



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Rev. Thomas Baima, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO, Judith Simmer-Brown, Geshe Sopa, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, Ajahn Sundara, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. James Wiseman, OSB

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

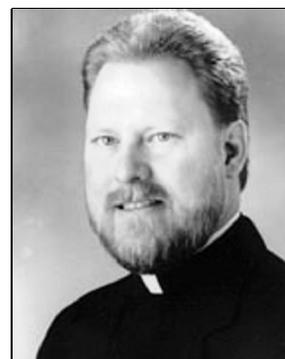
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James Wiseman: Judith Simmer-Brown was right, of course, that love does mean many different things and can be understood in different ways. When I heard the conclusion of Meg's talk, however, I didn't have that problem. At least it didn't arise for me. The way I understood it is this, and this might add a little bit to what Meg replied. Here was a woman, Sister Mary Gerald, who for many years had been in control of things, had done what she did very well, had had a large staff under her, and then suddenly gets put in a situation where she is underneath, where she knows that the people who are now her superiors are less gifted, less talented, and aren't able to do the job as well. That is certainly a kind of suffering. If she didn't know how long she was going to be in that job, it could be a rather severe kind of suffering. What I heard Meg say is that this woman genuinely had a conversion, because she stopped looking at the dyslexic woman who was also her superior. She stopped looking at them as over against herself, as totally separate from herself. She now saw that in Buddhist language they ultimately were all one and, in more Christian language, that she was now to be one with them in Christ, to love them as she loves herself.

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- [Zenkei Blanche Hartman's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)



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Rev. Thomas Baima](#)

I suppose the sense of love that I got out of the concluding line of Meg's talk was that love is to want the best for the other person. It doesn't mean that the food no longer mattered, but it wasn't the main thing. It was getting priorities right—it was the way she was now going to treat other people. I thought it was just beautiful, and a great example of conversion.

Norman Fischer: I wanted to go back to this question of suffering and transformation in the story that Father Leo just told. I want to read my own version of Psalm Twenty-Two, because we were talking about that this morning, and I want to make a point with it. This is kind of a demonstration of Buddhist/Christian dialogue in this piece of work.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why so far from my delivery, so empty in the anguish of my words? I call to you in the daytime, but you don't answer. Then all night long I plead restlessly, uselessly. I know your holiness, find it in the memorized praises uttered by those who've struggled with you through all the generations. These, my forbearers, trusted you. And through their trusting, you touched them, held and delivered them. They cried out to you, and you met them face to face. Their confidence was strong, and they were not confounded.

But I am not as they. Utterly alone, I am cast out of the circle, a worm, a living reproach, scorned and despised. Even less than despised. Unheard, unseen, unacknowledged, denied. And all who encounter me revile me with cynic laughter, shaking their heads, parting their nattering lips, mocking: "Let him throw himself at God for his deliverance," they say. "Since that is who he trusts, let the Lord save him."

And they are right. How not trust you, and what else to trust? You I entered on leaving the womb. You I drank at my mother's breast. I was cast upon you at birth. And even before birth I swam in you, my heart's darkness. Be not far from me now when suffering is very near, and



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All articles by or about Zoketsu Norman Fischer



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there is no help, and I am beset all round by threatening powers, the bulls of Bashan, gaping their dismal braying mouths, their ravenous, roaring, lion mouths.

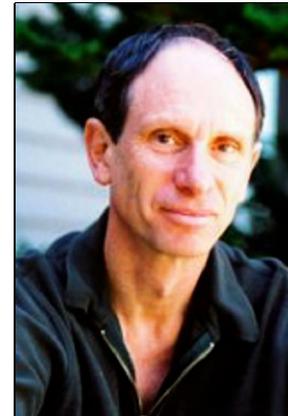
I am poured out like water. My bones, joints are snapped like twigs. My heart melts like wax, flooding my bowels with searing, viscid emotion. My strength is dried up like a potsherd. My tongue cleaves woolly to the roof of my mouth, and I feel my body dissolving into death's dust, for I am hounded by my isolation. I'm cast off and encircled by the assembly of the violent, who like vicious dogs snap at my hands and feet. I count the bones of my naked body as the mongrels shift and stare and circle. They divide my clothes among themselves, casting lots for them.

So, now, in this very place, I call on you. There is no one left. Do not be far from me. Be the center of the center of the circle. Be the strength of that center, the power of the absence that is the center. Deliver my life from the killing sharpnesses. Deliver my soul from the feverish dogs. Save me from the lion mouths. Answer me with the voice of the ram's horn, and I will seek and form and repeat your name among my kinsmen. In the midst of everyone, I will compose praises with my lips. And those who enter your awesomeness through my words will also praise. All the seed of Jacob will glorify you and live in awe of you.

All those who question and struggle will dawn with your light, for they will know you have not scorned the poor and despised nor recoiled, disgusted from their faces. From them your spark has never been hidden. And when they cried out in their misery, you heard and answered and ennobled them. And it is the astonishment of this that I will praise in the great assembly, making deep vows in the presence of those who know your heart, know that in you, the meek eat and are satisfied, and all who seek and struggle find the tongue to praise, saying to you, "May your heart live forever."

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All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein



Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB,

May all the ends of the earth remember and return to you, and all the families of all the nations bow before you, for all that is, is your domain. Your flame kindles all that lives and breathes, and you are the motive force of all activity. And they that rise up, live, and eat the fat of the earth will bow before you. Before you will bow all those who lie down, find peace, and enter the dust, for none can keep alive by his own power. You alone light the soul. Distant ages to come shall serve you, shall be related to you in future times. Those people not yet born will sing of your uprightness, your evenness, your brightness to a people not yet born; that is still yet to come. That this is how you are.

I got into making my own versions of the psalms six years ago when I was here and I heard the chanting of the psalms in choir. I was really disturbed by the psalms that I heard because they were so upsetting and violent and passionate. I couldn't imagine how they could be at the center of someone's religious practice. But since I had confidence in the people that were sitting next to me and around me in the choir, I thought I'd better study this matter further. I got completely involved in the psalms and came to see and, as you can see in the poem, feel how these psalms really go deep in the heart. I'm still not entirely undisturbed because the beauty of this psalm and the psalms and the example of Jesus himself is the uplifting and the raising up of suffering so that suffering becomes a path, as we were speaking about this morning.

But we were talking about Stephanie Kaza's question, and the unsettling fact that sometimes suffering's being a path can be devastating, not wholesome, positive, or good. Suffering as a path can reinforce and emphasize one's unworthiness: "I should suffer more. I should suffer more deeply. I should go far down to the depths." That can be a very unhealthy, bad idea. The question is, How do you validate suffering as a path, guarding as much as possible against that danger? Or is it impossible to guard against that danger—martyrdom,

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Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, is

as we know in the history of the Church, was an early practice? I wonder what kind of illumination the Christians can shed on how to distinguish these things? Maybe after this encounter I won't be disturbed anymore, but I'll probably continue to be disturbed forever.

Heng Sure Although we are speaking as monastics to monastics, I also have the benefit of having my parents and my sister here this afternoon, which is a personal blessing, looking at suffering from the point of view of nonmonastics. Suffering is the compost of discarded wrong thoughts that produces, from the Buddhist point of view, the seed of bodhi or awakening, the transformation from Sister Meg's story. This morning Joseph Goldstein talked about that transformation. I think all through the day we've had story upon story of that moment when out of the compost comes something very valuable. Out of the discarded leaves and stalks and thorns comes that seed of true fruit. As monastics, in all the stories we've heard today and will hear the rest of the week, there is an unspoken component, and this is what I've been hearing as I listened. The transformation moment is, you could say, kind of a still snapshot. You could say it's a black-and-white sketch. But around that transformative moment are three dimensions, and all the technicolor of the day-to-day doing of the monastic form. We heard Sister Meg talk about obedience as one of the Triple Jewels of St. Benedict's formula. And as I came around the corner in the road yesterday and saw Gethsemani Abbey dramatically popping up and striking the eye, I thought, Wow, what a great compost heap that is!

Let me explain that, lest I sound something less than respectful. Monastics are drawn in the Buddhist case to the Vinaya, in the Benedictine Trappist case to the Order, the Rule of St. Benedict, because of the compassion of the form, which comes from wisdom. Those rules, as I read them in the Rule of St. Benedict, and as I read them in the Buddhist Vinaya, are the true seeing of a way to transcend the self, to compost all of the stuff that arises—the greed, hatred, stupidity, pride, and doubt—and put it back on the heap so that through the form, something new can be born. In the case of Sister Mary Gerald, it was the form of the daily doing—more hungry stomachs, more hungry stomachs. Through the pressure of that and applying that form on her protoplasm, out of her living being came this

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**All articles by or about
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Christ consciousness, this awakening, this bodhi moment. That's the technicolor around our conversations and stories, the daily doing that produces that seed.

Kevin Hunt: Ajahn Sundara, when you used the word messiness it brought to mind something that happened to me almost fifty years ago. I was newly in the monastery and I was sent down to help put some rhubarb into our garden. The monk in charge of the garden told us to dig a hole a foot and a half deep and about a foot wide. And then somebody else drove down the line of the holes with a wagon behind. Another brother took a shovel, shoved it into the wagon, took out a shovel full of manure and dumped it in the hole. There I was, a young kid just out of New York City, considering myself to be rather sophisticated etc, and I looked down at it, and I got kind of sick to my stomach. The monk in charge came up to me and said, "Well, get to it." And I said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "You throw some dirt on it, and you reach down there with your hands and you mix it up together. And then you put the root on there because that manure is going to be the fertilizer, the compost of the plant." I couldn't help but think when you asked your question about messiness that most of us who follow some kind of a religious ideal tend to be very idealistic. We can have suffering, pain, and this or that, but, "Lord, don't let it be messy!" The messiness is always with us. We are never going to get rid of it. And it's the willingness to have this messiness in our lives that is going to carry us to where the seeds really can grow.

Columba Stewart: I'm going to go back to Norman Fischer's point, and then maybe perhaps tie it in with what my friend Heng Sure just said about suffering being the compost of cast-off thoughts. I think that's sometimes true, but part of the reality that perhaps Norman was getting at is that often our suffering is because of the fiercely held thoughts of others. So it's not just my stuff that I'm torturing myself with. I think that's the reality we were talking about earlier today—with people who find themselves caught in war, genocide, devastation, sexual abuse, or you name it. That's not stuff I'm making up for myself. That can be stuff that's coming at me from somewhere else. I think when we talk about martyrdom, or when we talk about how people react to the crucible of that kind of suffering, we don't have an

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easy answer. My teacher Evagrius, this fourth century monk I keep going back to, once said that, “When we pray, we have to make our stand on our own desolation.” Now, you can talk about that as emptiness, or you can talk about that as the desolation or devastation that happens when you find yourself caught in the fire of some of these situations we’ve been talking about or alluding to today.

If I can loop back to compunction just briefly: For many of us it is terribly important for us to learn how to see our suffering clearly before we can begin to experience it less keenly. What can be one of the most painful aspects of growth in spiritual life, as all of you know, is the stuff that comes up when you start to pray or when you start to work with a spiritual teacher seriously. Another one of St. Benedict’s steps of humility—we’ll cover all twelve perhaps by the end of this dialogue—is number four, and it’s often misunderstood. The most common translation puts it, “the heart quietly embraces suffering.” The Latin doesn’t use the word “heart.” It uses the word “conscience.” It talks about the conscience, in a sense, wrapping itself around whatever the situation is. That again doesn’t resolve it, but suggests that the experience of dealing with suffering is a profound part of our spiritual path, and one that requires us to keep reengaging at progressive stages. Spiritual practice is not a preliminary or an escape. If any of you know Iris Murdoch’s lovely novel *The Bell*, there is a wise abbess who gives counsel to a man who is troubled, in this case in the quite apropos and relevant issue of sexual attraction to a minor. The abbess’ advice to this man is, “The way is always forward. Never back.” That sounds like a classic saying from any one of our traditions, but I think it’s one that we need to hold.

Judith Simmer-Brown: I’m glad that many of the things that came up came up because they helped me come back to say why I asked about love in the first place. It seems that very often we have a lot of smuggled notions of the romantic—whether it’s in relationships or in the spiritual life, where we have some kind of magic wand that we’ll wave and love will take care of any of our problems. Or we’ll have some breakthrough where suddenly all of our problems are no longer problems. Obviously one of the themes today has been about how it is that we lean into the suffering and the edge and the irritation of our



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obstacles in order to awaken. One of the things that comes to mind at this point is an image in Vajrayana Buddhism of desolation, of desolation as a very important part of the spiritual path.

The image in Vajrayana that is used is that you, in the heart of your spiritual practice, are in a very vivid world of dead bodies, of decaying, smelly corpses. The corpses obviously are a reminder of your own death, but they also represent the hopelessness of every idea, fantasy, or expectation that you have for your own spirituality: that all of that gets sort of smelly and rots. It rots because it's basically an ego agenda until all of it becomes completely humiliated and leveled and devastated by failure and discouragement. Only then is there some ability to transform that into a completely different kind of experience. It doesn't mean that there is some kind of miraculous transformation. It's all about going through the completely disgusting humiliation of spiritual ambition, which is also what Joseph Goldstein was talking about this morning. I'm very grateful for the circle the conversation has taken us in, because when love suddenly appears it seems a little too easy without going through the devastation, discouragement; disheartenment, and alienation that is so much part of our path that we must respect as part of the suffering involved.

Mary Margaret Funk: I think my only word would be to equate love and emptiness. I went into the particularity of going up to the door and found in the door this sense of mystery. In mystery, you take a nosedive into humanity. In that nosedive into humanity, you put on Christ. The edge I'd like to learn more about is between Buddhist emptiness and our Christ consciousness or love is the particularity of Jesus, the Christ. So there really is somebody in the door with me. I still talk to Jesus as a real person, who is conscious. When I talk about the presence of Christ, it's a real presence like you in the room. It's not like just a mystery. I know emptiness isn't to you Buddhists like just a non-being. When we say presence or consciousness, it's a realization that it is the way it is.

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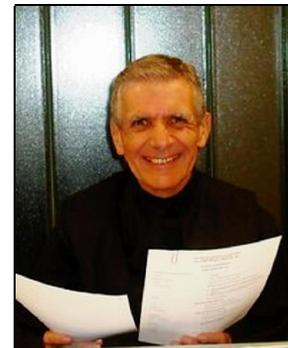
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Ajahn Sundara



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