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Joseph Goldstein: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Dr. Janet Cousins, Professor Ewert Cousins, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO, Shohaku Okumura, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Judith Simmer-Brown, Geshe Sopa, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam

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

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Dialogue after Joseph Goldstein's Presentation

Reverend Heng Sure: I would like to add a comment to Joseph Goldstein's presentation. At New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur several years ago, we finished a retreat with Fr. Bruno Barnhart's calling to us to bring spirituality off the mountain down into the valley where living beings live. I recall at that moment looking up over the lectern, and there was a crucifix in all its vivid suffering, the dukkha of that experience. I said, "Here is the symbol of the bodhisattva who came down to the valley."

I wanted to add a comment vis-a-vis Joseph's remarks about the crossing over. You used the word, "transformed." But in the Sutras of the Mahayana, the word in Chinese is du, which means to "cross over." "Cross over" is a clumsy, literal translation, which doesn't quite capture the meaning. When you say "transformed," however, the meaning comes alive. The Paramitas are called the six dus, the six crossings over, the six ways across. The Paramitas do exactly that—particularly in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the "Flower Dormant Sutra." It says, "If there were no living beings, no awakened being would ever accomplish

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Ven. Ajahn Amaro is a bhikku in the forest-tradition of Buddhism. He lives Abhayagiri Monastery in England. He took part in Gethsemani Encounter II. He is the author of *Silent Rain*.

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Dr. Janet Cousins is a writer and editor who works with her husband, Professor Ewert Cousins.

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anutarasamuaksambodhi." If there was no shadow for us to transform, there would be no awakening. There would be no light. So I heard that in what you said, which is a lovely bridge to the Mahayana and to the sutra tradition. Thank you.

Father Thomas Ryan: Joseph, you traced out the point of recognition leading to acceptance and acceptance leading to freedom or liberation. Could you say a little more about how acceptance leads to liberation?

Joseph Goldstein: Let me give some background to the short discussion on conceit and that pattern of comparing. It said that the antidote to the power of what in Buddhism we call defilements is seeing the impermanence of phenomena. One of the things that happens in extended Buddhist meditation practice is that there is a tremendous refinement of our perception of change. We begin to see the whole mind/body/heart process as arising and vanishing instantaneously, where there is no solidity, nothing to hold onto or grasp at. We see it directly and not conceptually—as we are actually experiencing that microscopic momentariness, where there is no time or place for conceit to be rooted because it's changing the very moment it's arising. It's through that doorway of impermanence that we get a very deep taste of what selflessness means. Nothing lasts long enough to be a self. Acceptance allows for the balance of mind, which can be aware of impermanence on that level. One of the very interesting discoveries that we make in meditation practice, and we know this also in a therapeutic psychological level, is that resistance feeds the very thing we are resisting. So, if we have judgment about these various defilements, the judgments themselves are locking them in. Thus, the path of purification goes through the doorway of acceptance. Through acceptance, the mind relaxes, and through that relaxation of mind we see an incredibly fast flow of change. As we see the change, the mind doesn't grasp. In the nongrasping, there is freedom.

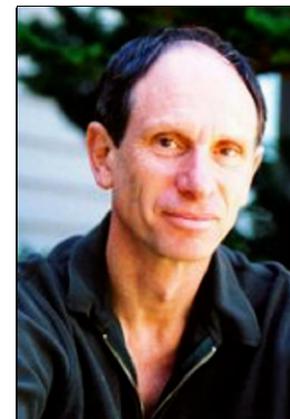
Dr. Janet Cousins: It seems to me that what you were saying has a correspondence in the Franciscan tradition—namely, Bonaventure—of the triple way of purgation, illumination, and union. I wondered if you might comment on that. I wanted to know if in this purgation process, when you are feeling so terrible, you ever get completely rid of feeling



Ewert Cousins, Professor Emeritus of Fordham University, died on May 30, 2009, in Bethlehem CT.

Dr. Cousins served for many years as an advisor to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He was the chief editorial consultant for the 100 volume Paulist Press series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* and was also General Editor of the 25-volume series, *World Spiritualit...* [[Read full biography](#)]

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so terrible? There must be some progress there; but do you see it or experience it?

Joseph Goldstein: I don't really feel qualified to comment because I'm not familiar enough with the Franciscan tradition or that terminology; so somebody more familiar with both might be able to offer something. With regard to the second comment: At a certain point in our journey we start smiling at our minds. Somebody once came to a meditation interview with me, and their great discovery, their announcement was, "The mind has no pride. It will do anything. It will say anything. It will create anything." At first we do get into an adversarial relationship with the negative shadow side. But after seeing it over and over again, and beginning to taste the emptiness and insubstantiality of those patterns, I think a great sense of humor begins to emerge toward ourselves and tolerance toward everybody else. There is a wonderful couplet by the poet W.H. Auden in his poem "As I Walked Out One Evening": "Love your crooked neighbor/With all your crooked heart." When we get to that place, I think there is a great ease because it is a place of acceptance.

Samu Sunim: Father Thomas, I appreciated your talk last night very much. You said that God is in limbo with us. You also said the presence of God is available to us twenty-four hours a day. Right now there is this terrible, heartbreaking conflict going on in the Middle East and in the institution of the Church. There is a conflict going on with the Buddhists in Asia. There is also conflict among the Buddhist clergy. My question is, where is God when all these conflicts break out?

Thomas Keating: You ask, "Where is God?" Well, I really don't know, except that he is there. This implies a view of God as the source of everything that is. This source, of course, is goodness. But if you introduce the human condition into this work or creativity of God, then the goodness of God is distorted by the human condition. To keep it very simple, since it's a complex concept, I'd like simply to say that there is no rational explanation for suffering, especially innocent suffering. The consolation in suffering, it seems to me, is that in some extraordinary and mysterious but maybe very simple way that we don't understand, suffering says something about the Ultimate Reality that

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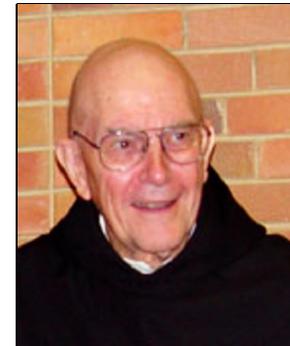
nothing else can quite say. The bottom line is that God is incredibly humble; he seems to want to give himself away, or more exactly throw himself away. Suffering, insofar as you see God identifying himself with the human condition, is telling us that God loves us so much that he is prepared to go to any length to convince us of his extraordinary love for us and of his determination to transform not just us but the whole human family into the divine life. So, where is God in suffering? He is right in the middle of it. But I can't prove that. I just believe it. This, it seems, is what the passion and death of Christ symbolize; namely, the death of the individual self and the resurrection of the new self; or the self as the image of God, or the expression of God's infinite tenderness and goodness in the details of life, including the utmost tragedy.

Samu Sunim: I think God is suffering. I think "God is suffering" could serve as a reference point for Christian and Buddhist dialogue as well as dialogue exchanged among all world religions right now. Deep and proactivist suffering is awakening from our delusion. Thank you.

Ajahn Amaro: I wanted to make a couple of comments, and add a footnote to Joseph Goldstein's comments about acceptance. Something that came to mind when Father Thomas was speaking last night also resonated with what Ven. Henepole Gunaratana was saying. One of the great Buddhist masters in Thailand, who has also been engaged in a lot of Christian/Buddhist dialogue over the years, Ajahn Buddhaghosa, said that the crucifix was the perfect spiritual symbol since it's the letter "I" crossed out, showing how the letting go of self is central to all spiritual practice. In terms of acceptance, one of the things that Father Thomas said last night that I was very struck by was how in Buddhist practice the quality of loving-kindness is a basis for meditation. Oftentimes it gets interpreted as being the attitude that we like everything. Loving-kindness doesn't mean that. It means more that we can accept everything, which is an attitude of heart that represents the insight that everything belongs. It is also that element of realizing that everything is part of nature, everything is Dharma, or, using Christian theistic terminology, everything is God. As Father Thomas was saying last night, it is the recognition that every element of the physical, mental, and spiritual world is all the body of God, the body of the Dharma. It's all of one fundamental nature. The heart that recognizes

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Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, has written many books on contemplative prayer, especially Centering Prayer, which he is credited with popularizing in the United States. Among these are *Open Mind, Open Heart*, *The Mystery of Christ*, and *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*. He lives at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and serves as an advisor to ...

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and accepts that, the painful as well as the pleasant and the neutral, is a doorway to spiritual illumination and to the Kingdom, as Father Thomas would say.

Kathy Lyzotte: On the question of where God is: During Lent in our monastery at noon reading, we read Good Friday People by Sheila Cassidy. Sheila quotes Elie Wiesel, who was in Auschwitz during World War II and who had seen a young child on a gallows dying and struggling. Somebody in the crowd said, "Where is God?" And Elie Wiesel said, "God is right here in this child that was dying." That's a way to find God in people who are suffering. Our Christian belief is that God is found in and with each of us who suffers. Another example is Mother Teresa, who in her ministry would go to the dying and those who were suffering most.

Geshe Sopa: Suffering is the first of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism. Suffering is the first truth the Buddha taught. We have to realize the nature of suffering and know we always suffer. You can respond to suffering that is temporary. When you get hungry, you can eat something. If you are thirsty, you can drink. When you are hot, you can go to a cold place, etc. All of these are temporary. We can also produce a temporary reduction in violence or creation of peace. But they are not perfect. They always produce suffering unless we examine our final causes and recognize the root of suffering. Buddhism asks: Where are the causes? Where did suffering come from? Joseph Goldstein and other speakers have said that Buddhism talks a lot about the egotistic view, the self-centered view: "I" and "me." First, We all have an "I", and think of "I" and "me." They are the first things in the whole world that we love and cherish. It can lead to selfishness and disregard for others. When there is a strong "I" then everything falls down. There is name-calling, physical violence, belittling people, misery, suffering, hatred, jealousy, etc. All of these come only from one's own selfish attitude. A selfish attitude comes from an egotistic view. We need to realize how this egotistic view creates attachment —hatred, jealousy, etc. From attachment comes all the misery and suffering in this world. It may be good at times to have temporary relief from suffering through temporary solutions. But we need to get to the heart of our selfishness and reach for Nirvana, which is the total



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exhaustion or freedom from misery, suffering, and the causes of suffering.

Joseph Wong: I want to continue the discussion about the question of where God is amidst all sufferings and conflicts in the world. As Father Thomas Keating was saying, it's difficult to give a theoretical answer to that. The answer comes rather from experience and faith. Perhaps for Christians, rather than God being present in the abstract, we would tend to say that the suffering Christ is present. I am glad our Buddhist brothers mentioned the cross this morning in the discussion about suffering. There is an interesting episode in the way of the cross when Christ carries the cross to Calvary. According to tradition, a pious woman named Veronica, seeing Jesus is suffering so much, has the courage to approach him, and with her veil wipe his face. The suffering image remained on the veil, the famous veil of Veronica. There is a spiritual writer called Caryl Houselander who has a beautiful reflection about this veil of Veronica. He says: "The veil of Veronica, which bears the suffering image of Christ, is not only found on the veil in the museum, but now of the whole humanity." The suffering world becomes that veil of Veronica, bearing the suffering image of Christ whenever there is innocent suffering—children being abused, people suffering from AIDS or cancer or other illnesses, violence, war, and so on and so forth. Where there is suffering, the whole world reflects the image of Christ left on the veil of Veronica: not just in the abstract. It's truly Jesus Christ present in them, continuing to suffer in solidarity with suffering humanity. On the way to Damascus, when Jesus appeared to Paul, he asked him, "Why are you persecuting me?" [Acts 9:4] Even today we believe that Christ is still present among suffering people and continues to suffer in solidarity with them. I think that should give us support, encouragement, and hope to see the suffering image of Christ on the veil of Veronica, which is the whole suffering humanity.

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhantji): We Buddhists talk a lot about suffering. Once I remember I gave a talk on suffering. When I came out of the talk, somebody asked me, "Bhante G., do Buddhists smile?" Suffering is so fundamental, especially on separation and alienation.



Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP,
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**All articles by or about
Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP**



Judith Simmer-Brown is a professor in the religious

We all feel one time or another that we are not accepted; we are alienated; we are insulted, and so forth. But underneath all this, there is a hope for liberating ourselves from that feeling of alienation, insult, and not being accepted. As Joseph Goldstein mentioned, the very feeling of alienation comes from our own conceit. If we learn to let go of our clinging, craving to ourselves, nothing on earth can make us feel that we are alienated. The problem of solving our problem of suffering is within us. We cannot blame anybody in the world for our individual suffering. I strongly believe that when each of us learns to overcome our own attachment to ourself and our ego, then alienation will not become a problem. We will be happy to be in any situation where individuals may have different opinions about us.

James Wiseman: Joseph [Goldstein], I very much appreciate your opening remarks, in particular because you did what we all presenters were asked to do, bring in personal experience to a certain extent. What I remember most from your presentation is your response to the teacher who told you, "That's not true," and how at first you felt so terrible. Then, when you recognized the truth and accepted it and admitted it, it was totally freeing. I look forward to what you are going to write about freedom-liberation. I would like to give a couple more examples, both positive and negative. I think myself, and I think most of the Christians here would agree, that among the most remarkable and praiseworthy things Pope John Paul II has done, especially leading up to the celebration of the millennium, was his frank and truthful admission of wrongs that had been done by the Church over the centuries. There is even a book called *When the Pope Asks Forgiveness*. I thought that was a remarkable and very freeing thing for the Church. Just as negatively, and I don't say this to sound critical of a particular person but it's public news, I think a lot of the problems [regarding sexual abuse in the Church] were brought on himself by Cardinal [Bernard] Law [of Boston] at first not fully recognizing the evil that had been occurring in his diocese, and how he had contributed to it by moving people around rather than truthfully recognizing the harm that was being done. I think both on a personal and on an institutional level it's only the truth that can make us free. Our Christian tradition says that, and I know that the Buddhist one does as well.

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All articles by or about Judith Simmer-Brown

Geshe Sopa is one of the few Tibetan scholars to hold a regular position at a Western institution of higher learning: at the University of Wisconsin. He founded the Deer Park Buddhist Center in 1979.

All articles by or about Geshe Sopa



Reverend Heng Sure has been an ordained Buddhist monk in the Chan lineage of China since 1976. He is the director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery.

All articles by or about Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

Geshe Lobsang Tenzin holds a Geshe Lharam degree from Drepung Loseling Monastery in India, and a Ph.D. from Emory University in the U.S. He is the founder and

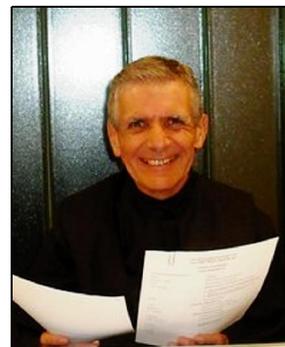
Geshe Lobsang Tenzin: It's wonderful to be here, away from all the chaos and problems that humanity is facing around the world now and to talk about suffering and its transformation. The sense of alienation and the worthlessness are the underlying factors of many of the problems in our society at this time. From the Buddhist point of view, one way of overcoming the sense of alienation is creating a common bond with others. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama would say, it's about recognizing that we all belong to the same humanity—wishing to be happy and to avoid suffering. This basic recognition that we all are the same is an essential element of overcoming the sense of alienation. The sense of alienation also occurs on a spiritual level as well. It is the same recognition that we as individuals and the divine—whatever name we may call it—also share the same nature. In Buddhism this would be called recognizing the Buddha-nature within.

In the Buddhist tradition, it's this recognition that we have the potential to overcome our difficulties and suffering that gives hope to finding the solution to the problem. But it's also the factor that helps us overcome the sense of worthlessness, which if we can somehow instill in people gives them hope that everyone has the potential to do better and find peace and joy. Through recognizing the Buddha within, or, as our Christian brothers and sisters might say, the God within, we are not isolated from society and the divine.

Kevin Hunt: As Joseph was talking and during our discussion, I remembered an incident when I was with a group that had gone over to India to visit the different Tibetan monasteries. We were up in Dharamsala and there was a monk who had come out from Tibet recently, and who had spent, if I remember correctly, well over twenty years in a Chinese prison. As we were talking, he began to cry, because I had asked him, "What was the greatest suffering that you had?" He said, "There I was with other monks, and we were all very well educated." They were all geshe, what we would call theologians, etc. He said, "The thing that terrorized me the most was to see the number who had given up in despair." He said it was not uncommon for people to be driven to the end of their rope and to take a way out in some form of suicide. "That really shook me, because traditionally we had the answers," he said. "We had gone through all of the mental exercises.

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Geshe Lobsang Tenzin**



Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, is a monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, and teaches theology at the Abbey School and at Catholic University. He served as Chair of the Board and President of MID, has been editor of the MID bulletin since 1998, and again serves as a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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Fr. James Wiseman,
OSB**

We had had these insights. And when it came down to it, the suffering was beyond the capacity of the insights to give a solution." Very often, when I hear Buddhist teachers talking, I'm left with the sense that if I could get my head around this idea, I could relieve my suffering. I had finally asked him, "What is it that finally enabled you to survive?" And he said, "I just gave myself to the suffering, with no thought, just giving it to the suffering." And I immediately reacted and said, "Jesus Christ." In the sense of alienation and unworthiness, when all of the intellectual stuff has disappeared, what are we left with? And how do we respond to that? Regarding the suffering in the world today, one of the questions that was asked was "Where was God?" And the only answer is: "I don't know."

Judith Simmer-Brown: One of the things that's very helpful is to point out how hard it is for us to work with the obstacle of conceit, because it's so subtle. I really appreciate, Joseph, how much you pointed that out, how that obstacle remains for a long time. It's very difficult to spot and remedy. I appreciate also very much what Geshe Lobsang said about Buddha-nature because it's so much in the Buddhist tradition. One of the most surprising twists of teachings that I've heard from my Tibetan teachers is that, when presented with the obstacle of discouragement, feeling I will never attain enlightenment—I'm simply not worthy of this path—the teaching that comes from Shantideva says that this kind of discouragement is a kind of laziness. To call it laziness is such a shock, to recognize that there is some way we are lagging on our path. In the Tibetan tradition the notion of exertion is joyous enthusiasm. The quality of tremendous joy of overcoming laziness is to overcome the way in which that discouragement is an obstacle for all of us all of the time. What it requires is to actually see the obstacle and to rouse oneself to work with it further so that one can uncover the Buddha-nature. I wonder if there is anything in the teachings that you [Joseph Goldstein] have received that has talked about laziness at all?

Joseph Goldstein: There are some classical Buddhist teachings about the five hindrances, one of which has a perfectly appropriate name, sloth and torpor. I don't know if you are familiar with the three-toed sloth, but it hangs by its feet. It's said that it's so incredibly slothful you



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could fire a gun by its ear and it wouldn't even turn its head. That's reflective of a certain mind state. But the deeper meaning of sloth and torpor from the meditative perspective is not simply sleepiness, dullness, tiredness, or laziness. It's a deep attitude of retreating from difficulties rather than advancing into them. That itself became a very useful teaching for me. In one of the mantras, especially working with Sayadaw U Pandita, that I started using in my practice was, "Choose the difficult," just because my pattern was to choose the easy, given a choice. That helped to overcome that particular quality of laziness. There is one response I wanted to make to Father Kevin. I think your point was very well taken— that it's not enough to have intellectual insight, that in the trenches it's not going to be enough. That's why a contemplative and deeply transforming practice is essential. The practice is itself the practice of being with suffering. That's really where we learn about it.

Ewert Cousins: I would like to dialogue now in terms of alienation, between the Christian and Buddhist traditions. What this conversation has triggered in me is that the greatest image of alienation in Christianity is just before the death of Christ on the cross, where he cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Matthew 27:46] It's a tremendous statement of emptiness. Eventually Christ dies on the cross, and there is a transformation that occurs in his resurrection. I think the combination of these two absolute alienations leading to absolute transformation are the energies that have awakened and supported a number of Christians in their own tradition. I would like to highlight a further significance of Veronica's veil that was brought up before as a profound image of suffering and alienation and transformation. At the climax of Dante's *Divina Comedia*, as many of you may know, when Dante reaches the ultimate vision of God in *Paradiso*, he sees the circling love of the Trinity. Within the circling love of the Trinity, he sees that it contains *nostra effigi*, our human image. And that in Dante's presentation, of course, means the incarnate Christ. In the context of previous images of Veronica's veil, that image at the heart of the divinity is the blood-stained image of Christ imprinted on Veronica's veil. It is transformed into glory in the eternal divine transformation in the Trinity.

Shohaku Okumura: One of my teacher's teachers, Sawaki Kodo roshi, says in his most important teaching in the sitting meditation that is called zazen and is our tradition, "Zazen is good for nothing. The more I sit, I see I'm no good." This teaching is very important. The sense of unworthiness is very precious in my practice. So to say that I'm no good is kind of wisdom, I think, prajna, being free from our self-clinging—the sense of worthiness where arrogance or pride is more appropriate. The founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, Suzuki Shunryu, said, "We are perfect as we are." Those are two sides of one reality and ourselves. This is what Buddha tried to show us. We need to see the preciousness of ourselves and this life, but we also have to see how terrible we are. That is, I think, prajna.

Continued in **Fr. Columba Stewart's Presentation
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