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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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Ajahn Sundara: As I was listening to you, Sister Mary, what you said resonated with some of my experience, both personal and in community, even though our nuns don't have a very long tradition. We actually started existing about twenty years ago in this form. You mentioned the experience of space. We don't have a lot of space, and I think space is a commodity that gives nothing, is good for nothing, and doesn't mean anything for most people. In my experience, it's not even valued. The monastery, we all know, is the busiest place in the world. Everybody thinks contemplative monasteries are quiet and peaceful, and we all sit on cushions, spaced out. But I think I've never been so busy in the monastic life. In fact, some people say, "I'm going home to have a quiet time." Even in the contemplative situation, this quality of space is not really respected or at least appreciated.

It's very important to me, certainly. I came to the point where I couldn't stand anything that had to do with my tradition. I couldn't stand anything that had to do with my community. If I hadn't had that space, which was given to me by the community, to lie down, as Father Thomas said like an old dog, I would have never been able to transform that resistance and that hatred—or rather that aversion and feeling of

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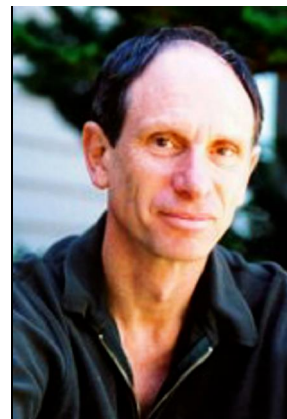
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the meaninglessness of it all. As monastics, this is what we have to look at it as our gold. We don't handle money or anything like that. Space is our wealth. If you don't have a lot of space, whether within or without, you are poor because that space is the container for transforming and moving on and reenergizing, breathing a new breath through old concepts, old ideas, old perceptions. The world couldn't care less about space or silence. It's often forgotten, I think, because we like to feel space, but don't always appreciate what it takes to experience it. It's like suddenly braking a train that's going at 300 miles an hour. Who wants to do that? It's pretty painful. Space is as essential as the air that we breathe every day. That kind of emptiness is not often brought out into consciousness.

Geshe Sopa: I would like to discuss violence and negative activity from the Buddhist perspective. Dissatisfaction is at the main enemy of ours. If you are dissatisfied, then anger or hatred arises. Dissatisfaction is the fuel of anger or hatred. The situation then expands to physical or verbal violence. The first thing we need to do is control our anger. Violence means hurting others to satisfy one's own needs. For that Buddhism talks of the three poisons—attachment, hatred, and ignorance. All these are causes of violence. Ignorance is not knowing real truth properly and believing in a kind of blind faith, believing that if you kill someone or something you will be happy. This is the origin of suicide and wars and other kinds of violence. Attachment is also a cause. We kill thousands and thousands of animals—pigs, fish, etc.—not out of anger, but because of attachment or desire, wanting to have good food or meat. We hurt others in order to satisfy our own cravings. The most powerful enemy, however, is anger. Anger permeates our world and inside us. We want our enemies to fail and we are happy; when they succeed and we don't, we are angry. This is very negative, and has to stop.

Joseph Goldstein: I want to make two unrelated comments. One was in terms of Mary Collins's talk and skillful means and the discussion about how there are many different ones depending on the situation. I think there is one underlying skillful means. It's universally applicable, and it's worth articulating: it is awareness. Every method we use is for the purpose of becoming more aware. Any situation can be used for



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

that. I think sometimes we forget that that's what we are practicing, and the articulation of it seems important to me. The second comment was an appreciation of the discussion about family values—and how it is the root of transformation. That term, however, has been co-opted politically, and it may not be useful anymore. We may need to find another way to express it because the term presses buttons for people, and there is a resistance to really feeling what's meant. I think there is a delicacy there.

Joseph Wong: If you remember, on Sunday afternoon, I had a question about Chapter 7 of the Rule on humility. So far we haven't had the chance to look at it again. But from this presentation, I find the very answer to my question. Chapter 7, you know, is on humility, and Benedict is quite demanding on the twelve steps of humility. One should have a humble opinion of oneself, accepting a low position in the community, accepting humble work, and even humiliations. Benedict, however, thinks in terms of transformation. The title at the top of Sister Mary Collins's paper is "Learning Obedience and Finding Salvation from Personal Suffering." Sister Mary cites a passage from a letter to Hebrews, Chapter 5, about Jesus: "He learned obedience from what he suffered," and, "having been perfected, he became the source of salvation to all who obey him."

This reference to Christ is also made two or three times, at least, in Chapter 7 of the Rule. The meaning of this humility or humiliation has value only if we are following Christ. The twelve steps are just a process of transformation beginning, as Benedict says, with fear and labor and pain. Then, after the twelve steps, after this process of humiliation and humility, we come to joy and love for Christ and delight in virtue. I want to connect with our Buddhist friends regarding the idea of Buddha nature. Christians have something similar. Instead of Buddha nature, St. Benedict would probably use the idea of Christ's image. The difference lies in that our Buddhist friends would think that Buddha nature is, of course, complete. It's only our ignorance veiling our eyes from seeing that we are Buddha nature. Therefore, the emphasis is on meditation to clear the mind and remove ignorance so that we perceive our own Buddha nature. For Benedict, following St. Paul, each one of us has the Christ image within us. This Christ image

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may still be evolving in a process of growth. We need to let it grow not only through meditation or prayer, but through daily life, following Christ in walking the same path of humility, obedience, and renunciation in order that the Christ image will gradually grow in us through our daily practice. Again we have something in common.

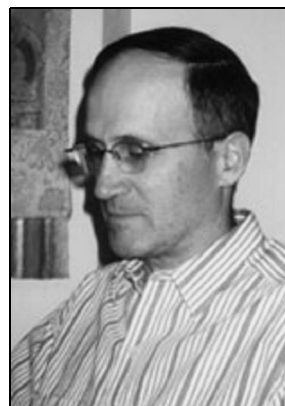
Samu Sunim: I'd like to go back to remark made by Joseph Goldstein early on. If we know that violence would not stop no matter what we do, then perhaps we have to come up with a different attitude. First of all, I believe as a Buddhist that the root cause of violence is hatred, not liking somebody or a group of people. It's true that lack of tolerance, patience, understanding, or sheer ignorance can easily lead to violence. But whether it be based on lack of tolerance or lack of patience or ignorance, I think the underlying cause is still hatred: All the world religions share in this kind of violence; that is, a lack of tolerance. There are teachings in a number of the world religions that allow their followers to become intolerant to those who don't agree with them and don't follow the same path. I think we have to reflect upon this seriously.

If we know that violence will not stop, which I think is true, and look at the Buddhist teachings, many of them are directed toward eradicating ill feelings, animosity, or malice and hatred within us and without. That's why Buddhists dwell so much on compassion, loving kindness, and friendship as antidotes. In many of the schools, the teachings of compassion and friendship are a priority in this lifetime, along with the teachings of nonviolence and dana, generosity, making yourself available without condition.

The other day some people invited me to go to visit Lincoln's birthplace, which is just twenty-fives minutes drive from here. He was born in log cabin from a working class family. There was a poster that displays many different photographs taken of Lincoln, throughout his lifetime. On top of the poster it said, "With malice towards none and with generosity for all." This is the bodhisattva movement in the Buddhist tradition. Bodhisattvas embrace wisdom and compassionate action in the midst of their life. They postpone their own enlightenment for the sake of all of us. In their mission, helping others is helping

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All articles by or about Prof. Donald Mitchell



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.

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themselves; in other words, helping others helps them remove their own ill feelings or any negativity within.

This is a movement. It's like a watercourse or flowing water. The body of a river or a body of water can carry a lot of impurities, and take them and purify them. Such a movement can take more than one lifetime. Ch'an Buddhists are an impatient lot; they need enlightenment right away. But other schools say that the attainment of enlightenment can take *sankara* and *kalpas*. But *sankara* and *kalpas*, or 84,000 Dharmas, simply means infinity. Buddhism and Christianity are very differently conceived. Buddhism is a wisdom-based religion while Christianity is a faith-based religion. But we have to be willing to share our difference here.

In Christianity, this lifetime comes to end. So, Christians are very much preoccupied with social justice. It has to be righted. So sometimes I say that Christians have righteous anger. Buddhists are almost the opposite. Sometimes they almost look like they are giving lip service and they look complacent, and some are. However, this is why there are some things that we have to learn from each other here to formulate ways to eradicate violence within us and violence in society.

Mary Collins: All I want to say by way of pulling this together is that I think my principal point is that embodiment of wisdom is probably the most skillful means. Wisdom is best embodied in communities, for no one person is always able to carry it. For Christians, this wisdom is the wisdom of unconditional love, reaching out even when the circumstances—especially when the circumstances—are not loving. I would say that this is the way the tradition has been carried in my community.

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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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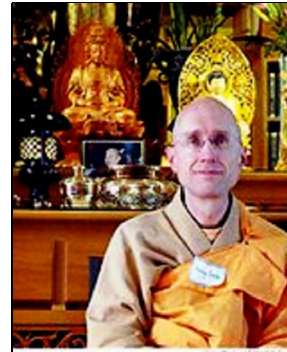
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