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Sr. Kathy Lyzotte: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

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

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Dialogue after Sr. Kathy Lyzotte's Presentation

James Wiseman: I fully affirm what Sr. Kathy said in her conclusion; that the reality is communion, rather than the separate individual. I would like to tie that in with my response to a question that Norman asked in our first session this morning. He pointed out that, when this encounter was originally planned and we expected His Holiness to be with us, there was going to be a larger gathering in Louisville, with young people especially, to address them and show what we of the Christian and Buddhist monastic traditions had to offer. I think there is a lot of suffering, not just among the young but among many people outside the monastic life. By that, obviously I don't imply that living in a monastery is utterly ideal or vice versa. But so many people I know cannot stand to go to work in the morning. There is a woman who comes to me once a month for spiritual direction who hates her job, because there is such animosity among the workers, people climbing over one another's backs to get ahead, a very nasty kind of superior that she has to deal with, and yet she doesn't have an alternative.

I hear this time and again from so many people. One answer, I think,

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to Norman's question is that monastic life can show the world that you are not what you own; you are not what you have; and that the reality is the beauty of living together in communion. Benedict's Rule, as most of us know, has in its next-to-the-last chapter the beautiful phrase that monks are to vie with one another in obedience. That doesn't mean giving directions right and left. It means trying to be alert to what others' needs are rather than seeking your own. Another beautiful passage of the Rule speaks of the abbot's charge to see that the sick are especially cared for. Elsewhere in the Rule he speaks of the young and the very elderly as those who need special attention.

We can show that to the world. The difficulty is that so much of those outside the monastic ground don't even know what we're about, and it's sometimes difficult for them to make our acquaintance. I'll give you one almost silly example. As some of you know, I'm originally from Louisville, and I came to Kentucky a day early to spend the night with some relatives. A cousin was driving me to the Executive Inn for the van ride the other morning, and we were talking about what was going to be happening here. I was telling her a bit about the Buddhist outlook on life and what I've learned from my dialogue with them over the years. My cousin, who has known me all her life, said, "But you are a Catholic, aren't you?" There is a lot of confusion and ignorance about what our life is all about.

Damon Geiger: I wanted to continue the thought that Sister Kathy had started and give one Eastern Christian perspective on it. Every human being assumes the whole creation in him- or herself, in the sense that we are a microcosm. Thus, our salvation is tied up with the salvation of the world. We are not to be saved from the world, but we can only be saved with the world. From that same perspective, looking from scriptural sources, we were given responsibility to be stewards, not owners, of creation. Creation belongs not to any of us but to God, and we are only to cultivate and till it. The responsibility comes that we must render accounts to one another and to God for our stewardship, and then to administer it according to the owner's will, which is that of communion. If we properly administer creation, the whole creation becomes a sacrament. How many sacraments do we have? As Easterners, we say at least seven. But the ideal is that everything is a sacrament, because it is administered according to the will of the owner, which is to bring about communion with him and with one



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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of

another.

The terrible thing about the Fall is that we have turned creation from being a sacrament into a sacrilege that has become a curse. The idea of Christ's redemption is that in assuming our human nature he assumed the whole of the creation and resacramentalized it. Our practice would involve rediscovering the sacramentality of all things, allowing them to become a source of communion. This requires a real effort to see each other as fellow stewards; not as rivals or competitors to be used or to be manipulated either to gain the goods of the earth or to race for them. A lot of work has to be done there.

Ajahn Amaro: In response to Sister Kathy's last question, about whether loving communion between persons could be considered the ultimate reality. What immediately sprang to mind was the quality of sangha in Buddhist thought. We speak of the Three Jewels: Buddha, dharma, and sangha. That quality of sangha is also known as the Three Refuges. The sangha is the center of our lives, particularly as lived as a monastic community and a community of human beings. It is given great importance in the Buddhist world. There is a very well-known teaching of the Buddha. Two of the Buddha's disciples are having a debate. One is saying meditation is the most significant thing. Then Ananda, who is the Buddha's attendant and frequently the fall guy of many Buddhist dialogues (he is also known as a kind-hearted and gentle character) says, "Well, I think that spiritual friendship is half of the holy life." The debate goes back and forth. They take their debate to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "Not so, Ananda" (which he says very frequently! Ananda's role in life is to kind of bring out these difficult questions). "It's not the half of the holy life. It's the whole of the holy life."

The Buddha expresses the importance of good spiritual friendship. He also flips it around and says, "What is spiritual friendship? It's not only having noble spiritual companions and a harmonious relationship with them, but it's also friendship with the lovely, with the kaliana, the good or the beautiful." Internally what is important is the relationship of the heart with Ultimate Reality, an association with the Lovely. Internally and externally, such love manifests as a harmonious, non-selfish relationship with other beings.

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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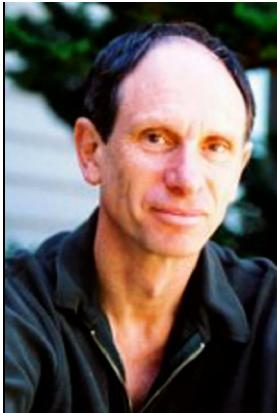
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All articles by or about Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST

Judith Simmer-Brown: I'd like to take this line of discussion about the sangha and community back to Sr. Kathy's paper and the topic of greed and consumerism. I'm reminded of our Lilly dialogues where we've been talking about these topics for several years and the theologian, John Cobb, who says that in a world where consumerism and globalization have become such powerful forces most of the institutions of our world have been bought. He says there is real concern about the damage being done to our community and our world through the powers of consumerism and globalization. To me as a lay person, these thoughts highlight the importance of a dialogue topic like this happening in a monastic setting. Because it seems that the monastery is a very powerful force for raising issues and looking at things in an environment less sullied by the environment of consumerism and globalization.

Even though we all are part of the network and we all contribute to society, it seems very difficult to really see what we're doing because consumerism and materialism are so deeply embedded in our society. Consumerism and materialism are such an important part of the suffering in the world right now. A very important part of our practice is to awaken to the pain in our lives and the lives of our larger world, so we can really begin to address in some direct way how that suffering could be relieved. I appreciated very much Sr. Kathy's bravery in talking about how the monastery is part of that, and what could be done just within our own personal practice to heighten the relieving of that suffering.

Joseph Wong: I'd like to continue the discussion, responding to Sr. Kathy's last statement whether there are two truths or one. I think they are different views, but they probably lead to the same practice. If, as pointed out by Norman Fischer and Father James Wiseman, our purpose is proposing a common practice to people, especially young people, I think it can work here. Yesterday, for example, we heard again and again from our Buddhist friends that suffering is really illusion and that the solution is removing ignorance and arriving at enlightenment and true vision. Because at the heart of suffering is the self. In Buddhist doctrine, there is no self. The self is continuously changing, impermanent. It's illusory. If we don't cling to this self, then suffering disappears. So the conclusion is no clinging, no self, and no clinging to the self.



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

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In Christianity, we think of a permanent self with some basic continuity amidst all the changes. That self, however, is not individual. The self is always in communion, and it is an illusion to think of oneself in isolation. Again, the conclusion is pointing toward non-attachment. If we cling to the self, we lose ourselves. It's only by giving away the self that one becomes a self. That's from the teaching of Jesus. Those who want to save themselves and hold onto themselves will lose themselves. It's only those who lose themselves for Jesus' sake, he says, who will find their true self. These are probably two different visions of reality. But we come to the same conclusion in our practice—that is, no clinging to the self. Perhaps we can offer that as a message to people as a basic solution to the problem of suffering?

Norman Fischer: I want to return to the topic of money and consumerism. I don't understand much about money, but it seems very important. I understand how you could make money, but I don't understand how money makes money—the heart of what our capitalistic world does. In Sister Kathy's paper there was a line about advertising. I think all religious people feel that advertising is crazy and whips up people's greed, which is true. However, my oldest friend works in advertising, and I visit him whenever I go to New York. He is just trying to earn a living. He appreciates humor; that's why he is in advertising. It offers him a chance to write humorous little things in support of a product. It's really irrelevant to him that it's in support of a product. He is writing humorous vignettes and he enjoys himself, and he is basically a good person.

As you, Sister Kathy, say, we are all supported by this system. What's frightening about the system is that wealth is somehow generated by the ever-increasing need for stuff. I think that the world economy would collapse if there weren't an ever-increasing need for more stuff, which is generated by advertising and getting people interested in it. Spiritually, we can all see the dangers of that. But think of what would happen if the economy grinds to a halt, and my friend loses his job, and the friends that help in the monastery lose their jobs? People wouldn't have work because there is not a generation wanting more and more stuff. It's a worse problem than one imagines, because it's not as simple as just cutting back. If we cut back, people will lose jobs and the whole mood of the world goes down the drain. Everybody



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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.

becomes panicky and frightened and so forth. I'm completely at a loss for how to think about this, but I think it's quite an intractable and difficult problem. It's as if we've painted ourselves into a corner.

John Daido Loori: I think what we need to really look at is the eightfold path of the Buddha, particularly with regard to right livelihood. The Buddha was fairly specific about his teachings on right livelihood, and I think it addresses these questions of greed and consumerism. The practical questions become how right livelihood works in such a world as we live in today? I notice Gethsemani, for example, has what we would call a right livelihood program. The monks produce fruitcake, cheese, and other things to bring money into the monastery. We do the same thing. We have an arm called Dharma Communications, which communicates the Dharma and makes a profit. Of course, everybody that works on it is a volunteer. They are all monastics. It's part of their work practice. It brings income in.

Dharma Communications is operated with a real sensitivity to the people that request it. In fact, if someone has a real need for any of the stuff we produce, we just give it to them. Since we've been operating Dharma Communications at the monastery, much of the lay sangha has become aware of it. Some of these people are in business for themselves; and they've become so interested in it that we've begun to convene workshops to help guide them into how they can introduce some of these principles of right livelihood into their own business; whereby the customer is not ripped off and the person making a living is not consumed or debilitated by the process of making a living.

Felix Machado: The fact of institutions being bought by money and business is so real that it scares me. I think that even religions are bought. There are religions that are losing the prophetic element that Sr Kathy also touched upon. One of the recent popes, through his encyclical letter, almost condemned the situation where money makes money; and this was way back I think in 1930s and 1940s.

Norman, you wondered what would happen if we lost jobs and imagined the chain being stopped. I don't have to imagine, coming from India. That is the real crux of the problem of globalization that Sr. Kathy was talking about. We don't have to imagine because job loss has

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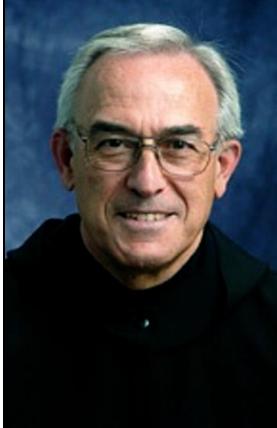
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happened and it seems it's going to continue to happen. Who is going to break this chain? I think perhaps that we monastics are the prophets. I don't know much about the history, but I know that monastic movements, both that of Buddha in India within Brahmanic Hinduism and that of the monks in Christianity, like St. Benedict, have been great protestors and makers of change. There needs to be a revitalization of this prophetic movement, particularly in the area of globalization, where we don't have to imagine things, at least for our part of the world.

Geshe Sopa: In this situation, I think that we are talking on two levels. One is the spiritual level—the final, highest goal of peace and happiness, and how to attain them mentally. The other level is that we are all living in world with our earthly body and five or six senses, each of them wanting their own satisfaction. We all want to see beautiful things, hear nice things, smell sweet odors, touch and taste pleasant things, and always be full of food and drink, etc. We also need those things; without them, no one can survive. As monastics, our goal is to work for the higher goal. Whatever your religious background, every tradition has an image of final peace without suffering. Monastics and teachers came into this world to help us reach those goals. Their main concern is not survival or beauty; their main intention is the spiritual goal. We need people to be consumers in this world to satisfy the demands of the other level. It is the intention behind the production and consumption that matters. In this way, we can reconcile the two goals: one is temporary and helps us live in the world; the other is permanent, and helps us understand the suffering of the world.

William Skudlarek: Just to pick up on the prophetic role that monasticism can offer and on practical ways of doing that: I think of Benedict's advice in his chapter on the artisans in the monastery; that they should do their work and do it well, and the goods should be sold but at a price cheaper than what is charged outside the monastery. This strikes me as very prophetic. But it is also something that will cause a lot of suffering, because it's going to put other people out of business. That's where I always sense this bind. How can you be prophetic in a way that does not cause suffering?

Guo Yuan Fa Shi: On this issue, our teacher has some thoughts concerning wanting and need. We always want a lot: we want this and



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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.

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Geshe Sopa**

that. However, when we look at what we need, it is very little. The kind of teaching he advocates in Taiwan, which many people respond to, is that if you want something, you should not get it. If you need it, however, you should. This analysis comes from the root of the three poisons that Buddhists always talk about. One of them is the greed. So such craving is very deep rooted. He also says that if you do not get what you want you should forget about it. He then continues on the theme of blessing. We should know that we are blessed, that whatever we have—our body, our clothing, the food we have—we should appreciate and treasure. This is what I feel at Gethsemani. The monks know their blessings and treasure them. They turn off the lights when they are not in use, things like that. These are good practices. Besides treasuring our blessings, we need to cultivate them, and not only cultivate them but nurture them. This is a way to help society, because we know that greed is very deep-rooted.

Ajahn Sundara: I resonated with what John Daido Loori said about right livelihood. There are several teachings in the Theravada scriptures that address money and how to use it skillfully. There is one sutra in which the Buddha describes how a person living in the world should use their wealth. Wealth is not a sin. Wealth is not a bad thing. It can be actually the result of using the mind, body, and our life skillfully, if it is based in Right Livelihood. Right Livelihood is based in non-harming, non-violence and in the respect of others. When right livelihood is founded in such qualities, then having wealth can be used to develop generosity. Generosity in Buddhism is actually the foundation of practice. The first quality that one develops in one's life, before even meditation as described by the Buddhist teaching, is generosity or giving. If you have, then you can give.

Another aspect I wanted to touch on is the way a Theravada Buddhist monastery is set up. Monks and nuns do not handle money at all. Whatever money is received goes to a Trust that supports the monastery. The standards of necessities by which a Buddhist monk or nun can live by are minimal: one set of robes, shelter over one's head for one night, and alms food received daily—we cannot keep food overnight for our own use. If somebody wants to give you something better than what those standards offer, you can still receive it. You don't have to be a "saint." The relationship between the establishment of the Buddhist monastic Sangha (community) which has given up the



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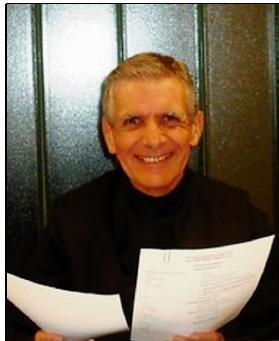
Fr. Dan Ward, OSB, is a monk and a priest of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville MN and a member of the MID board. He is currently director of the office of legal affairs for Catholic religious orders in the United States. He contributed to the second Gethsemani Encounter in 2002.

use of and the control over money, and the role played by Buddhist lay people who materially support the monastery is quite an interesting one. In our tradition a monastery is established through the invitation of a group of Buddhist lay people who will take care of the material needs of the monastics. So one the one hand a Buddhist lay-person lives in the world, earns money to support themselves and their family, on the other hand, the monastic Sangha offers a mirror, exemplifying the fact that one doesn't have to live with very much, that one doesn't have to demand or want a lot. Now, of course, learning to live with few needs is an ongoing training. It doesn't happen overnight. When you enter the monastery, you have very much the mind of a worldly person, and it takes many years to accept the fact that you are committed to a life of simplicity.

Our relationship with money in our society is quite thwarted. We tend to have a negative relationship to it because we feel very guilty. When you go to Asia and people come to the monastery, it's really shocking to us. There may be a famous teacher giving an incredibly enlightened and insightful talk, and sometimes there are all these people in the background simply getting their money out of their purses to give donations to the monastery. And they are very proud of that. They feel very happy because they are giving. Money is not actually the main point; they are just giving. For them that is essential.

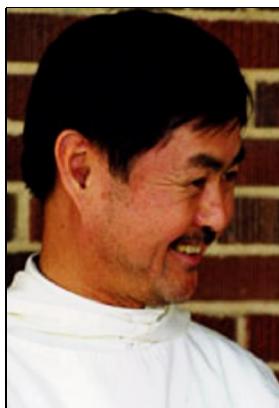
It's somehow a question of finding a balance. Money allows you to be generous but the means of its acquisition is what needs attention. So that leads to another point, which is karma. The reason why we are having this discussion on consumerism and greed is because we have gone overboard and our planet is now endangered. Humanity is endangered and greed has taken over, and we don't know what to do. We are completely stuck. There may be no real answer to the situation until we get more enlightened about this notion of karma—that when we sow certain seeds, they have a result. Perhaps through mindfulness and becoming more conscious of the result or the process that's taking us to this result we can stop. The more consciousness we bring into the situation, the more we defeat the strength that's involved in this destructive planetary karma.

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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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Ven. Guo-yuan Fa Shi is a monk in the Chan Buddhist tradition. He became Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center until October, 2004, when he went back to Taiwan to oversee the newly built Chan Hall.

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