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## Geshe Lobsang Tenzin's Presentation Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin

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

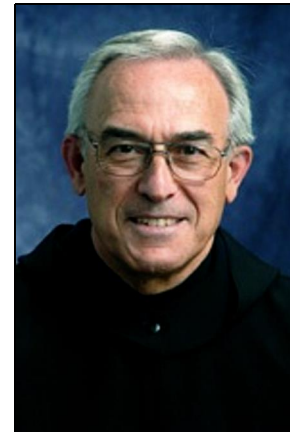
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**William Skudlarek:** The topic that we will address today is that of suffering caused by violence, both personal and structural. Once again, the Psalms were there to speak to us today without, as far as I know, any particular planning that the question of violence would be dealt with. Psalm 72 was prayed for morning prayer: "How good God is to Israel, to those who are pure at heart. Yet my feet came close to stumbling. My steps had almost slipped. For I was filled with the envy of the proud when I saw how the wicked prosper. They wear their pride like a necklace. They clothe themselves with violence. Their hearts overflow with malice. Their minds seethe with plots." The psalmist goes on to describe the presence and the prosperity of the violent in the world and begins to think how useless it is to keep his heart pure and wash his hands in innocence when he is stricken all day long and suffers punishment day after day. So he struggles with the question of how to respond to violence that causes so much suffering to so many, and yet seems to bring prosperity to those who perpetrate it. That was there in our prayer for today.

The monk who led the intercessions remembered that violence was the theme of our discussion today and asked us to pray for all the victims of violence. At the Eucharist we heard the account of the violent murder of Stephen [Acts, the first of the followers of Jesus, who was stoned because of his profession of faith in Christ and his denunciation of those who used religion to subdue rather than to show compassion to others. That account in the Acts of the Apostles is so moving because the author of Acts notes that not everyone threw stones.

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**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.

There was also one there at whose feet [Saul] they laid their cloaks, and who in that way, as a bystander, was complicit in the violence of those who actually threw stones [Acts]. That is the reality that we will be reflecting on and speaking to today. My hope is that we will in some specific and concrete ways be able to speak of a specific monastic way of responding to violence—how the monastic-flavored Buddhist and Christian ways of life respond to violence and the victims of violence in our world.

I remember an incident that happened in the early 1970s. I was in graduate school at the time. I was a chaplain to undergraduates—this was at Princeton—and knew some of the undergraduate students quite well. Three of them on their drive across the country to their home in California stopped at my monastery in Collegeville to visit and, I think, get a free night's lodging. On the morning of their departure, I took them to see one of our old monks (I think he was in his 90s at that time), Father Herbert. We went into his room and as small talk I said, "Father Herbert, these days must be rather long for you, aren't they?" "Oh, no, no," he said. "I'm writing a book." "Really," I said. "Father Herbert, what is the book you are writing?" "Well," he says, "I'm writing a book to help young people with their problems today, drawing on the wisdom of well-tried authors and my own experience. I want to help young people today deal with their problems."

This was in the early 1970s. There were protests over the Vietnam War. It was the height of the drug culture. There was unrest in all places. And I don't know if Father Herbert ever finished that book. I'm pretty sure it was never published; I don't remember ever seeing it. But in a sense I think that's what we have a chance to do. We have a chance to write that book. As some have pointed out, one of the original ideas was that this conference would be specifically one to which young people would be invited so we could share with them some of the wisdom of our monastic traditions. That direction, I think, is in some way where we need to move today—to speak also of the violence that is caused by greed and consumerism, and, again, how the monastic tradition speaks to the suffering caused by that violence—perhaps the monastic tradition thought of almost archetypically, the monastic that is at the heart of every human being, the way of life that

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we profess and try to practice.

We also, I think, need to be quite open and frank in speaking about how we have been unfaithful to what is best in our tradition; how we have perhaps passively or even actively contributed to the violence that causes untold suffering in our world; how we have been that Saul who stands off to the side, watching over the cloaks of those who are casting the stones. It would be well if we could raise up those prophetic voices that we need to hear. We are not the only prophets in this world, and oftentimes our prophetic voice is muted. But there are prophets, prophets who speak fearlessly in denouncing violence and speak with their lives to call a halt to the violence and the suffering caused by violence in our world. We also need, I think, to speak about those from whom we need to ask forgiveness.

Before I introduce the next speaker, I would like to tell a little anecdote. On one occasion when I was living in Japan, I was asked to minister at a wedding in our church in Tokyo. Before the wedding, the groom came to me with another person I hadn't seen before and was trying to explain to me that the person who was to be the best man at this wedding wasn't able to make it because of a traffic jam. I understood from him that the streets were filled and they couldn't get through. But I didn't understand in Japanese the word for substitute. He was asking if this person he was bringing could be a substitute best man at the wedding. I couldn't get it. I didn't know exactly what he was trying to ask. Finally, the person who was with him said, "Pinch hitter."

When we learned that because of his illness the Dalai Lama was not able to be with us today, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin graciously and generously agreed to be the pinch hitter. Geshe Lobsang Tenzin was born in a small Himalayan Valley of Kinnaur in 1960 and received both his novice and full ordinations from His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he was fourteen and then when he was twenty-two. He got his initial training at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala. In 1984, he joined Drepung Loseling Monastery and received his Geshe Lharampa degree in 1994. Prior to that, in 1991, he had moved to Atlanta to establish and oversee the development of the Drepung

Loseling Institute and also to pursue further studies in the West at Emory University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1999. Currently, he teaches at Emory University, and he directs the overseas activities of Drepung Loseling Institute.

**Geshe Lobsang Tenzin:** Violence is a major problem that affects our society at the present. Of course, we have experienced violence throughout history, but this is a time when we are experiencing many unforeseen kinds of problems, such as violence in high schools, on an international level in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, and in the United States itself. As we monastics look at how to face the problem, the problem seems too large and our responses too personal for problems on such a large scale. But I think that at this time, when the problems seem so large, what we have to do is to reach into our own spiritual traditions and see how they provide ways to cope with the problems. To bring about social change or a resolution to these bigger problems, we need to begin looking at the individual level also.

I come from the Buddhist tradition, and I would like to offer some insights the Buddha and his followers proposed. In Buddhism, violence is seen as a response to our inability to forgive or accept difficulties. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that, "Violence means any action that is motivated by hatred." In fact, as Father William mentioned, when we look at violence, whether it's simply hatred or is contributed by our greed, jealousy, and so forth, there are many factors that contribute to our distorted actions and compel us to engage in harmful actions. I think at the root of the violence is what is His Holiness pointed to, hatred. Violence is an expression of hatred or anger.

Buddhists' look at any action, whether violent or anything else, from different perspectives. This is known as abhidharma, a category that says that for any action to be complete there need to be many factors present. For any unwholesome action, for example, there are many factors: the basis for the action, the motivation, the actual execution, and the emotion behind that motivation. The harmful action could be primarily based on hatred, but also hatred can be built on greed and our own desires and so forth.

The question that stems out of this analysis is how nonviolence can be adopted, promoted, and integrated into one's personal life. To answer that, I would like to take the approach that His Holiness the Dalai Lama usually presents, presenting the issues in a way that involves understanding the causes. In other words, although we may see violence as the expression of hatred etc, we have to look at hatred as coming from our perceptions about the situation we find ourselves in.

Yesterday, Venerable Thubten Chodron mentioned the eight worldly concerns of the bodhisattva Shantideva. To Shantideva, the primary cause of hatred or anger was a mental unrest that arises from a perceived obstruction to what we desire and a perceived access to something that we want to avoid. What this means is that anybody who is perceived as creating an obstacle for our own pleasure, fame, reputation, or wealth, gives us a certain kind of mental unrest. This Shantideva names the mental unrest that arises from those perceived obstacles for what we desire.

This mental unrest doesn't just remain limited to me, but it expands to my family, friends, teacher, religion, or country. It becomes bigger and hard to draw a line of where it ends. Some of the expressions of violence we are seeing now—the wars in the name of the nations and religion—are caused by the perception that somebody else is obstructing or causing harm to what is mine or to me. In that respect, violence as an expression of hatred has to be dealt with primarily on easing the presence of such perceived obstacles, and facilitating the presence of our desired goals. For that reason, the proper understanding is important. That is why His Holiness the Dalai Lama says the Buddhist's view is that of dependent origination, and its conduct is nonviolence. Nonviolence is a logical outcome of the proper understanding of dependent arising as the nature of reality.

Let me say a little bit how the dependent arising can help in overcoming our own personal or communal structural violence. Dependent arising from the Buddhist point of view has to be understood again on various levels. One level has to do with causal dependence. That is to say that every condition that comes to being depends on cause and conditions. That being the case, when we face

difficulties and obstacles, we tend first to turn outwards to judge who else is causing us problems. However, if we look at our own actions, the way we are conditioned with various unhealthy attitudes and actions, caused by our own five psychophysical aggregates, upon which we designate ourselves as a self, how can we blame others? We have to assume a certain responsibility for ourselves also.

Dependent arising also has to be understood in a larger context—that everything depends on different factors. Ultimately, it's a way to give rise to the sense of dependence upon other beings as well. That understanding of dependence upon others gives rise to a sense of compassion. Compassion is the real antidote, I think. If on a personal level and as a community we can cultivate and promote compassion, a sense of connectedness and affection, there will be hope for reducing the violence. Otherwise meeting violence through violence is simply going to continue the cycle of violence, and we will end with no solutions, but continuing conflicts and violence.

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Continued in **Geshe Lobsang Tenzin: Discussion  
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