



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Fr. Columba Stewart: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Stephanie Kaza, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Ven. Samu Sunim, Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, Danielle Witt, SSND, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Donald Grabner: I would like to suggest that these stories of the passion have to be read in the light of an earlier, very important Christian text that we recite frequently during the Triduum, the three days when we celebrate the passion, death, and resurrection. The text is the second chapter of Philippians, where we are told we have in ourselves the same mind that was in Jesus Christ when he humbled himself, although he was God, taking on the form of a slave and becoming obedient to the father even to death on a cross. For this reason he was raised from the dead, God exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, that Jesus Christ is Lord. I think the whole picture that Paul presents has to be kept in mind, in what is probably a very early Christian hymn, celebrating the whole process. We need not stop at any moment and try to explain it in itself; but instead see the passion and the death in the light of the resurrection, of the exaltation that is promised in that hymn.

Joseph Goldstein: The key point in the understanding of selflessness—from the Buddhist perspective—is that the self is not something that we have to get rid of. It is that, from the beginning, it's

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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

an appearance, a concept. I'll give just one example, and maybe it will help to illustrate that. After the rain, if the sun comes out and we look up, there is the appearance of a rainbow. We say, "Oh, there's a beautiful rainbow in the sky." If we examine or investigate the rainbow more carefully, however, and look at what exactly a rainbow is, we see that there is no thing that is a rainbow. There is a certain appearance due to conditions coming together of light, moisture, and air. Given the right conditions, a rainbow appears. In just the same way there is an appearance of a self, given all these conditions of body, thoughts, emotions, awareness, and consciousness. These conditions are coming together like the appearance of a mosaic. I see our spiritual practice as freeing ourselves from this attachment to a concept and appearance, and dropping into that silence of mind where there is actually the experience of the conditions coming together to create that appearance. In that, we get that taste, that baptism of selflessness. There was a writer named Wei Wu Wei. He said that our attachment to the self is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there. I think we have to stop barking.

Stephanie Kaza: I am also trying, as was John Daido Looi, to understand this process we've been describing. I'm finding myself looking around the world today to see where this process of alienation and transformation is happening in a way that we can't avoid seeing. On my way here, I saw Newsweek magazine with two faces on the cover: a young woman suicide bomber and a Jewish girl. I would really appreciate the wisdom of some of the other people here in asking, Is the process that some of these young people are taking up in Palestine the same process that we're describing, the profound alienation under this aggression and abandonment by the world?

How is a young woman to come up with a way to transform the suffering? It's my own sense that having the young women join the bombing has broken through our stereotypes that it's some kind of aggressive, angry young male thing to do. These are young people in a desperate situation. This is a kind of crying out, maybe. Is this a re-arising in the very town of Jerusalem of the same process? For, certainly, Jesus was under the extreme oppression of Roman colonization at that time, too. I'm sure my own understanding is

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certainly limited theologically and I'm sure also geopolitically. But that article moved me very deeply, and so I ask for any other insights.

Blanche Hartman: I was not thinking of Stephanie's question when I asked for the microphone because I was going to speak as someone not at all schooled in the Gospels or the psalms, but someone who has been practicing Buddhism for a long time. When John Daido Looi first brought up his question, it seemed to me that the key to transformation in my experience was a radical acceptance and a dropping of trying to control what is. I don't know if the young women taking up the bombing is any different than the young men, Stephanie. It may be shocking to us, but while it may be an act of desperation, it may also be an act of rage and anger. I am deeply disheartened by what's happening in the Middle East, but I don't think that the spiritual realities that we have come to understand in our own practice are any different there than they are in our lives. We happen to be at this time fortunate in not being in the middle of a war. But as we were discussing this recently in my own community, when my husband Lou was speaking, he realized that the day he was born 25,000 men were killed in a battle in the First World War. In our life there has been war after war after war. And all of them are caused by some excess of self-clinging on a national as well as a personal level, as far as I understand what is happening; an excess of greed, hate, and delusion, which is why the Buddha left home. It does not help the anguish at what's happening right now in Israel and Palestine to recognize that this is yet another example of human delusion.

Mark Delery: As I look back at my career as a monk, I've become more a counselor than anything else. This means that I've seen many people in many phases of suffering. About ten years ago a young lady approached me and said, "Do you remember the advice you gave me when I was a college student?" I didn't remember. I was sweating, wiping my brow, because I thought maybe I told her not to get married! When she finally told me what it was, I said, "I would give you the very same advice today," which was twenty years later. That advice I've used quite a bit and have to kind of refine it without saying it's a complete answer. My statement to her was, Agree to be vulnerable. She had lived by that for twenty years, and ultimately applied to be

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accepted by the Trappistines, which she had been. Most of the people who come to see me for counseling are going through divorces and cancer and illnesses. My observation has been that if they use prayer and vulnerability in imitation of Christ, then the only way I can describe it is that it helps God the father take over. This kind of answers a little bit of the transformation process. I am being more and more supported by the philosophy of Rene Girard, who argues very strongly in the field of philosophy that Christ became a victim and remains a victim. In his victimhood, as I see it, Christ became vulnerable to everybody from Pilot, the soldiers, the crowd, to his own disciples, who betrayed him. It is surprising when I give this advice, more often than not because it is part of the theory of acceptance, too. When they turn things over to God the father in true vulnerability and stop being aggressive in response to whatever is bothering them, people receive a certain answer that comes and gradually develops, and begin to get a freedom and dignity they didn't have before.

Samu Sunim: In Buddhism we have this all-encompassing and foremost precept, ahimsa or "nonviolence." What it means is not to hurt or harm at any time in any situation. Ahimsa is a precept not a commandment, so you take it upon yourself. The Mahayana Buddhists came out with this alternative that occurs in certain situations in confronting aggression: It is good to kill one in order to save ten. If you put yourself in the person of the Palestinians, being slaughtered before organized violence, if you put yourself in the position of the early Buddhists suffering under the Indian regime, or the Vietnamese monks who committed self-immolation [during the Vietnam War], or the Korean Buddhists who were confronted by the Japanese invasion and slaughtered, perhaps we would understand this better. They did this out of desperation. Somehow, out of this desperation, they wanted to bring some kind of hope and salvation to their own people who were victimized and slaughtered. In principle I don't agree, but at least we can stretch our understanding. It's very difficult to say anything about these things.

James Wiseman: Stephanie, I'm not sure I totally understood your question, but I will try to respond to it as best I can. I've not read the Newsweek article, and I think we would all agree with Father Columba



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that we cannot judge what's going on in the heart of any particular person and totally understand the motivation of their actions. The woman suicide bomber in Israel could not, however, I think, be in any sense held up as an ideal for any of us. It's certainly not parallel to Jesus' behavior, because, although he was true to himself and may well have seen what it was leading to, in no sense could we call his death a suicide. In fact, he prayed, as we heard last night, "Father, if possible, let this cup be taken away from me." I've always thought that the most wonderful and inspiring person of the twentieth century was Mahatma Gandhi, because he understood so clearly that in situations of aggression and violence, the only proper response is not more violence, which simply continues the cycle. He could respond nonviolently because he was utterly fearless and knew that he may well have been killed at any point before in fact he was. He is also, I think, a tremendous model for any person in the world today as to how to confront situations of violence and oppression.

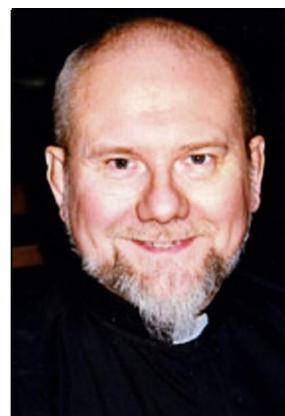
Samu Sunim: I should make a distinction between the self-immolation committed by Vietnamese Buddhists and the suicide bombers in Palestine. In the case of the Vietnamese monks, burning themselves to death as social protest or to carry the message, they took the violence on themselves instead of taking it to others. That's a big difference. I think it's in line with the Buddhist principle. Also in Buddhism, we believe in rebirth. Of course, the case in Palestine is different, but I sympathize with the Palestine situation. My heart cries out. There should be some justice in their case.

John Daido Looi: I wanted to return to the thing that we talked about before in terms of practicalities and in terms of my own experience with students, who are dealing with separation and alienation, which is quite common. Anybody entering the monastic community at first feels on the outside, and tends to isolate him- or herself. Then they complain that they are isolated! What I try to get them to appreciate and help transform them is that the alienation is really a mental process. It's not something that someone is doing to you, but something that you create in the way you use your mind. In the same way that Joseph Goldstein was talking about the creation of the self being an illusion, a mental process, so it is with the totality of



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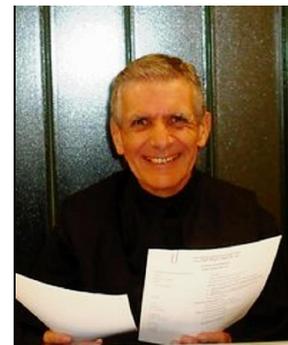
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existence. Of course, all of the parts existence—which includes alienation, a sense of separateness, and self-hatred—are things we create. When we take responsibility and say, “I am creating this,” we then enter a whole other realm, which is empowerment. We are no longer a victim. We become empowered to do something about it. It’s the same with anger. When one says, “He made me angry,” there is nothing you can do about the anger. But when you realize that only you can make you angry, then you’ve empowered yourself to do something about that anger. To me, that’s transformation.

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