



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

Sponsored by North American Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries of Men and Women

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## Sr. Mary Collins: Discussion Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Fr. Bruce Baker, O. Carm, Sr. Mary Collins, OSB, Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO, Prof. Donald Mitchell, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Judith Simmer-Brown, Geshe Sopa, Ajahn Sundara, Ven. Samu Sunim, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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### Dialogue after Sr. Mary Collins's Presentation

**Bruce Baker:** I was very glad to hear that in your dialogues there has been some focus on teenagers. For a good number of years I worked with troubled kids and had about sixty I was responsible for. The interesting dynamic with these kids was that society had given up on them, but they hadn't given up on society. To respond to what Sister Mary Collins said, they also had adopted their own philosophy, which was that even if nobody else loved them, God did. They insisted that before we circle up for group or whatever, prayer was a part of their healing process. One of the most interesting things that happened during the time I worked with these kids, talking about ecological violence and so forth, was when Earth Day first started becoming strong. The kids came to me and said, "We want to do something." I said, "Fine. What is it you want to do?" They said, "We want to plant flowers." I said, "Okay. You arrange it. You fix it. You organize it." The kids put together a car wash over a weekend and managed to get together a couple of hundred dollars and spent the entire amount on flowers.

After the flowers were planted, the mayor was invited. It was beautiful what the kids did. They planted them themselves, and were a muddy mess by the time they got finished. The very next day the same mayor

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**Sr. Mary Collins, OSB,** is a liturgist and former prioress at Mt. Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas.

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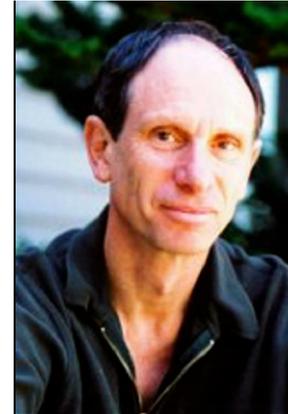
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ordered the city workers to mow the flowers because people were slowing traffic, enjoying the view. These kids had adopted their own council, and had a president, a fifteen-year-old. The fifteen-year-old had been in nine foster homes before he was eight, and the strides that this young man had made were remarkable. I had not caught wind that this had happened until my phone started ringing off the hook, and I got a call from the fifteen-year-old, saying, "Oh, by the way, has your phone been ringing?" He proceeded to tell me what happened. The kids called an emergency meeting and said, "We want to plant more flowers." I said, "Fine. How are you going to do it?" They said, "We are going to collect soda bottles, anything that we can redeem for cash."

They had also gotten their foster parents or biological parents to promise to match whatever they had put together. So they came up with about \$100. They went back to the same spot with flowers and replanted them. What they also did was get a life-size poster of the mayor, and had it headed over the top of it, "He okayed it two days ago and mowed it the next day," and it stood there challenging the bureaucracy: "We are doing something beautiful. Don't destroy it." My point is: in your dialogues with kids, listen to them, because they have much to say.

**Kathy Lyzotte:** I think the Cistercians and the Benedictines have a lot more in common than was suggested. We could have a dialogue on that, too. My thought was about an awakening of conscience. After September 11, it's my perception that there has been something happening on a large scale, especially in the United States, of an awakening of conscience on many levels. It has rippled through many levels of our society. The Enron and the campaign finance scandals are also happening at the same time. The clergy problems have been going on for fifteen years, but it's only right now that there is a demand for it to stop, that somebody has to be responsible, and that it cannot go on. There is a greater urgency than ever before on these issues. As I see it, there is an awakening of conscience. Victor Frankl says that conscience comes from the same part of our being as love and art—it's a creative part of our inner work. An awakening of conscience is an important part of the traditional Catholic background, when we were taught to examine our conscience and take it seriously.

**Thomas Ryan:** Thank you, Mary, for describing community life as a



**Joseph Goldstein** is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

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**Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.)** is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

skillful means. I suspect that our experience in both Christianity and Buddhism is much closer to what you have explicitly recognized as the experience of your community—namely, muddling through without the skillful means. I've been a participant in different conversations in the last couple of days, one of them being between Buddhists observing the difficulty in providing skillful means to the first generation of new Buddhists in communities, monasteries and in the American context. Thomas Keating this morning pointed out that to look at the schedule of Roman Catholic monastic communities is to observe that it would seem that contemplation is not taken all that seriously. When is one to do it? When is there any time simply to come to rest in God between all the singing and the work and other common life practices? I certainly observe in my own community a lack of skillful means.

The second observation is that life seems to provide us with skillful means to polish and grind and make us diamonds with facets that sparkle in spite of our privation from certain traditional skillful means. My observation with celibacy vis-a-vis family life is that family life is a more radical asceticism for true holiness, because my understanding of the universal Christian vocation is availability for service in love. When I see parents raising a family of children, what I see is a more radical availability for service and love on the part of parents to the children than anything I've ever been called to live as a member of a religious community. I recognize family life, and its adjunct in the religious community experience of community life, as precisely the skillful means that in the life requires, even when other more traditional skillful means seem not as much in evidence as we would like them to be.

**Don Mitchell:** I've been having to process our dialogue as an editor, so I haven't had time to really think about saying much. One thing that did come to mind is that, in 1987 or 1988, I was asked to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Bloomington to convey some information to him. In the process I talked about various activities within the church for various projects and so on. He listened very carefully, attentively, and politely. But as I was talking, I wasn't quite sure how interested he was. I then talked about some youth activities that were going on and some elements of character formation, such as Kathy was talking about. He became quite excited and animated, and he said, "This is very important." He asked a number of questions about what was going on, and he was especially interested as to whether we were

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**Professor Donald Mitchell** teaches at Purdue University. He is the co-editor (with James Wiseman) of *The Gethsemani Encounter: A*

teaching doctrine, or if we were teaching values. In this case, it was mainly value education, and working with young children and families in lay communities.

"This is very, very important," he said, "because in the future the children are going to do unthinkable things in terms of violence." He said a few more things about it, and I listened to him, and I thought, "Well, this may be the Dalai Lama, but I think he is crazy." I couldn't think of children killing children and whatever.

We finished our conversation, and I stored the experience in my memory. Then, all of a sudden, there was [the massacre of schoolchildren by other schoolchildren at] Columbine [High School, in Colorado] and other events, and I thought back to that conversation. It was not too long after that that we began planning Gethsemani II. Columbine was in our minds because it was on the front page of the newspapers some years ago. One of the things we thought about was, What can monastics, Buddhists and Christians, do to put into the hands of people in community and families certain skillful means, not so much to teach doctrine, but to pass on values? One of the points that His Holiness made to me is that the values that are typically passed on are not going to be passed on. That's what we are seeing today. So, what can we do? What kind of advice can we give? There is a chance for us to examine our own consciences and what we aren't doing. What are the avenues in the lay communities outside of the monasteries that we can take to try to convey something that is missing more and more from family life and the education of children? That was one of the reasons we thought that if His Holiness was here, we could go to a kind of a youth meeting in Louisville and present some of these things in that context. It didn't work out in the end. What Kathy was mentioning is very important in terms of how this spiritual life can be conveyed beyond the monastic walls into families and communities.

**Heng Sure:** If I could offer a definition from one Buddhist tradition of skill and means. This might be helpful to think about how the Chinese Mahayana tradition uses this term. The Sanskrit word is upaya; the Chinese word is fung bien. The Chinese say that that skillful means is a function of wisdom. Wisdom is the substance, but upaya or skill in means is the application of that. Yet wisdom doesn't move until there is a provocation. The Chinese say that the analogy is like a mirror. When

*Dialogue on the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1996) and *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Doubleday, 2003). He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID.

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**Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. Thomas Ryan** resides at the North American Paulist Center in Washington DC, and works for Christian unity and interfaith relations through a variety of formats: interreligious dialogue, retreats, on-line courses, graduate instruction, workshops, etc. He has served on MID's Board of Advisors.

**All articles by or about Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP**

there is nothing going on, the mirror is still. But as soon as something arises, the reflection is perfect in the great, perfect mirror—wisdom. Skill and means, therefore, are always tuned to the person, to the place, and to the time. One means might be perfectly inapplicable at a different time or for a different person or place.

Joseph Goldstein was talking about this complete collision between two worldviews of the Dharma. Yet from the Buddhist point of view, two different sick patients get two different medicines. If you have a bleeding toe, you don't take an aspirin. If you have a headache, you don't put a bandage on it. The skill and means come as appropriate medicine for the ill. Likewise, there is no set upaya. What might work in the abbey or in your priory might be absolutely perfect and yet be brand-new because the wisdom in the mirror reflects that that's the medicine we need to solve the problem. There is another list, called the 84,000 Dharma doors, and those are methods of practice. All you could say by definition are upaya. And any one of those 84,000 Dharma doors could be appropriate for this person, and it still could be number one. So there is no competition across that variety of practices.

**Judith Simmer-Brown:** It seems, in thinking about the things that have been said, particularly about young people and about the issue of values, I was haunted by Mary's quote, "Never turn away from someone who needs your love," because it seems to me that young people especially need our love. One question is how we teach values. I think that we could really misunderstand this challenge and do it in a very unskillful way. As a mother of young teenagers and a teacher of undergraduates and graduates, who spends hours each week talking to kids from eleven years old to twenty-five, what I hear from many of them is that they just want someone there. The most powerful way I know how to teach values is to listen and help young people come to know who they are, especially through meditation practice.

I think that any kind of laid-on value is not going to work. We know that about young people. We know that about ourselves. No one can tell us values, but they have to be discovered in a practice setting. What I see in the many students who come to Naropa is that they want a spiritual practice and a spiritual life. They want to find some kind of inner meaning. I can't tell them values, but I can show them tools to discover an inner life and to find meaning in themselves. The teenagers



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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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want the same thing. My son just finished sitting a meditation weekend—his third—sitting eight hours a day (he is fourteen years old), for two days this weekend between weeks of high school. He is part of a small community of teenagers in our community who are sitting. He says, “When you are a freshman in high school, you really need support.” This is how he is finding that. One very direct contribution the monastic community has to make to the parentless teenagers of our world—those who may be given money but aren’t given time and attention by their parents—is to support them in some way to discover themselves through meditation and prayer.

**Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.):** I’m very much interested in this topic. I am also head of a meditation center. Normally, meditation centers draw all kinds of people, particularly people with troubles or difficulties. We don’t have a paid staff to work with them. All our workers are volunteers. Working with volunteers and troubled people is a yeoman’s task, very difficult. We learn all sorts of ways of dealing with people in a very friendly way. The first thing, as Judith mentioned, is that we have to listen to them patiently and teach them how to be patient. Being patient doesn’t mean that you let others walk all over you. Being patient means buying time to say the right thing at the right time with right words with right attitude. If you use any of these things incorrectly, you will misinterpret patients and people will be misguided.

We also have to learn to listen to them—sometimes to agree and sometimes to agree to disagree. We always don’t expect them to agree with what we are going to say or what we tell them. We don’t expect them to accept whatever we tell them. There are situations where we have to listen; and if we don’t agree, we tell them that we don’t agree. If they don’t agree with us, they have to say that they don’t agree with us. We both have to learn to agree to disagree. That situation applies not only between individuals but between societies, organizations, religions, ideas, views, and so forth. This means that we learn to respect each other’s cherished and valued opinions, ideas, and beliefs. For harmonious existence between two people, two families, or two societies, we always have to learn to respect each other’s opinion, feelings, ideas, and so on. With this approach I try to help my community and people who come to seek help from us.

**Mark Delery:** As I’ve been sitting here listening for three days now, it



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**Ven. Samu Sunim** is the spiritual director and head of the Zen Buddhist Temple in Ann Arbor and the Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

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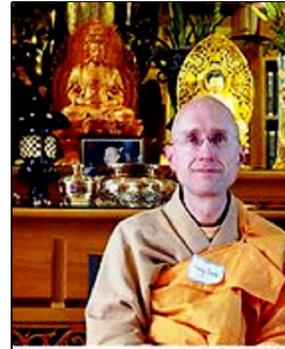
suddenly occurred to me, especially with Sister Mary Collins's talk and Donald Mitchell's contribution, that we are hurting. Thomas Keating mentioned it the other day in terms of monasteries. A few weeks ago, a friend of mine was at a baptism, and the priest very beautifully said, "I've often wondered why Christ insisted on us becoming like little children." He said, "I think I have the answer. Little children cry when they need help." A novice master had just finished a six-monthly meeting with so-called Generation X from Washington, D.C., and at the end of that meeting, he asked their advice. The only advice the young people could give him was based on what they knew about themselves and Generation X. Young people today are not ready for monastic life. They have very little religious training. The culture is not adequate. Trying to put this a little bit together, I don't have any real answers. Monks and nuns, especially in monasticism and contemplative communities are worried, and they need your help. The values that Don speaks of, we cannot give. Only the family can give them. If the media gets that message from us and lets the families know we are hurting, worried, and afraid of what's going to happen not only to our monasteries but our country, that could be part of our message. But it's not the complete one.

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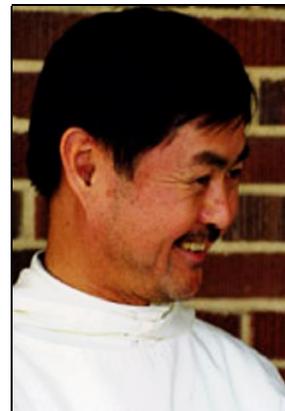
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#### **Ven. Samu Sunim**



**Reverend Heng Sure** has been an ordained Buddhist monk in the Chan lineage of China since 1976. He is the director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery.

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