



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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## Thubten Chodron: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Jim Funk, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Shohaku Okumura, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Judith Simmer-Brown, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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### Dialogue after Thubten Chodron's Presentation

**Kevin Hunt:** This is the type of question we have to ask ourselves, and the type of thing we have to be concerned about. In the Christian tradition, we always speak of purity of intention, and it's very easy to use the idea of purity of intention but then let the snake into the Garden of Eden. There is a major problem in the First World, but especially in the United States, with the popularity of spiritual practice today. I remember hearing years ago of a so-called Zen teacher who guaranteed enlightenment at the end of two years if you paid \$40,000 a year. I'm sure that his students were enlightened by the end of two years. I also think one of the things that we have to do in connecting with your remarks is analyze some of the other things that we spoke of earlier about power, control, and security. These also come into this: "I am the most famous speaker. I am this, I am that, I am something else." Yet, at the same time, I think we have to realize that we can't stop teaching.

**Heng Sure:** This is a very useful index and it cuts close to the bone. But it is culturally specific. My community is largely Chinese language-based or Chinese and Vietnamese, almost all second-generation. I spend a good part of my time teaching in Asia in Chinese,

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#### Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai Lama, Tsenzhap Serkong Rinpoche, and Zopa Rinpoche, she has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore and Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She is active in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogue, including the MID-sponsored Gethsemani... [\[Read full](#)

and perhaps none of these problems apply. Instead, a whole different set of expectations apply. The Asian spiritual practitioner, for example, has a different set of expectations about the teacher because the role of the monk or nun has been alive in Asia for a millennium, and they are culturally specific. For example, monks in the Chinese Mahayana tradition that I come from are expected to be healers, and there is a shamanic side to the monk. People, particularly old ladies in China, take my hand and put it on their head and ask me to tap their head to confer spiritual blessings and to heal them. I have to say, "I don't do that." They say, "But why not? Look at your robe."

What I find helpful from this index is expressed in the word bodhimanda, "the place of the way." Underneath the original bodhi tree was the original bodhimanda, the place of awakening. If we say there is a marketplace mind where all of your [Thubten Chodron] criteria—and we could probably find more—apply, and the monks are just the next seller of goods, and if we move that marketplace mind into the bodhimanda, the place of enlightenment, then you have to say, "Let's leave that marketplace mind at the door. Come into the place of the way and talk about what are the qualities of seeking enlightenment." I think that's a helpful line.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** I would say that Thubten Chodron has such a moment, starting a nunnery at this time in the American culture. A lot of us have learned a lot of things we would like to get out of because the systems are already in place—so if we don't get to it here, a lot of us would like to see you [Thubten Chodron] later!

**Thubten Chodron:** I would welcome advice.

**Leo Lefebure:** I would like to speak a bit from my own experience as a Catholic diocesan priest. Felix Machado, Thomas Ryan, and I may be the only diocesan priests here. However, I think some of the problems you are talking about would actually be an improvement in some ways in a functional level for diocesan priests. Often, functionally, we've done everything we can think of to get people to leave, but they keep coming back. We've been rude to them. We've abused them. We've done horrendous things. And I don't mean just the terrible sexual scandals.

[biography](#)]

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**Zoketsu Norman Fischer** is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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A cousin of mine was getting married to a Lutheran in a small country church and had an appointment to see the priest. They rang the doorbell. Nothing happened. They rang the doorbell again. Nothing happened. Finally, the priest came and told them very honestly, "I heard you, but I was hoping you would leave." I could multiply stories. In my first parish, there was an older pastor. They had trouble with graffiti on the school, and he was ranting and raving from the pulpit about it and told everybody, "I have a .22." Now these are probably the teenagers from the parish that are doing the graffiti, so he was telling their parents he had a gun and would shoot them. We need to take more seriously the needs of the people, and I think the sexual abuse scandals are the most arrogant example of this type of abuse of power, of just complete disregard for the needs of the people.

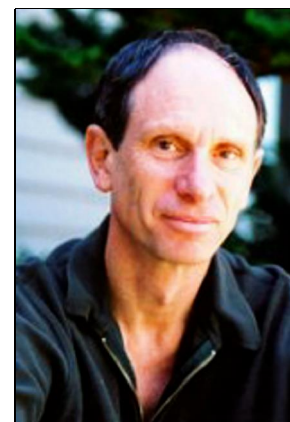
**Norman Fischer:** I'm glad you said that. I was going to ask people from the Catholic side about this, because the other side of consumerism and capitalism and so on is exactly that—paying attention to what people need and trying to accommodate them, rather than saying: "This is our belief system. This is what we do. Actually, we don't really care that much what you need and what your concerns are. This is what we do." Some happy balance between the two of these is what's needed. It's actually a good thing that people are interested and wanting to come. Nevertheless, I was sitting, squirming in my seat when Thubten Chodron was talking. It was a very unpleasant experience.

**Joseph Goldstein:** I also very much appreciated your [Thubten Chodron] talk and have been grappling with many of those issues for the last twenty-five years. It seems to me that a core question, at least from the teaching side, is what we do with mixed motivations. We would all like to have totally pure motives, but I think there are probably very few of us who do. Do we let the mixture of motives keep us from acting, realizing that there are impurities there? Or do we make an effort to recognize the mix, and as best as possible go in the direction of purity? That's a great koan: What to do with that in our own minds.

**William Skudlarek:** Whenever I hear this question of mixed motivations, I think of that wonderful phrase of Martin Luther, *Pecca fortiter*, "sin bravely." I think what he means by that is that there is no

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possibility that we can act from an entirely pure motive. It will always be tainted by egoism. "But go ahead," he says, "and sin bravely. Do it, and then rely on mercy."

**Jim Funk:** My question is, though, wouldn't a criterion of whether you are successful or not in your teachings be what these students do after they leave, and how possibly you have impacted their lives? That would seem to be more important.

**John Daido Looi:** I wanted to mention Shohaku Okumura's teacher. He probably won't tell you about it, so I will. When Shohaku first came to America, he went to this little Zendo somewhere in Massachusetts off the beaten track and was told explicitly by his teacher, "Don't advertise. Don't proselytize. Just sit." That's all they have to offer. Through the years, and he was there many years, the message was the same: Don't advertise. I wonder how this place is going to survive. Nobody knows about it. Two or three people go there, and when they go there, it's just such a grueling, excruciating experience that they never want to go back. It has remained this very tiny place off in the country where one or two of them till the field. The teacher has to work, giving lectures at the university in order to take care of his family. That's the other extreme.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** Do you mind if we ask him how he does it first?

**Shohaku Okumura:** I'm doing something else now, and I'm going to enter the American Buddhist Society. Now I'm trying to start a practice center in Bloomington, Indiana. I tried to keep that tradition. Regarding our sesshin, we just sit. We have no lectures, no chanting, no dokusan, just sitting. We sit for fourteen hours a day, for five days. This is really my koan right now. What I did in Massachusetts was a kind of extreme tool, and it's still small. But to be small is okay. However, I wonder whether it is meaningful or not to practice and share the Dharma in this country with Americans. So I want to open a place and start to welcome this problem. It is really a koan.

**Thomas Keating:** The excellent presentation we heard reminded me that there is something that happened in the field of psychology that I think all religions desperately need to take note of, and that is the discovery of the unconscious. Not only are all the faults that were



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enumerated in the talk present on the conscious level, but the real problem is that they have their roots in the unconscious, where an enormous amount of secret energy goes to sustain them. Consumerism is basically rooted in those three instinctual needs that we're born with: security, power, and approval and affection. When these are frustrated, the energy centers, somewhat similar to the first three chakras, begin to fossilize and develop secret habits that influence not only our behavior but our decisions for all our life.

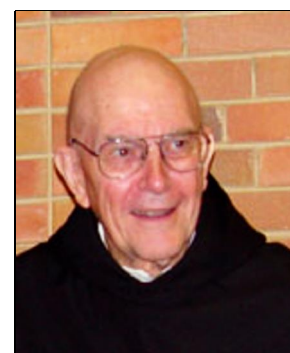
Unless teachers can help people find a method in which they can become aware of the roots of these faults, activities, desires, and aversions, then all the teaching in the world is virtually useless. It is especially important for leaders in the churches or other religions to be aware of the dynamics of their own unconscious; otherwise they are going unwittingly to cause untold suffering on their students. A place where you can find this delightfully laid out is in *The Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross. One of the preliminary chapters is called, "The Faults of Beginners." These are people who are not just converted, but people who have been practicing discursive meditation and rituals and practices for years, and they just haven't gotten to the basic issue, which is the confrontation with the roots of the false self, the first three energy centers, you might say.

In Christianity, Lent is really about the discovery or the confrontation of those issues. It's not just a problem of mixed motivation. It's a question of how deeply we feel called to purify that motivation to the roots. Without that, I don't think transformation will happen. It's an issue that is so important, at least in the Christian tradition. Teaching novices a lot of rules and regulations on how to behave or hold their hands or their drinking cup in formation is a lot of baloney compared to confronting why they get angry at their brothers, or why they think the superior is a damn fool, and all the other spontaneous or afflictive emotions that arise when the consumer aversions or attractions are frustrated. Likewise, if they are gratified, then you fall into the habits of elation or self-inflation or presumption. If they are frustrated, you get guilt, shame, humiliation, depression, and the others. This seems to me the very heart of the asceticism. Without a practice, I don't think the teaching will ever help, because what we have to find out is not what somebody else thinks, but who the hell we really are when all the clothes are removed.



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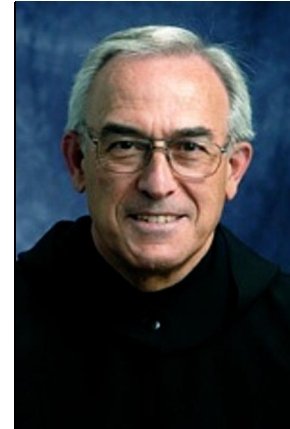
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