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## Introduction: Responses from the Audience

Roger J. Corless, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Judith Simmer-Brown, Ven. Yifa

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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**Patrick Henry:** I think the most important single moment in the conception of Benedict's Dharma was the moment at which we realized that what we were asking people to give us was anecdote not analysis. That is, we wanted people to respond to this text in terms of its resonance with their experience, without raising dogmatic questions, without getting obsessed with differences in worldview—rather, anecdote, story-telling. And that is very congruent with a guiding principle of the institute where I work, where when we bring people together for five days at a time, they will ask us, "What do we need to do to get ready?" By which they mean, how many books am I supposed to read, and what paper am I supposed to write, and how many footnotes does it need?" And we disarm them by saying, "We ask only that you bring your life." That is, you come as an expert in your own life, and you are as much an expert in your life as anybody else is in theirs, so everybody is on a level playing field.

I tell you this because I think it is terribly important and because it is a seque for me into a recollection of the most heart-stopping and heart-starting moment for me in the last few days. It was when I received an email message from someone, I think, well-known to many of you here at Beech Grove, Shahid Attar, a Muslim physician in Indianapolis, who is president of the Muslim Physicians of America and who participated for two years in a consultation we had on living faithfully in the United States today. This was a copy of an email he had sent to all the members of his Muslim physicians organization around the country, saying, "organize blood drives, go to New York or Washington if you

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**Patrick Henry, Ph.D.**, (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

[All articles by or about Patrick Henry, Ph.D.](#)

can to be of help to the injured people. And also please let me know if you're getting harassed."

I very quickly forwarded that message to the twenty or so people who had been part of that consultation. Within five minutes, I had received copies of two messages that had been sent to Shahid by two of the Jewish members of that consultation indicating their solidarity with him. That, to me, was a testimony to the depth and the reality of the connection that had been made in those times together in Collegeville in which people had told each other the stories of their life. So, this gathering here, for the next two days, is designed for anecdote rather than analysis. All we have asked you to bring is your life. You are here as an expert in that. We are all experts, but not only do we have our own expertise to offer to everybody else, but we have everybody else's expertise to receive for ourselves.

What we're going to do is see, for about fifteen minutes or so, if anybody has anything they would like to say. If you don't, we will move right into the next phase of what we're doing, and if you do, that will be great. Then, our routine will be, tomorrow when the sessions begin, I will introduce a speaker, a Christian monastic responder to a portion of the book. Then, after that person has spoken, we will ask Yifa and Judith and any of the other Buddhists in the group, if they want to respond, if not, OK. Then we will open it up for discussion and then we will also have occasion for these dyad discussions that we will hear more about in a minute. You can respond to something that has been said or something you've heard or something you haven't heard that you would like to hear.

**Rev. Charles B. Crenshaw, Jr.:** I just wanted to say that I met Sister Meg here and we were introducing ourselves and I was saying that I was raised within walking distance of this place and I've been around the world. I'm an interfaith minister. I was trained by rabbis and swamis and sufis and Buddhists and the motto of my training was: "Never instead of, but in addition to." When I hadn't formally met Sister Meg but to her on the phone, I said, you know it's amazing that I've been around the world, visited India, and then come back and within walking distance of my house, where I grew up, there is this



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[All articles by or about Ven. Yifa](#)

kind of dialogue going on. I lived in New York and have sold Brother David's books in East-West books, not far from where the buildings blew up, and was kind of like, "Oh, I want to meet this guy." When I think of the Rule of Benedict, I think of the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita and these things. But I am just amazed about reading and comparing these things, and knowing that this is again within walking distance of my house where I grew up. [laughter]

**Roger Corless:** We have heard from Dom Patrick that the Rule of St. Benedict is now getting out among laypeople because of people such as the person, you mentioned, Esther Dewaal, but also in this country, we have people like Joan Chittister who is trying to put the Rule into the hands of laypeople. I would like to point out that it's important that something similar should happen in the Buddhist tradition. It hadn't occurred to me, although I've been studying Buddhism for a long time, until I was talking recently to David Chapple and his research with SGI, that we don't hear much at all about what the layperson should do in Buddhism.

The focus of interest is on the monk or nun as we say in English, I don't like to use the word monk or nun about the Buddhist tradition because bhikshu/bhikshuni isn't really the same thing. Those of us who have read in the Vinaya, maybe perplexed to note the amount of space given in the Vinaya to sex, what you shouldn't do, of course. If you are in a relationship and are looking for something different to do, look into the Vinaya and it will tell you what monks and nuns should not do and, "Oh, I never thought of that one before." [laughter] So, the emphasis is on what monks and nuns are doing and it doesn't go out into the laypeople. In this country, and I think also in Europe, the Buddhist tradition is being more and more practiced by lay people in centers rather than in monasteries or in temples, and we need some guidance in this. So, I'm hoping that one of the results of this would be that someone like an Esther Dewaal or Sister Joan, would start writing a commentary on the Vinaya. Of course it's enormously long, but some section of it, that would get it out into laypeople.

**Patrick Henry:** I wonder, Judith or Yifa, would you like to comment on that and in the comment, would you say whether you think this book,

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Benedict's Dharma, might be of use to Buddhist lay persons, precisely as a kind of backdoor or end-run around that question by reflecting on the rule of Benedict, helping them to see how Buddhists understand monasticism as a resource for lay people?

**Judith Simmer-Brown:** I think that's very interesting. I think Benedict's Dharma does offer a real resource for Buddhist laypeople but I'm not sure how many of them would pick it up. In the Buddhist communities I know, and I'm part of large lay Buddhist community with a small monastic community, in our community of Shambala Buddhism, there's been a tremendous emphasis on the practice of lay precepts and understanding how that actually works in lay life, especially on what are called Shambala precepts, which are not just the classic five precepts of lay Buddhism, but also a whole sense of how you create a dignified, disciplined life for your family. It is not just an individual discipline, but also family discipline and community discipline. So, I'm not sure I agree with you, Roger, that there is nothing out there, but I do agree that there is not much written about it. I think that more and more needs to be written about that. I think it's an excellent idea to invite commentary on the Vinaya or particularly on the precepts in Buddhism by Christians practicing Benedict's Rule, or laypeople practicing the Rule. Because I think there is an enormous desire on the part of so many people to find some kind of sane and elegant and joyful life that isn't just drawn into whatever the whim of the moment is. I think why a lot of people are drawn to Buddhist meditation practice and some kind of life like that is because of the fact they are looking for something very similar to that. I'd be curious as to what Yifa would say.

**Yifa:** I think it's a good question. Literally, if you look at the Buddhist precepts or Vinaya, the main body is for the so called monastic monks and nuns, bhikshu or bhikshuni. For the lay people you find only the five precepts—no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxicants. But in the Mahayana tradition, you also find the 48 Bodisattva precepts that are shared by monastics and laypeople. But my personal interpretation when it comes to the precepts there are steps of learning. The first one is called a precept, but you can also interpret it as mental discipline. The second one is meditation or concentration, and the third is wisdom. When we come to the rule or

precept, for the individual, mental discipline is applied not only to monastics, it's also for laypeople. Everyone needs to have mental discipline to deal with our emotions, our action, even our formal practice.

A monastic code is for a community, as is the Rule of St. Benedict. When we are living together, we need rules. I always say, if you live alone, if you live in a remote place, you find there are fewer traffic signs and lights. You can drive more freely. But when you come to a city, you find more traffic lights and more rules. So the Rule is for people living in a community and I think it's for monastics as well as for laypeople. So if Buddhism in the United States is practiced by many laypeople, then you find, if the laypeople are living together as a community, then they need a rule for the community. I think for the individual, the precept, the mental discipline, the ethics described in the Buddhist canon, are precepts for monastic or laypeople.

I studied law before I was a nun. At that time, I did not consider myself a spiritual woman, maybe more materialistic. I wanted to study law and become a politician. I said, "Maybe I will be the first female president in Taiwan," before I was a nun. Then I came to Fo Guang Shan, the Buddhist temple. I came not with spiritual intentions, but because I saw a poster that said room and board are all free for a two-week retreat. [laughter] So I went, and within two weeks I had shaved my head and I became a nun. In these 22 years of being a monastic, I am still searching. The philosophy in my life is freedom and justice. So even though I don't study secular law, I still study "spiritual law" or monastic law. That's why I chose to write my dissertation about monastic regulation.

Many people, when they come to think about the precepts or rules, they first appear to them as rigid restrictions. But, in my dissertation on texts written in 1103 in China by Chinese monks, I went back to the texts and then tried to go back to the Indian roots and compare how many elements are inherited from Indian Vinaya, and how many are really an adaptation from Chinese culture. I found it was very interesting and amazing to find the continuity of the rules between them, especially when you come to see the spirit of the rules, the

principle. What I also found interesting were the adaptations of Chinese culture, like how Patrick Henry talked about how the tea ceremony that appears in the Chinese monastic regulation is totally Chinese.

But the most important thing I found in the Chinese and even the Vinaya was the flexibility, being allowed to change. So after I studied the Indian Vinaya and the Chinese monastic rule, I found what was crucial was the historical background for the time when they made the rules. When I reflect on St. Benedict's Rule, I am humbled to say I am not qualified to make any criticism on the Rule, unless I know the historical and cultural background during that time. One thing I want to say is, I believe that the people who wrote this rule had the wisdom to compile those rules for their age, for people during that time. I think it is also the time for us to reflect on the old rules, either Buddhist or Christian and find out the principle and the spirit, or maybe do some interpretation, or modification for our time and our space.

**Patrick Henry:** I just learned a comparison of Buddhist and Christian monasticism that hadn't occurred to me before. It took Yifa to decide and it took Brother David five minutes to decide. But they're both probably on the quicker end of their traditions. I'm going to turn it now over to Meg and Judith.

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Continued in **Introduction: Creating the Dyads  
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