



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Fr. Dan Ward: Discussion

Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Sr. Mary Collins, OSB, Sangeetha Ekambaram, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Paul Gailey, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, Eric Marcoux, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Sopa, Ajahn Sundara, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Fr. Dan Ward, OSB, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB

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

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Geshe Sopa: So many people have problems with sexuality and the monastic life. We all have bodily organs that dominate the body and experience pleasure that can dominate the mind. It will happen. Shame is a very useful way to prevent sexual misconduct, but sometimes it is not enough. Awareness is necessary.

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): We started with violence and ended up with sexism. With regard to the ordination of nuns, I have a great deal of consideration. I, myself, have ordained several women, and one of them even received high ordination according to the Chinese tradition. I myself participated in one high ordination ceremony in Taiwan where Theravada nuns and novices received high ordination from the Chinese tradition, and then went back to their own countries, especially Sri Lanka, and received another high ordination from monks. The question is whether it is legitimate. Should it be accepted? Some Theravada countries do not accept it because they think that, as our sister bhikkuni suggested, it has died long ago. But there is no any stipulation in the vinaya that once the order is dead it should not be

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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

revived. There is no stipulation. It is just the male dominating bhikkhu sanghas that uphold the view that it should not be revived.

Rules are there to govern institutions and organizations. From time to time rules and regulations have to be changed. Rules have to be broken; otherwise they will break us. There has to be some understanding among Buddhist communities to accept the fact that this thing should be changed. This issue is one aspect of crime and violence, because of the abuse of power and authority. When people in authority abuse their power, then those who have been victimized get frustrated, and they find a way to express their frustration through violence. This happens at homes and in monasteries. Those who enter the monastery are born and brought up in families, and families are the nurseries of violence. Parents and other adults inculcate violence in children's minds.

It is in the family that parents discriminate between boys and girls. They pay more attention to boys than girls, and from there, everything goes in one direction. Girls are ignored, belittled, looked down upon, and boys are given high esteem and respect. It is boys who inherit parents' names and property, etc. It goes down to the base of our families. Therefore, crime and violence are not things started in monasteries or temples. It is like when you copy something from one or two books and don't acknowledge it, it's called plagiarism. If you copy from many books, that is called research. Similarly, when individuals commit something unacceptable, it is called a crime. When organizations plan well ahead to commit crimes, it is justified by law. For instance, I heard from somebody yesterday that our policymakers are now planning for another war in fifteen years ahead. How can you stop violence? The people in policy-making decisions are the ones who try to promote violence in organized way, and they seek legal advice. They seek authority, the support of the public. They prepare people through mass media for a war. Then we are in a helpless situation because this cycle goes on and on.

Such abuse is not limited to sex. It is everywhere in every part of the world, especially coming from high authority. We cannot stop that abuse from the bottom. We have to stop it from the top. So it is very

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Sangeetha Ekambaram was a religious studies major at Emory University in Atlanta at the time of the 2002 Gethsemani Abbey.

**All articles by or about
Sangeetha Ekambaram**

difficult question, a mammoth, endless problem. We are having a dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. I don't think Buddhists and Christians have that much conflict or violence. We never fight. We all live peacefully, and this dialogue is just to continue our peaceful coexistence. But we have to have a real dialogue with people, organizations, and institutes that promote and cause violence, and have brought all kinds of violent activities to fruit in the past and promise to do so in the future. You know who they are. We have to have dialogues with them.

Paul Gailey: In your talk, Father Dan, you mentioned the expression "hardness of heart" at one point. As I've listened to the conversation, we've talked about organizations and structures and how those are often abused, all the problems that occur within those settings, and how we all have these basic desires and fears that we operate from. I think the organizations often give us this very subtle way of hardening our heart and closing our eyes to the things that are happening. My question would be, both to the Christian and the Buddhist communities, What are the techniques for loosening that hardness of the heart?

In my understanding of Christianity, it's listening to the Holy Spirit. In Buddhism it would be something around awareness. I'd like to hear more about that because in addition to dealing directly with the groups who are perpetrating violence and so forth, I think that if we do this within our own organizations, it will affect the whole society. The work that we can do out in the world in other ways is important; but the work that we can do where we are I think will make a difference.

Geshe Lobsang Tenzin: The question about the full ordination of nuns is very much rooted in the cultural ideas about men and women. There is no justification, from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective not to have full ordination for nuns. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has certainly recognized that and has taken the initiative to have the monastic elders discuss and find ways that on the one hand the tradition is firmly maintained through the proper lineage but, on the other, that there are other traditions, like the Chinese tradition, where there are fully ordained nuns etc. I don't know about the lineage part, but monastic decisions are made collectively. The old culture is hard to change, but



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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

this is something we need to change sooner or later. In this day and age we have to talk about harmony, equality, and so forth, This is one aspect that needs to be really addressed within Tibetan tradition.

Norman Fischer: I predict that in our lifetime—probably in America—we’ll have a big event to ordain women in many traditions. Many people will come, and it will be an event to release tremendous energy and joy. What I realize today in our discussion that ties this together is that Catholic sisters and brothers will come to that Buddhist ordination, and that will also be an important event for the Church. You are all invited. I’m offering the Zen Center for this event, even though I’m not abbot anymore. I was jealous when I listened to Ajahn Amaro and others speaking last night about massive Buddhist events in Asia, which I never attended. I thought, “Darn, I missed out on all of that.” But we’ll have a better one in America on this occasion, with more people, and I want to live long enough to be there. So, let’s do that.

Blanche Hartman: Within the Buddhist tradition, these questions of patriarchy and some elements of what you describe as clerical culture—just the boys hanging together—come up. One incident happened in a friendly conversation with some fellow Buddhist monks about a very elderly, respected Japanese roshi, who is also known for his objectification of women; that is he seems to appreciate women in his community not so much for their spiritual practice as for their sex. He is now about 95. I said something like, “Yes, and he is still inappropriate in his relationship with women.” One of the men said jocularly, and they all joined in jocularly, “Well, you know, at a certain point it becomes a question more of admiration than approbation.” And I said, “I think that depends on your gender.”

This was a joke for the men in the conversation. It was a humiliation for the women in the conversation. It shows a deep lack of understanding of what it is like for a woman to have their teacher pinch their bottom. Now some of these women come to me to tell me how it was for them. As someone said, we can’t have this “Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, boys will be boys” mentality. It’s not okay. It’s just not okay. On the other hand, as Geshe Sopa says, it will happen. The other thing I wanted to say from this morning’s conversation is that at one

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point I was at a gathering at Green Gulch at Zen Center, and Robert Thurman said, "A Buddha is someone who feels all of the suffering of all of the beings all of the time." I thought, "Oh, my, I don't want to be a Buddha."

Kevin Hunt: I'd like to address the abuse of power as the abuse of power. I have to give a little bit of my background. I've been in the monastery about forty-eight years now, and the first twenty-five of those I was a lay brother. For those who don't know the distinction within the Christian monastic community, in those days you had clerics or choir monks, and you had lay brothers. The lay brothers were traditionally considered or described as the servants of the monastery. We did the basic manual labor. During those years, I found (and still find because I'm not a teacher or somebody in authority in my community) that I was able to identify with my situation when a black man told me, "You know, you are the nonexistent person in a community." He was talking about the social community. For him, people looked around and automatically their eyes jumped over him.

This is not to say that that situation exists because you are a lay brother or a black person. But it does exist I think in every community in every social reality. We tend to call them the marginalized. How are we going to confront the issue of those who exist in our communities who are nonexistent—whether it's because they are gay, or they are lay brothers, or because of their race, their lack of education, or their type of education? The abuse of power I think is something that has to be confronted in society as a whole, but most especially in our monastic communities, because people are so defenseless when it occurs. When you are a teacher and somebody comes to you, their heart is completely open. And what happens when you stomp on it?

Sangeetha Ekambaram: This a word of hope. Because religion and culture are intertwined, you can work from the top and the bottom to transform gender constructs. I studied a little about a group of women in Thailand, who, because women aren't allowed to be fully ordained in the Theravada tradition in Thailand, are essentially still concerned lay women. However, they've renounced their lives in the household, and they wear white robes, which distinguishes them from ordained monks,



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who wear yellow. Just by being out there, they are starting to transform the conceptions of the community toward them. Perhaps a few years ago lay people wouldn't have donated to them, but now they are starting to just because these women are out there. I think that the basic psychological transformation of gender ideologies within a community can help break down structures.

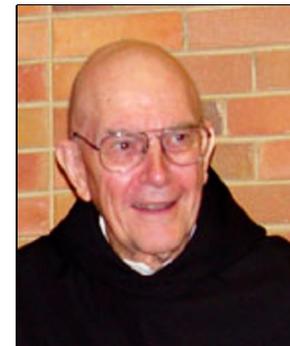
Eric Marcoux: I'd like to return to the question of methodology, of softening or opening the heart. There is a principle that the Dalai Lama frequently enunciates, which is, "All beings wish to be happy. All beings wish to avoid suffering." It's a lovely abstract principle. I'd like to quickly show it has worked in my own life. I know in many religious houses there is an emphasis on celebrating diversity. It's lovely rhetoric. The other day I was sitting under the Gingko tree in the south garden, and I thought: How in the hell do you do it? How do I celebrate if my abbot says, "Brother, we have two new members. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have joined our community." I watched what went on in my heart, and it took me back five years ago, when sitting at home, I looked at the television and that oleaginous smile of Jerry Falwell came on.

Notice the way I said it. There is a judgment, a cruelty. You could hear that in my voice, and I was embarrassed by it. I then said: "What's under this?" Sheer terror. When we are frightened, we retaliate. If we are good Buddhists, we retaliate subtly. Here is for me the methodology I used, which is straight from my tradition. Mindfulness is the basis for facilitating this. I recognize my anger, and underneath it the terror. (It happens that fast now.) I recognize simultaneously arising from me—my Christian brethren from your Christ nature, my Buddhist brethren from our Buddha nature—a simultaneous arising of a willingness to not love that person, but to recognize that they don't want to be hurt and do want to be happy. That I can find in myself. The only effort required is to find it. I don't have to create it. But I do have to make that effort, and now it comes spontaneously. Disagreement about politics and views of sexual orientation become secondary. I can look in both of Reverends Robertson and Falwell's eyes as they enter into my imaginary community and say: "Damn it, I really do want them to be happy. I really do not want them to suffer."



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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

Dan Ward: First, I just want to thank you for open and honest discussion. What it reveals is that whether we are Buddhists or Christians, whichever tradition we belong to, we still stand in the world with the same problems. The question that comes to us then is, How do we devictimize ourselves so we are no longer part of the cycle of victimization? It seems to me that interreligious dialogue is not merely sharing our ways or traditions with each other, but it's also about coming together and working together to liberate. Both the Christians and the Buddhists in this room—whether we are from the United States or now live here—have the added problem of having to deal with our American ways and with cultures from other countries. That also is a point of unity we can share and work together for our traditions.

As Paul asks, "How do you not harden your heart?" I've always regretted at my own community and in many monastic communities that they've dropped what St. Benedict says is the first psalm that you hear each morning, which is Psalm 95. He wanted that psalm to be heard, because it follows from the first sentence of the Rule, "Today, listen to his voice and harden not your heart." Benedict wanted it to be that, each day, you reminded yourself to listen to the voice and not harden your heart. That's what we have to take again to ourselves so that we stop being part of the victimization and become part of the liberalization.

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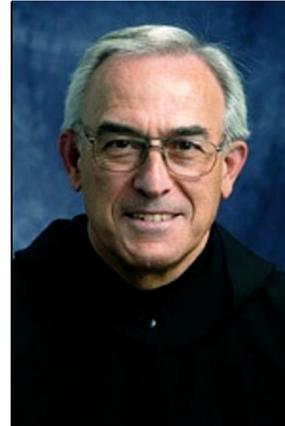


Fr. Leo Lefebure is the Matteo Ricci, SJ, Professor of Theology at Georgetown University. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and also of the new Center for Religious Understanding, Acceptance, and Tolerance. He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors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

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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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Ajahn Sundara is a Theravada Buddhist nun who was ordained in England in 1979 in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajan Chah. She was a participant in Gethsemani Encounter II in 2002.

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Ajahn Sundara**

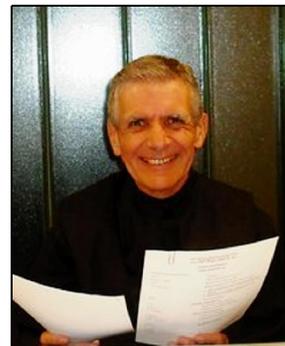
Geshe Lobsang Tenzin holds a Geshe Lharam degree from Drepung Loseling Monastery in India, and a Ph.D. from Emory University in the U.S. He is the founder and director of Drepung Loseling Institute.

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