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H. H. the Dalai Lama: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Professor Ewert Cousins, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, H.H. Dalai Lama, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Sopa, Ven. Samu Sunim, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Geshe Lobsang Tenzin

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

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Dialogue after the Text of His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Mary Margaret Funk: First of all, we need to respectfully receive these kind and encouraging and instructional words from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. And we thank you, Geshe Lobsang, for the kind reading of them. I'm sure that this hour of common reflection on the text will be shared with His Holiness.

Thomas Ryan: I'd like to lift out one of the phrases from the Dalai Lama's reflection: "The primary aim of the meditational practice of taking on others' sufferings is to eliminate our self-centered attitude." The language of taking on others' sufferings, granted that the Dalai Lama says the primary aim is to eliminate our self-centered attitude, still has something that raises for me the question of atonement. In Buddhist understanding, can one person atone for the sufferings of another person, or must each person atone for their own sufferings?

John Daido Looi: In our lineage we understand atonement as at-onement, nonduality. So to atone, for example, for our evil karma, we become intimate with it; that is, we take responsibility for that karma. And in so doing, we are able to transform it. I feel that what the

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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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Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai

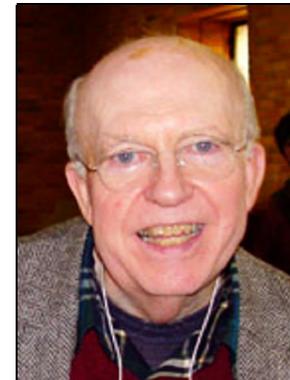
Dalai Lama is saying is that that same process is taking place in terms of being intimate with the suffering of others. We chant, "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them." Well, the way you save sentient beings is to recognize that "self" and "other" are really one reality. When you do that, there is no longer the duality that creates the self. The self disappears in a sense, merges with the "ten thousand things," the whole phenomenal universe. At least that's the way I understood what he had to say.

Ajahn Amaro: One of the very common practices in the Buddhist tradition is something known as the sharing of blessings or the sharing of merit, which is not exactly atoning for another person's wrongdoings but a way of consciously sending forth your good intentions and benevolent wishes. It is, if you like, sharing the good karma of your own life to benefit others. That's seen as a very major part of Buddhist practice in all Buddhist countries. There are wholesome acts and practices done, and then there is a conscious committal of that act and its effects for the benefit of an individual or group of individuals. That's not seen as sort of wiping out of another person's negative karma, but it's seen as ameliorating some of the painful effects they are experiencing or some kind of a difficult situation they are in. In the daily life of a monastery, very often people will come to make offerings to the monastery. Actually a large part of the material support of Theravadan monasteries comes from people wishing to make offerings in order to dedicate the blessings to the benefit of, particularly, departed relatives, friends, or people in their family who are sick, etc.

Thubten Chodron: In response to your question [Thomas Ryan], no, everybody creates their own karma, and everybody must purify their own karma. His Holiness in that statement is referring to a practice in Tibet called Tonglen, or taking and giving, where we imagine taking on the other's suffering and using it to destroy the cause of our own suffering, which is our own self-grasping ignorance and our own self-centeredness. We then imagine transforming and giving away our body, possessions, and our positive potential to all sentient beings, which brings them temporary and ultimate happiness. We meditate in this way in order to overcome our own obstacles that prevent us in actuality from being of benefit when the situation arises in which we can be of benefit. But we can't take on somebody else's negative karma and purify it for them; although we want to develop the compassion to

Lama, Tsenzhap Serkong Rinpoche, and Zopa Rinpoche, she has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore and Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She is active in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogue, including the MID-sponsored Gethseman... [[Read full biography](#)]

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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](#)]

be able to do so.

Heng Sure: I was going to say, yes, one can take on the other's karma for them and purify it for them. That phrase from the message could come right out of the Avatamsaka Sutra, if you understand that His Holiness is speaking from the point of view of the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva's path. In the Flower Dharma Sutra it says that taking on the suffering on behalf of others is the highest giving of offerings. What Sister Thubten Chodron said is also true; that my karma is mine to pay back, good and bad. My good karma is mine to receive, the good fruits of the good that I do. However, someone who is working with those vows that Roshi John mentioned—"Living beings are numberless. I vow to save them all"—has that heart. This is because there is personal karma and there is collective karma. We are all participating in both of those every minute. We are tying up wholesome affinities with ourselves as a group here today and with every act we do. With every bite of food, we are connected to the source of that food and the effort that went into it, etc.

So someone who makes a resolve to end suffering on behalf of others is also at the same time creating his or her own karma, but also working on the level of collective karma. For example, there is a practice called liberating life, where we find animals that are heading for a stewpot or somebody's dinner table and then recite a sutra or a mantra over them, sending them back to live again and intervening in their quick demise. The idea is that this is a direct cause of reducing the amount of hatred in the world that leads to wars. So if you can liberate animals, then wars are postponed. There is less collective hatred by creating the good causes of giving them another life.

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): This is a very important point that we all practice according to both the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. We want to practice what we call brahmahiyas, four sublime states of mind that I translate into the English as "the best behavior," brahmahiya. These are loving-friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Such practice is not personal or selfish. When we practice loving-friendliness, we practice loving-friendliness for all living beings, human and nonhuman. Similarly, we practice compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity in order to liberate all living beings from suffering. Therefore, in this sense we

**All articles by or about
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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 contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk,

commit a wholesome individual and collective karma. In this light, the Dalai Lama has made a very wonderful and effective statement.

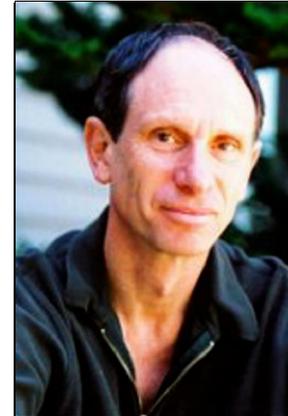
Ewert Cousins: I thought I might speak about the doctrine of purgatory, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition. There is a communion of saints whereby prayers and the good works of those on earth can be offered for the release of the souls in purgatory so that they can go quickly to heaven. I had mentioned Dante yesterday as a source and a model for the suffering of Christ being transformed in the final mystical vision. I think that Dante is one of the best sources for exploring the doctrine of purgatory. In fact, some say that he led to the Reformation over that.

Geshe Lobsang Tenzin: Regarding the question of whether someone can take your suffering away or erase your negative karma: There may be various ways of looking at it, but one of the sources says that the Buddhas cannot wash away the sins or the negative karma of others as if washing dirt with the water. They cannot remove the suffering of others as if simply sweeping away the dust from the floor. They cannot transform or transfer their realizations or understanding. So, what good can the Buddhas do? The text says that they lead beings to liberation by showing reality. So, in Buddhism, the role of a teacher or a person in helping others is not by taking their suffering upon oneself but rather showing the ways that each individual can him- or herself put such practices into their life that become the transformative process.

That being the case, nobody can erase the suffering of others, but by sharing the path they can lead others to transform their own negative karma and thereby attain peace. As Venerable Thubten Chodron mentioned, the particular reference of taking upon oneself the suffering of others, is a practice known as Tonglen, "giving and taking." It is done as a way to reinforce one's practice of compassion and love. Tonglen is more of an expression of compassion, that wants to take the suffering of others upon oneself, rather like a mother who very much cares for her child. If the child is inflicted with certain pain or suffering, she would want everything to take that suffering, even if that meant taking it upon oneself. In that sense it is transformative of one's own self-centeredness. For it's our self-centeredness that prevents us from sharing our happiness with others.

OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . .*

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Joseph Goldstein is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein

Geshe Sopa: Our egotistic and selfish attitude, which dominates the world both in our private and public affairs, is the cause of suffering. We all love ourselves and cherish ourselves first—we all believe that there is no person worthy of cherishing more than ourselves. The devil, we might say, is my egotism, and from it comes our insecurity and feelings of worthlessness, sadness, conceit, pride, etc. We need to be less selfish and more charitable to others.

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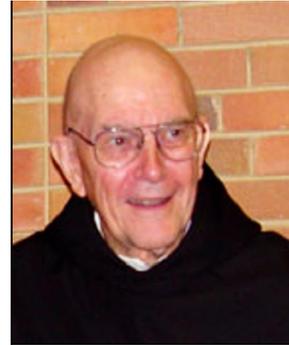
Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.) is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

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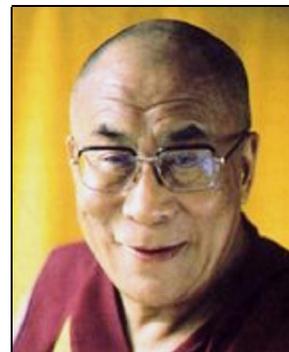
Zenkei Blanche Hartman is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

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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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His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the head of state and spiritual leader

of the Tibetan people. He has been involved in interreligious dialogue through the Gethsemani Encounters and visits to India and the United States for many years.

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H.H. Dalai Lama**



Fr. Leo Lefebure is the Matteo Ricci, SJ, Professor of Theology at Georgetown University. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and also of the new Center for Religious Understanding, Acceptance, and Tolerance. He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID and participated in the first two Gethsemani Encounters.

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John Daido Looi is the founder and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.

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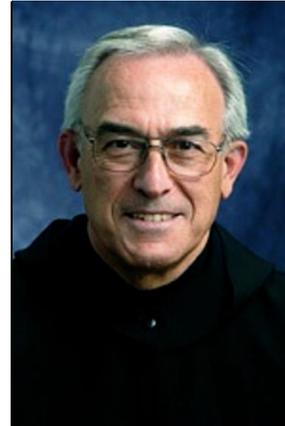
Ven. Dr. Chuen Phangcham is the director of the Wat Dhammaram/Vipassana Meditation Center, the Thai Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

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Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. Thomas Ryan resides at the North American Paulist Center in Washington DC, and works for Christian unity and interfaith relations through a variety of formats: interreligious dialogue, retreats, on-line courses, graduate instruction, workshops, etc. He has served on MID's Board of Advisors.

All articles by or about Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP



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.

All articles by or about Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

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



Ven. Samu Sunim is the spiritual director and head of the Zen Buddhist Temple in Ann Arbor and the Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

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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.

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