



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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## Thubten Chodron's Presentation Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB,  
Archbishop Felix Machado, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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**Mary Margaret Funk:** Before we continue our dialogue and hear our two presentations, we have a privileged presence of someone in the room. I'm going to ask Father William to introduce him.

**William Skudlarek:** We wanted to give a special welcome and to allow for an opportunity for Monsignor Felix Machado to speak to all of you. He is here as the official representative of the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. Cardinal Arinze is the prefect, the head of that congregation. Monsignor Michael Fitzgerald is the secretary. And in the position of assistant secretary—I'm not sure of the exact title—is Father Felix Machado, whom you already know and from whom you have already heard. But we would like to offer a special welcome to him as the official representative at this assembly and to invite him to address us.

**Felix Machado:** When Jesus entered Jerusalem and the crowd welcomed him with rousing applause, the donkey thought it was all for him. I feel like that donkey. The Catholic Church has made an irreversible commitment to interreligious dialogue. We see this in *Nostra Aetate*, a document that talks about the Church's deep desire to enter into interreligious relationship and dialogue. At the time this document of the Second Vatican Council was published and even before it was ratified by the council fathers in 1964, the then pope, Paul VI, established a secretariat for non-Christian religions. Happily, in 1988 the name was changed from Secretariat to Non-Christians to Pontifical

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#### Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai 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 Gethsemani Encounters

Council for Interreligious Dialogue. I bring here officially the greetings of Cardinal Arinze, who is the president. He is Nigerian, himself born in the family of African traditional religions. He later on converted and, much later, so did his parents. For the last seventeen years, he has been president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. I also bring greetings from Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, an Englishman with an Irish heart. He is involved with Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and, at the same time, the European wing, Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique.

We have tried to follow the work of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue from the beginning, even before it was named. As I said yesterday, I followed Gethsemani I only through the book, and much desired to be here. But there are only twelve people in the council and we cannot always be present, although we would like to. The particular work that is being done for monastic interreligious dialogue, however, is very precious to us. When we talk of dialogue in the Catholic Church, we try to tell people that everyone has a place in promoting interreligious dialogue. Every Catholic can promote interreligious dialogue.

I feel there are four forms of dialogue. First, there is a dialogue of life. My father, who is a simple agriculturist in India, unfortunately had to give up his education after seventh grade, although he very much wanted to pursue his education. He became a cultivator of a little piece of land to raise our family. Nevertheless, I have seen my father every day living a deep dialogue. Indeed, in India we cannot avoid dialogue. Secondly, there is a dialogue of collaboration, collaborating as far as possible with people to make this world a better place to live in. Then there is the dialogue of theological discussion, what people think dialogue is only about. But this is a very small portion of dialogue, I would say, that is meant for university professors—discussion, theology, et cetera. The fourth form of dialogue—dialogue of religious experience—is held in high esteem by the Church. Whenever the meetings of the Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique are held in Europe, and if they are anywhere close by, the participants are always invited by the Pope and the Pope receives them personally. In fact, when Buddhist monastics and Christian monastics have met in their exchange program around Rome, the Pope gave them very personal attention, to

and Nuns in the West. Her books include *Open Heart*, *Clear Mind*; *Buddhism for Beginners*; *Taming the Monkey Mind*; and *Working with Anger*. She is the founder of Sravasti Abbey.

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Chodron**



**Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, 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 . . .*

**All articles by or about  
Sr. Mary Margaret Funk,  
OSB**

encourage them, because he believes that this is the foundation of all dialogue.

I simply wanted to elaborate on this and say that my presence here is to report all the good things I'm seeing here and all the good people I'm meeting, and to share them with people in the Vatican. Our cardinal also sends to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists a greeting on the feast days of these respective religions. Our message is translated into many languages, with a simple wish: "Happy feast." It is a message for doing something together for the good of the world. I take this occasion to personally share this message with you all.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** We can testify to Felix's warm reception when in Rome this last October. On Sundays, he is a parish priest, living in a parish and saying mass. We asked him how he has time with his schedule, and he said, "First of all, I am a priest." It's wonderful for us to know face to face the people that are in dialogue in the Roman Vatican, and they are very interested in what we do. It is my pleasure, now, to go back to our original program and welcome a first-time speaker in our assembly of gatherings, Thubten Chodron. She is a graduate of UCLA, worked as a teacher in Los Angeles city schools, and did graduate work at USC in education.

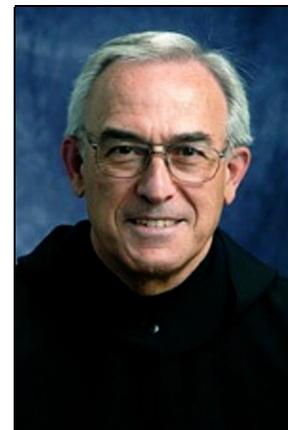
After meeting the Dharma in 1975, she studied the practice of Buddhism under the guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Zopa Rinpoche, and other Tibetan masters for many years in India and in Nepal. She was ordained a Buddhist nun in 1977. She teaches Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and meditation worldwide. She has been a spiritual director to the Istituto Lama Tsong Khapa in Italy, resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore, and resident teacher at the Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. Together with Santikaro Bhikkhu, she is a cofounder of Sravasti Abbey in Liberation Park, an inter-traditional Buddhist monastery that's just beginning near St. Louis, Missouri. In 1990, she was present at His Holiness the Dalai Lama's conference with Jewish practitioners, which was the basis for the book and the documentary, "The Jew in the Lotus." In 2002 she received an award from the World Fellowship of Buddhists for her work in Jewish-Buddhist dialogue. Ven. Chodron was a key organizer for the



**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.

**All articles by or about  
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Machado**



**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

1996 interdenominational conference of Western Buddhist nuns in Bodhgaya, India, and has been instrumental in efforts to reinstate the full ordination lineage for women within the Tibetan tradition. So, how did you get ordained?

**Thubten Chodron:** I took the novice tradition in the Tibetan.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** So she went to the Chinese tradition to be ordained, because as of yet the Tibetan nuns don't have in the lineage ordination; is that correct?

**Thubten Chodron:** They have the novice, but not the full lineage.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** So, women, do we have an interest here or what? Her books include: *Open Heart, Clear Mind: Buddhism for Beginners, Working with Anger, Taming the Monkey Mind, Choosing Simplicity, Transforming the Heart, and Blossoms of the Dharma*. Ven. Chodron emphasizes the practical application of Buddhist teachings in daily life, and is especially skilled in explaining them in ways easily understood and practiced by Westerners.

**Thubten Chodron:** I was asked to speak about the role of consumerism in causing suffering and will focus on consumerism in the spiritual realm, that is, how religious teachers and students alike may be influenced by the consumer mentality.

I want to go through my paper and highlight some of the points and then explain a little bit what I meant. First of all, and here I'm talking about how our American consumer mentality has influenced us as spiritual seekers, lots of students come to Buddhism and want the best product. They want the best religion. They want to jump around, try a little bit of this and that, so that they get the best product. Another factor of consumerism is that we want to be entertained. So the Dharma teacher should definitely entertain the students, because if we are not entertaining enough, they might go somewhere else. As students, we want instant gratification. So whatever religion we learn should bring instant results, and it should work immediately.

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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OSB**

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Another feature of consumerism is that things should be easily available, so we shouldn't have to put forth much effort to get the Dharma teachings. In the ancient traditions, people traveled over the Himalayan Mountains, across the Silk Road, and went through all sorts of hardships to find teachers. But nowadays, as spiritual seekers, we want our teachers to come to us, and we shouldn't have to go through any kind of hardship to get the teachings—nice comfortable room, right temperature, good food, the whole thing. So things should be easily available. We shouldn't have to undergo difficulties. We should also be able to pay as we go. That's another quality of consumerism. Here in the paper I brought up the whole topic of how funds are received and given. In Buddhism, we have the tradition of dana or generosity. Traditionally this means generosity from an open space in our own heart, giving because we want to support things that are going well and to support the good work of others, to remedy poverty etc.

In Buddhist retreats and courses, some people actually charge for the teachings, which is not the way it used to be in olden times. Some people ask for dana, except I'm questioning if dana becomes another way of paying by making it look like we are receiving offerings. Somehow, however, it's presented as if you received a service, a Dharma teaching, so you should pay the teacher. Are we really allowing dana to flow freely, or are we on a subtle or not so subtle level letting people know that they need to give to support us. The whole topic then arises of whether we make our living out of teaching the Dharma, and whether we as teachers decide where to go to teach according to where we get the most generosity. Do we go to the inner city to teach? Do we go to the Third World to teach? Or do we go to the places where we get generosity?

Another consumer quality that characterizes the contemporary student is that we are very self-centered, and so we go into the spiritual domain with a consumer mind: What can I get out of this? I am here to get something. You, as the teacher or the center or the church, should give me what I'm demanding, because this is supply and demand. Students don't come in with a mentality that the temple, monastery, or church is a place where we go to give, but a place where I come to get.

As students, we sometimes get a little perk on the side, which is called status, from our spiritual practice. We want to be close to a teacher, and we get a little bit of status bragging about what teacher has stayed at our house or driven around in our car. We also get some status by getting all the Dharma or Catholic paraphernalia. We all have gift shops, don't we?, where you have all sorts of beautiful statues of Jesus or the Buddha, and all your offering objects. So, as good consumers, especially when we enter the practice, we get all this stuff. Then we feel like we are really religious people, because our altars are full of all the right stuff.

These kinds of things may be in our mind as students. But the consumer mentality also influences the mind of the teacher. This is a little bit embarrassing, but let's face facts: Spiritual events need to be announced. On the one hand, we need to let people know they are happening. But what I find, and here is where I'm ignorant of what's happening in the Christian faith, is that in Buddhist circles, the advertisements for religious events are: "This is the highest teaching, the most exotic teaching, the most realized master who has done this miracle and that miracle. You can't miss this teaching because it's given to a select group of students; and if you pay \$99.99, you will be one of those select group of students." In other words, announcements are made with hype, and dressing up the Dharma and the teacher, is utterly contrary to the image of the spiritual practitioner that I grew up with.

Also, from the side of the teacher, the success of one's course, teaching, or retreat is measured in numbers, because in consumerism we measure success in numbers. How many students came to the retreat? Did you get more students than the other teacher, who was also teaching a retreat the same weekend? Who is more popular? Do I have more students? Are my retreats better attended? How much dana did I receive? Because, after all, we are building a center. We are building this; we are building that. We need funds. So, are the students providing the dana? Was our course a success? Sometimes these courses are given to raise money. We say, "We are raising money for the Dharma, for our monastery, our temple, our whatever. You pay to come to the teachings, and our events are successful if we get a lot of

money to take back for the monastery." Or, sometimes it goes into your own pocket, because if you are a lay teacher, you have to support your family and send your kids to summer camp and all this kind of stuff. Success is measured by numbers.

Also, as teachers, we have to make the Dharma or our religion appealing to the consumer, because if it isn't appealing, then they are going to take their business somewhere else. And we can't have that. We talk a lot about skillful means and adapting things for the mentality of the students, but how much do we water down the Dharma or leave out certain points, or even in the Christian faith water down certain things to make it more appealing so that you get more people coming? Are we really being true to the deep spiritual meanings in which we've been trained, or are we just making things available in a consumerist way to a large number of people so that everybody buys our product? Then there is the whole thing of making a profit and fund-raising, using the teachings to fund-raise to support ourselves and so on.

Now, the question comes, why does this cause suffering? Because that's what I'm supposed to talk about. I think it causes suffering in a couple of ways. One is that it makes our own spiritual traditions degenerate in a number of ways. First of all, we are teaching one thing, and not practicing what we are teaching. Then people say, "What's going on? Do these teachings work? Is this something viable if they are teaching simplicity and nonattachment and humility, but the whole thing is run in a totally different way?" By watering down the teachings, future generations won't get the purity of what we've been trained in. So it's harmful, I think, on the outward side for society for the transmission of our faith to the future, but it's also harmful individually to us as practitioners.

In Buddhism, we talk about the eight worldly concerns. My teacher was famous for talking about this over and over again, because he wouldn't let us off the hook.

These are the four pairs of things that actually preoccupy a lot of our life. First is the pleasure at receiving material things and money. We all like that. And then there is the displeasure over not receiving it, or

having it stolen from us. Then there is feeling happy and pleasurable when people approve of us and praise us. That's a big one. And there is the feeling displeasure when we are blamed and when people don't approve of us or appreciate us. The third pair is feeling pleasure when we have a good image and a good reputation, and the opposite is feeling displeasure when people talk about us behind our backs, our reputation is ruined, we lose our good image. The last pair is pleasure from the senses, seeing beautiful things, beautiful sounds, taste, touch, smells, and displeasure when we encounter physical sense-things that cause us displeasure.

We get attached to the pleasurable experiences and have an aversion to the unpleasurable ones. This is all centered on the mind that grasps onto the happiness of only this life. As religious practitioners, I think the basic foundation of what we are trying to do is go beyond the happiness of just this life. We are trying to reach some kind of liberation, salvation, understanding of deeper truth, or an open heart that extends love and compassion to everybody. We're trying to go beyond my happiness in this life. These eight worldly concerns, of which consumerism feeds into and grows out of, completely destroy our spiritual practice. It looks like spiritual practice on the outside, but the inside motivation is basically the happiness of only this life.

In Buddhism, when we talk about the demarcation line between an action that is a spiritual action and one that is a worldly action—and this can be either physical, verbal, or mental—the defining line is whether it's involved with clinging to the happiness of only this life. I don't know about you, but when I look at my mind, almost every single thought is involved with the happiness of this life. It's actually very difficult, I think, to be a genuine spiritual practitioner, especially when these eight worldly concerns take root and consumerism just flows out of them. They destroy our own practice and then harm the transmission of our teachings to future generations.

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Continued in **Thubten Chodron: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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