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## Zenkei Blanche Hartman: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Stephanie Kaza, Sr. Joan Kirby, RSCJ, Archbishop Felix Machado, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam

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

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**Blanche Hartman:** I certainly think that has been a big part of it in my experience. What happened the first time I saw Suzuki Roshi and he said, "You are perfect just as you are," was my internal response went, "Well, he doesn't know me." He kept saying these kinds of things, pointing out our wholeness. And it became a koan for me: What is he pointing at? Because he would also say things like, "Zen is making your best effort on each moment forever." He would say, "We sit zazen with no gaining idea." What kind of effort do you make with no gaining idea? This has been a wonderfully rich koan for me over my life of practice. Suzuki Roshi didn't just say, "You are a good kid. Don't worry about it." He gave us a lot to work with. He also said, "There is always room for improvement."

"You are perfect just as you are, and there is always room for improvement." What is that? But it was certainly enormously encouraging. What was encouraging to me was that when I met him he had been practicing for fifty years. Some of you have been practicing for fifty years. I was in my forties when I started. I probably won't make it that far. But to see that it was possible for someone to accept everyone unconditionally was an enormous inspiration for me. This is

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**Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB,** is professor of theology at Conception Seminary College and a member of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri. He contributed to both Gethsemani Encounters.

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my deepest aspiration. I can't do it, but I keep trying. Making your best effort on each moment forever, what else can you do?

We talk about the ignorance of thinking that you are anybody, thinking that you actually exist as a separate. Where our real suffering originates is thinking that we are somehow independent of all that is. It's ridiculous on the face of it, but we get that notion. There is this wonderful image in the Flower Ornament Sutra of Indra's net—the universe imagined as a gigantic net. At each intersection of the net there is a jewel, and every jewel is reflected in every other jewel. That kind of intimate interdependence is the vision of the universe in the sutra.

**Geshe Lobsang Tenzin:** I'd like to talk a little bit about suffering and what role it plays in the Buddhist tradition of spiritual development. Suffering is not embraced for the sake of suffering. Just embracing it is not completing the journey. However, embracing or understanding suffering provides a way to understand where suffering originates. Through suffering we understand another's feelings. Shantideva has a saying that without suffering there is no will to freedom. The Buddha himself saw the suffering of aging and sickness and death, very much connected with others, and wanted to find where suffering originated. A Buddhist sees that suffering is simply the product of our misconceptions, not knowing our true reality.

In some ways it's paradoxical to talk about our true reality and no self. In Buddhist Madhyamika or middle way philosophy, you'll find two levels of reality: Conventional reality and the ultimate reality of oneself in every phenomenon. Emptiness is the ultimate reality of every phenomenon. That is to say that each of us, as we look within ourselves, finds there is no core self that survives. The notion of "I" as the center of the universe is where attachment, aversions, basic duality, concrete me versus concrete others come from. Dissolving that concrete self is not about dissolving the self altogether. It simply means putting the understanding of self in a different way, in a relational, dependent manner.

The Buddhist way to see freedom would be that suffering is something



**Zenkei Blanche Hartman** is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

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**Stephanie Kaza** is an associate professor, concentrating on environmental ethics, religion and ecology, and ecofeminism at the University of Vermont.

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**Sr. Joan Kirby**, a Religious of the Sacred Heart, represents the Temple of Understanding at the United Nations.

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we have to acknowledge and understand. As we embrace, it opens our eyes to where suffering comes from. We gradually deepen our understanding about our true nature—that we lack an absolute state of being, and that, therefore, my sense of self is created, emergent, dependant, a designated or imputed identity. The self exists as an imputed, not as an absolute. I think that deepening the understanding that there is no core self, and bringing that to an experiential and not just conceptual level, is a way to connect with everything. That's where the Buddhist would say that enlightenment or freedom comes. Where there is no grasping to the self one can have infinite love and compassion for, and connectedness with, all. There is no fear or suffering because there is no grasping.

**Chuen Phangcham:** It's a very Buddhist understanding to acknowledge that we need to use the "I" as the means to communicate. When we were born, we had no name. We were not Buddhist, Hindu, or anything. We use a name and an "I" to communicate the ordinary truth and absolute truth. At the high level of absolute freedom, there is no "I," no "you." Let us return to our subject of suffering. In Buddhist practice and learning and understanding, how you deal with suffering depends on yourself. You cannot make me lessen your suffering and I cannot do the same for you. Each individual has to make themselves try by themselves.

Therefore, do you want to suffer or do you want to be happy? Most of us want to live our life happily, safely, and want to live in the community peacefully and happily. We want to help the community, the nation, the human community as a whole, and all living, sentient beings to be happy. When we learn that suffering itself is impermanent and conditioned, we can make our mind learn what suffering is and its cause. The Buddha shows us the way to do this. Because suffering is impermanent, it is also out of our control. Likewise happiness is also out of our control. We cannot say "This is my happiness. This is your happiness. This is my suffering. This is your suffering." Happiness and suffering are universal experiences. When we learn about and understand suffering and its causes, then we learn the way to walk on the path of relieving suffering and increasing happiness. The Buddha notes that there is physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. We have to



**Archbishop Felix Machado** served as under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue prior to his appointment as bishop of Nashik (India) on January 16, 2008.

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**Ven. Dr. Chuen Phangcham** is the director of the Wat Dhammaram/Vipassana Meditation Center, the Thai Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

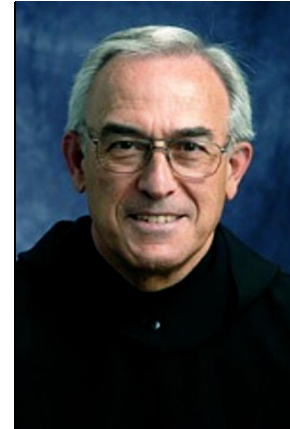
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overcome the causes. That is the way of transformation.

**Joan Kirby:** I'd like to return to what Father Joseph Wong was saying. When Blanche Hartman spoke, I wrote on my paper, "divergence, original perfection, original sin." Yet in terms of what I'm hearing, I don't think there is a divergence, and I don't think that's the proper contrast. I think that you, as Buddhists, are talking about suffering. We, as Christians, are talking about suffering from original sin. Suffering comes from ego or from our weakness, our fallibility. I believe we're talking on a deeper level than original sin or original perfection to begin with. We are talking about transformation, which it seems to me is very coordinated: the nonduality, the sameness of beings in Zen. In Christianity we talk about communion, and I want to bring in the Eucharist. I think it's in the Eucharist that we become Christ. St. Paul says, "I live now not I, but Christ lives in me." And our whole sense of oneness is reinforced in the Eucharist.

The only real difference that I see is that in Zen there is a stronger emphasis on the unity of all beings; whereas, in Christianity, I think historically we have emphasized the redemption of humanity. Christians speak of humans being interconnected. It strikes me that we really need to expand our understanding of communion to the entire universe and articulate it more often, so that we become more deeply involved with the suffering of the earth and the earth's suffering in us, so that we truly are one with the earth, with all beings.

**Blanche Hartman:** Thank you. I appreciate that, and I think in your language, as I understand it, thinking of the earth as God's creation makes that an easy step. I did want to express my agreement with the work of letting go of holding onto our wrong view of the existence of a separate self. No one can let go of it for us. But as we see how much suffering the view of a separate self causes us, it gets easier to let go. It is very persistent. It keeps coming back. Dogen Zenji says, "Those who are enlightened about delusion, we call Buddhas. Those who are deluded about enlightenment, we call ordinary beings." If we realize that the delusion of a separate self continually arises, the best we can do is see it as soon as we can and say "uh-oh," and let it go. We get in trouble when we grasp it and think it's real. When we recognize our



**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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Fr. William Skudlarek,  
OSB**

**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 director of Drepung Loseling Institute.

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connection with everything, it helps us to let go of that. We feel supported by everything. We don't have to do it all ourselves.

**Felix Machado:** I should introduce what I am going to say by saying that what happens here does not remain only here. It has much larger repercussions for both our communities and religions. I did not attend the first Gethsemani Encounter; but through the book I learned so much. I felt I participated and that I was diffusing the good news to others in my capacity. This will happen again here. I feel that, yes, there are fundamental differences between the two religions involved here. That was the type of question that Fr. Joseph Wong asked, and it should be pursued, because we are people sitting in dialogue but holding responsibility within our own contexts. We are in a certain sense also leaders of these communities. Of course, we don't officially represent anybody, but I think we do in a certain sense. I want to emphasize that there are fundamental differences, also, and they don't seem to come through. Or perhaps we just are so good to each other that we don't want to perhaps explore them! But for the good of our own communities, it will be good to pursue questions like Fr. Joseph Wong's.

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**Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB** Cam, was elected a member of the Council of the Camaldolese Benedictines in 2005 and lives at the Mother House at Camaldoli, Italy. He was involved in the second Gethsemani Encounter in April 2002.

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