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Thubten Chodron: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Jim Funk, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Shohaku Okumura, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Judith Simmer-Brown, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

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

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Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): Sometimes teachers start their teaching with a pure heart, with the right motivation, skillful intention, and with no thought of gaining popularity, wealth, and power. They start out of the one conviction that they want to share the understanding of the Dharma or whatever, without any personal gains. But eventually, because of the person's pure heart, the message becomes very effective and people are drawn to the teacher. The teacher never expects these things, and yet people are drawn to the center. Then the word gets around. People talk about that teacher. And then more and more people come in. At that point, if the teacher becomes infatuated with glory, reputation, gains, and so forth, then that will become an impediment. On the other hand, if the student goes to a teacher and the student gets some clear and genuine benefit to change his or her personality and lifestyle, or overcome certain difficulties and problems, the students will naturally go to that teacher. The students will not look for a famous or learned teacher, but the teacher who can convey the message to the student. These two aspects, of course, are to be kept in mind when we deal with this issue. What you, Thubten Chodron, brought out are genuine things that come

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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... [\[Read full](#)

out of this pure motivation when we start to teach, and the students go to learn.

Judith Simmer-Brown: This is such an important topic, and it seems to me that the implications of what you've said, Thubten, do go beyond merely consumerism and greed in an outer level. It reminds me a lot of one of my group's teacher's—Chogyam Trungpa—early books called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. He talked about three levels of materialism that really seem to lend themselves to this conversation: physical materialism, referring to greed and consumerism and wanting to accumulate goods, money, things like that, and then psychological materialism, which is like charisma and popularity and a kind of emotional magnetism and the advancing of oneself through charisma. But the subtlest level and the most difficult is something that seems to be pointed to by what we are talking about here, which he called spiritual materialism, which is spiritual ambition, and the way in which we have an ego drive for enlightenment for the ego's sake.

It seems to me that we might be able to deal effectively in some way with consumerism, or charisma, and the desire to be loved by our students or whatever, but the spiritual ambition is such a subtle and dangerous one for us. That quality of nakedness in our practice around these issues that Father Thomas was talking about is so important because we keep finding more and more levels of this unfolding for us, more and more things that shock us and come to us in the events of our lives. Without some kind of acknowledgment and exposure of that to ourselves and to each other as contemplatives, it is very easy for the spiritual path to be full of all kind of obstacles that we don't see.

Thomas Keating: Thanks, Judith, for bringing that up. I was wondering if in the Buddhist tradition there is something that corresponds to what in the Christian contemplative heritage is called "the dark night"? This is a passive kind of purification in which, without too much effort of our own except to keep quiet or to quiet the mind or put a stop to the interior dialogue through some practice, we are made vulnerable to the contents of the unconscious. The repressed material that is talked about in depth psychology begins to emerge in the form of painful, primitive emotions or bombardment of thought. St. John of

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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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the Cross describes these stages of purification, and they are much more important than experiences that are not full enlightenment. In other words, the trouble with experiences is that they are partial; whereas the goal that we seem to be aiming at is a permanent state of freedom from the false self or its death or whatever the word might be called.

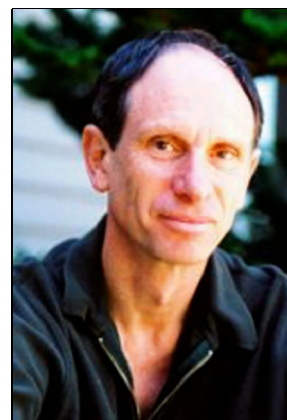
I once was conferring with Trungpa Rinpoche in a little talk that happened to be on videotape, and I raised this question with him. I said, "In the Christian scheme of things, we believe that there is a spiritual suffering that one needs to go through to reach a certain union or especially unity with God. Is there something similar in your tradition?" And he said, "Oh, yes, we have a word for that. We call that old dog spirituality." I was fascinated by that description. The image of an old dog is someone who has been reduced to powerlessness, and all it can do is lie around all day, get up maybe once or twice, wag its tail and lie down again. It's the radical experience of one's own powerlessness or, if you prefer, nothingness—a kind of nothingness within nothingness. It gets deeper and deeper. This is the level to which our practice should bring us. I don't think anybody is interested in paying for that, since it's only a great love of the spiritual journey and Ultimate Reality that can put up with it.

Mary Margaret Funk: I coordinated the first Gethsemani Encounter. We had so many calls from people wanting to come and meet the Dalai Lama. One caller wanted to be healed. I asked the Dalai Lama about this: "Healing?" he said, "if I could do it, I would get rid of my stiff neck."

Heng Sure: In the 1930s a man named Holmes Welch went around monasteries in the 1930s in China and did a very responsible sociological survey of why people left home and became monks. He discovered there were a whole gamut of reasons—and as monastics I'm sure we can respond in all the different traditions. Around fifteen percent of the men and women he met left home in order to escape a broken heart or some personal tragedy. There were orphans, who had no family and wanted to connect; poor people, who had no source of food who came for the regular meals; criminals trying to reinvent

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themselves in a safe space; people escaping military conscription; people who were related to monk brethren, siblings, and those who just fell into it. Then he found about 15 percent who heard the Dharma, and who sought liberation from suffering. I don't know about Catholic orders, but I suspect they both have equally long histories. One of the benefits of the Chinese tradition is that you can look at them; there is enough of a sample to get some patterns, and that's one.

Dharma in the West is so new that it's no surprise that the people who come come looking for a product—because the television is on seven and a half hours a day, and who knows how many consumer messages a day we get bombarded with, and how many images per day are on those messages, all of them generated to set us off balance so we are not complete until we acquire that product? That is very strong conditioning. We have alphabet literacy, but we don't have visual literacy. It's not taught. We are not sophisticated enough to sort out which images are there to put us off balance, to make us needy, and which ones are there for information or edification. We don't have that, and so there is this kind of deeper programming. How do those images speak to the deeper mind? We don't know that yet. We are learning.

I want to piggyback a comment on to this morning's discussion. We have labeled the young people who come to the Berkeley Monastery now, just down the hill from UC Berkeley, or from Santa Cruz or Santa Fe State, "post-despair children." These are children who have never not been in a world without television or atomic bombs. They've only known a succession of wars. They are kids who are largely post-alcohol and post-drugs. The best ones have already been hooked on alcohol and recovered. They were drunk when they were fifteen, and now they are in their twenties and they've recovered, the ones who come ahead. They can't find anything true. The way they sort out where they go is not seeking a product. They are looking for anything that touches that spot. They may be largely inarticulate in describing what they are looking for, but when they hear the Dharma and come to Mercy Center, or come to Catholic retreat centers, they come to hear something true. They are so cynical and despairing, they are post-despair. They are ready for anything that just hits the spot, because there has been no nutrition there. That's another generation that is culturally specific.



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These are kids who are through the marketplace. They know that money doesn't buy it. They can't buy what they are looking for through their credit card or their father's. They are looking for something that hits the spot and sounds true, something to believe in.

Chuen Phangcham: In terms of the balance that will be good for both Catholic and Buddhist practice, one word. The Dharma that we share with the young students or the new learners, as our brother from the Chinese tradition [Heng Sure] mentioned, is new to the West. The Dharma has no cost. We need to balance both physical and spiritual health, balance between physical and spiritual practice and physical and spiritual consumption. The Buddha did emphasize mostly spiritual balance, and the mind is primary, since it is the forerunner of all actions. Eastern Buddhist practice and culture is growing in the West, and more and more of our friends are learning about how to share, be generous to the teacher and the community, and to help the community run in other ways. So think about balance.

Blanche Hartman: I think this very problem is why Suzuki Roshi again and again said, "No gaining idea." Of course, it didn't start with him. Dogen Zenji said, "No gaining idea. We sit for the sake of sitting." If we are Buddha from the beginning, why do we sit? Well, because that's what Buddhas do. It's not to get something. That was almost a mantra. I think we also should keep in mind that we are not practicing to get something we don't already have. We are already complete. There is nothing to get from outside. What our effort is is to find in ourselves that basic goodness that is our birthright, and not to get it from someone else. It certainly can't be bought.

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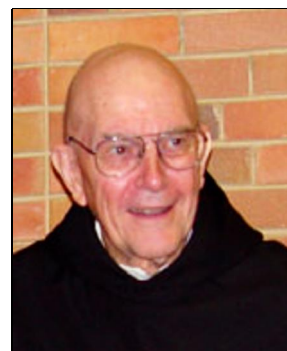
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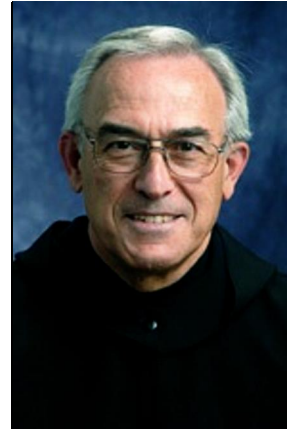
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