Fifth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Oxford (UK), March 2012

On the final day of the meeting, leaders were asked to reflect on what had been accomplished. They were asked to consider three questions:

- 1. What does Interreligious Friendship mean to you?***
- 2. How do you practise Interreligious Friendship?***
- 3. What messages and practices of Interreligious Friendship can you take back from this meeting to your community?***

Some chose to respond independently to each question while others integrated their answers.

Alison Murdoch



I'm very grateful for the great work being done by the Elijah Institute, and for your generous invitation to take part in this meeting. My understanding of both friendship per se, and of interreligious friendship, has greatly deepened as a result. Thank you!

As a newcomer to Elijah, the meeting was itself a progressive experience of interreligious friendship: from arriving, a little anxious and knowing nobody, to enjoying some wonderful and profound personal encounters and discussions. The conditions that made this possible included: trust and safe space; time and space; well-prepped, high calibre and highly motivated participants; conducive surroundings; and the emphasis on storytelling.

The meeting helped me appreciate the simplicity and directness at the heart of the Buddhist approach to friendship. Buddhist teachings see friendship as a natural, logical and preferred way of relating to other beings that can be deliberately developed and deepened through the gradual elimination of obstacles to friendship - such as fear, pride, jealousy, competitiveness, anger, resentment and low self-worth. Using the tool of mindful attention to my mental processes, the opportunity to develop my aptitude for friendship is therefore present in every encounter and conversation that I have.

I reflected on how these obstacles to friendship can also be classified according to what Buddhism labels the 'three poisons' of attachment, aversion and ignorance. Attachment might involve wanting to be friends for personal gain, such as money, fame, or knowledge. Aversion could manifest as prejudice of some kind. Ignorance would include a shallow or mistaken understanding about our relationship with the other beings on this planet – for example not remembering that we are all interconnected, and in a continual state of flux.



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HH The Dalai Lama offers a living example of someone who has dealt with his inner obstacles to friendship, and seems to be in a state of continual openness, curiosity, equanimity and delight. In photos and audiovisual footage, we see how people quickly feel at ease in his presence. He creates warm personal relationships wherever he goes – with drivers and cooks just as much as with prelates and politicians.

The English poet TS Eliot refers to “a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.” One of my insights from the Elijah meeting is that true interreligious friendship leads us beyond religion, or any kind of difference, to a state in which we are simply living beings who are compassionately opening up to each other. Eventually, even the consciousness of being a separate living being will fade away.

I appreciate that this Buddhist approach to friendship may seem simplistic in view of the stories and life experiences that others brought to the meeting. For example, as a western Tibetan Buddhist I wasn't able to identify any group memory or angst which would be an obstacle to interreligious friendship. The barriers that I experience are more in the area of identity and psychology – particularly in being a convert, which initially caused me to be more private and reticent about my faith than I might otherwise have been.

In the 25 years since then, I've engaged many times in Buddhist/Christian dialogue (and possibly my Buddhist/Christian marriage) precisely because of my familiarity and ease with Christian theology, culture and vocabulary. However I don't feel that joint projects with people of other faith traditions necessarily support the development of interreligious friendship. Buddhism sometimes classifies busy-ness as a form of laziness – in this case, the danger of being too busy 'doing' to allow time for 'being'. In contrast, the Elijah meeting created a retreat-like environment in which we could simply 'be' with others and rapidly move into a profound exploration of what interreligious friendship can look, feel and taste like. We weren't just talking about the subject, we were experiencing it!

On this basis, the immediate things that I take back to my community are a deeper personal understanding of and respect for what interreligious friendship involves and demands, greater enthusiasm to develop such friendships, and an appreciation that the conditions under which it can arise are rare and special.