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Introduction: Henepola Gunaratana

Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

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

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William Skudlarek: The second presentation this evening, "Suffering and Its Transformation," will be given by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana. He was ordained at the age of twelve as a Buddhist monk at a small temple in Maladeniya Village in Kurunegala District in Sri Lanka. At the age of twenty, he was given high ordination in Kandy, and subsequently he was sent to India for five years of missionary work for the Mahabodhi Society, serving the Harijana (untouchable) people in Sanchi, Delhi, and Bombay, and then later spent ten more years as a missionary in Malaysia. Bhante Gunaratana came to the United States in 1968 to serve as General Secretary of the Buddhist Vihara Society of Washington D.C., and in 1980 he was appointed president of that society. During his time in this country, he earned a Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy in philosophy from the American University. Bhante Gunaratana is now president of the Bhavana Society, and abbot of the monastery in West Virginia in the Shenandoah Valley, about 100 miles west of Washington, D.C., and he continues to teach meditation and conduct retreats worldwide.

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): I am very pleased to be here to share our views of suffering. Suffering is the one common denominator of all living beings. However, some people wonder why we have selected this subject at this time in our human history, because, for some people, suffering is not that much of a problem. Because of modern technology, we have discovered various ways to combat suffering, prolong our life, overcome sicknesses, and deal with poverty, sanitation, and so forth. With all this, some might say that we don't have to talk about suffering.

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Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.) is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

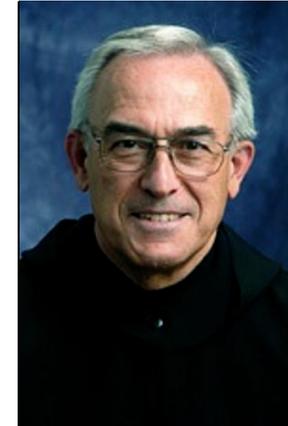
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Suffering, however, is not something that exists at one time and not at another. In spite of modern technology, science, and all kinds of creative knowledge, suffering continues to exist as it did thousands of years ago. It can never be eliminated from the world.

We may think that we want to stop falling sick; and when we are healthy we think that we won't fall sick. But can we stop falling sick? Can we stop growing old? That which comes to existence grows old. Can we stop the sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair caused by separation from loved ones? Then there are those feelings caused by not getting what one wants or getting what one does not want. There are two tragedies in life: one is to get what one wants; the other is to get what one wants. Both are equally tragic, because when you've got what you want, you have another kind of suffering caused by needing to protect and safeguard what you have, and then you have to fight—verbally, physically, or mentally—to protect what you've got.

We talk about all kind of rings—wedding rings, engagement rings, earrings. But there is one ring that we all equally share, whether we are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, or no religion. All living things have one ring. That is suffering. When we look around, there are so many things that we don't want, that we don't like, and still we are immersed in the situation. We have to live. We witness crimes, wars, killing, and all kind of things that we don't want to hear or know about, let alone experience. But we simply cannot avoid them or stop them forever.

In his wonderful speech, Father Thomas gave us the gist of what suffering means to all existing things, human and nonhuman. When it comes to human beings, as we know, nobody is born with a big smile. We all cry. We cry because we are separated from our mother's comfortable womb where everything is cozy and provided for us. We don't have to do anything except stay there. However, we are thrust into this world, and at that moment we start crying. This crying continues all our life. We may not hear it, but the cry is going on. We cry for so many gallons of milk, so many yards of cloth, so many thousands of papers, books, magazines, pills, food, etc. From the moment we are born until we die, we cry. This first crying at our birth is symbolic of the crying for things that we cry for for the rest of our life.



Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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The more we emerge into the world, the more beings we come across. The more beings there are, the more cries there are—because everybody is crying for the same thing: limited resources. And our cries continue to increase. Being ignorant of the reason for our crying, our pain and suffering, we might think that if we changed certain situations or conditions, we might be able to stop our pain and suffering. Thus, if we are lonely we believe we need a companion, thinking that that will make us happy. But the companion is not going to make us happy; the companion might make us even more miserable! Then not having the companion seems preferable, so we separate and try to live apart, and that adds more suffering. So you reunite....

I remember a man telling me, "Bhante G., I married six times. The first time I married, I was miserable and unhappy, because my wife didn't like me because I was impatient, so I got divorced. I married again. The second time, she was impatient and I divorced her. The third time I married, I was arrogant and full of anger, so we got divorced. The fourth time we married, she was angry and we got divorced. The fifth time we married, I had extramarital affairs, and my wife didn't like, so we got divorced. The sixth time, she had extramarital affairs, and I didn't like it, so we got divorced. Bhante G.," he said. "The seventh time, I am going to have a perfect marriage." Here is the crux of the matter. No matter what we get, where we go, what we do, or how we think, suffering continues to exist at the very bottom as a root in our existence. Why? Because we do not understand it. Understanding suffering is essential if we are to do something about it. Just as when we are sick, we may continue to suffer from the sickness and not know what to do unless we find out on the one hand that we are sick and on the other, if we are sick, some sort of cure. Now, if somebody thinks that he is not sick and continues to suffer from the sickness, he will never get cured. If somebody knows that he is sick, then finds a way to seek some help to be free from sickness, then he will get better.

Our suffering has two causes. One is insatiable greed. Greed can never be satisfied. It perpetuates and increases our suffering. No matter what we get, we want more, and therefore we continue to suffer. The second cause, which is even more important, is ignorance of suffering. And these two combine and work together. In suffering, the greed exists because of ignorance, the ignorance of suffering itself. Father Keating

said that it is because of our ego that we suffer. I would like to say one more word in addition. Buddhists call all the five aggregates of existence suffering. What exists is nothing but suffering. This is a very radical statement. Some people may not even like to hear the word, suffering. Suffering exists because of our clinging or attachment to self. This is what we call sankara. Sankara refers to things that come into existence through causes and conditions. Anything that comes to existence—particularly ideas and mental states—through causes and conditions is called sankara. Sankara we may best perceive through the word “onion.”

I use the word “onion” because it has a very beautiful philosophical meaning. An onion itself doesn’t have that, but the word “onion” does. Onion is spelled by O-N with I in the middle, and then O-N. That means “on,” with I in the middle, and then “on” again. On and on with I in the middle. That means we go on and on and on because I is in the middle. That is “onion.” So long as we are attached to this “I” in the middle of the onion, suffering continues to exist. Because of attachment, clinging to this concept of I, we go on and on suffering. This is ignorance. We need to recognize ignorance is a mere concept, not something that permanently exists. Until we recognize that, we continue to suffer.

Therefore, on the one hand, we are attached to this nonexisting I. On the other hand, we do not understand the very deep meaning of this concept of “I.” So we continue to suffer. Thomas Keating mentioned our fixed ideas come from the childhood stage of our life. Self-identity is a very big thing in Western psychology, and the West does everything to promote it. Rather than trying to make us understand what it is, without knowing what it is or whether it exists or not, we try to promote it and continue to suffer.

Let me give you one example of my own life. When I was little boy, about six or seven years old, in front of my house there was a little compound that was full of sand. I sat down and drew a beautiful pumpkin in the sand with my fingers and I began to admire it. I was attached to it. While I was enjoying it, my sister, who was a few years older than me and a very naughty girl, erased the picture. I got angry. I suffered a great deal. I wanted to attack her. I looked around and found a block of wood. Even though I could hardly lift it, I managed to lift it and chase after her. She ran through the kitchen, hoping to open

the kitchen door and run out. Unfortunately for her, the kitchen door was locked. She stopped. I took that block of wood and threw it at her; and it hit her foot and her big toenail came out. She was crying and weeping and making a big commotion. To this day, my sister still has that scar on her big toe. Purely because of my ignorance and attachment to something that did not exist I created suffering. And I suffer even now when I think about it.

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