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Sr. Margaret Michaud: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

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

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Joseph Wong: I like Judith's question about the idea that Jesus has conquered death. Several of my Christian colleagues have given good answers to the meaning of the idea of resurrection. Jesus has conquered death because he assured us of resurrection into eternal life. I would like to add another aspect of Jesus conquering death. Through his death, Jesus has given a new meaning to death. I think that's the idea of conquering. He has given a new meaning to death. Death from the Christian perspective is seen as something natural. It happens because we are limited. But as it is, the death everybody encounters now with anxiety, angst, uncertainty, and so on, is seen as a punishment for our sins, the sins of humanity, and so on. Jesus' death turns a sign of punishment into a sign of total love and obedience. That's the redemptive, salvific meaning of Jesus' death. In itself, it's a punishment imposed on our sin, but with loving acceptance and total surrender, Jesus makes it a supreme act of loving obedience to the Father.

After the death of Jesus, we are given a new possibility to face death.

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[All articles by or about Ven. Ajahn Amaro](#)

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Death can be seen as something very passive on one hand, because we have no choice at all over the time, place, and condition. It just happens. But some theologians say that death is also something very active. It's the supreme moment of our life, the supreme event. The German theologian Karl Rahner has a beautiful reflection on the theology of death. He says that death is the most personal act each one of us has to accomplish, the supreme moment. That can be also seen if we compare our life as a long letter written to God—the daily conversation, surrender, dedication. The moment of death is like a signature. I affirm. I sign the whole letter of love for my whole life. That's the supreme moment. Who gives us the possibility, the right to do this? I think it's the death of Christ as total surrender to the Father. Christians, or those who follow Christ, are able to appropriate the death of Christ to the moment of our own death.

Guo Yuan Fa Shi: We know that in theory or on different levels that we are just very common, average people. We have vexation, we have all kinds of greed, hatred, ignorance, and things like that. The moment that we pass away, as practitioners or religious persons, everybody wants to help us be better. Even if you are born in the Pure Land again, you are transformed and born as a Lotus—then after that, you still practice. We hear the Dharma, the teachings in the Pure Land, until we reach a certain state called the nonregression. At that time we become a great bodhisattva, and still come back and then help sentient beings. We still have to go through this process until we reach Buddhahood. That is the idea of the Pure Land practice.

There is the famous story of Bodhidharma, who faced the wall in the mountain of Songsham for nine years before he taught. At the time he passed away, he was buried and put in a coffin. Later, when his coffin was uncovered, what they found was just one sandal. Later still, people saw him traveling toward India, to the West, wearing one sandal. That is one of the stories. There are quite a few similar stories about Ch'an practitioners, as Samu Sunim stated today. They sit and then they pass away, in any form. Someone with great ability could just flip the body up and down, and then pass away. Stories like that make me feel like I want to compare these people with Jesus, because the way he healed people, and passed away and was resurrected is very similar to those



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high Zen practitioners.

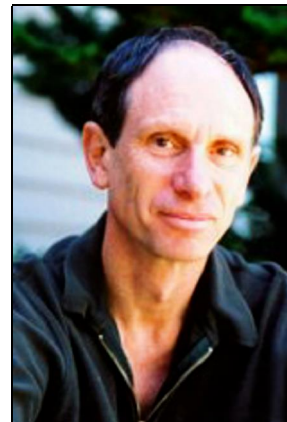
We common or average practitioners do not have that ability. We would like to reach that ability; this is what we are trying to do. If you understand the life process in this way, then you don't have to worry about the age the master will be when you see him again, or what his body is like, because he already has that power of transforming himself into any form. So it doesn't matter. I have one more point. About funeral services: There is money wasted not only in the U.S., but also in Taiwan. In Taiwan, one person may die in the family, and that family would like to show off. They invite bands to come and play, and somebody to dance. You have a long procession on the street that blocks traffic. This is not a good way of spending money. Later on this family will have to pay back the debt. That's why we advocate this kind of massive funeral service. Actually many things are done voluntarily, there is no charge. We try not only to do the funeral but the wedding as well. So we save a lot of money for those people. That's something we could share.

Geshe Sopa: A lot of people worry about death because, according to Buddhism, death is everybody's nature. Once you are born, you must die. Death itself is not something strange, but the punishment after death may be difficult. In Buddhism we have Avalokitesvara and Amitabha bodhisattvas. Faith is very crucial. Faith is the root of the matter as virtue is the faith. The Buddha says this. Faith allows things to happen. It acts as a lever that allows very heavy things to be lifted up. Without the lever, then the weight is impossible to lift. Buddhists pray om mani padme hum, the prayer for compassion. Faith is with us, even if we have nothing else. Our faith is the thing we Buddhists and Christians share—whether it is the lever of Jesus Christ or Amitabha.

Damon Geiger: Three quick points for the ongoing conversation. First of all: about death. From an Eastern Christian perspective, death is not natural. It is not a natural thing in the sense that it's unnatural. It's an insult to God. God never intended it. It was invented by the human race, not by God. Secondly, the resurrection of the dead is not, as James Wiseman pointed out, a resuscitation, but is entering into the fullness of life that has no death. From the moment we are born, we

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**All articles by or about
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are a mixture of life and death. The older we get, too, every time we look in the mirror, there is less hair and more wrinkles. We don't know a state of pure life. Thus, resurrection is to a state where there is not a mixture of death and life. We don't know how we're going to be because we've never experienced it other than through the risen Christ. In all the Christian churches, Catholic and Orthodox, around August 15 we have a great feast, which is called the dormition, the falling asleep of the mother of God, which actually celebrates what death is for us as Christians. The iconography of it shows Mary, the typical archetypical Christian, falling asleep in death. We call it falling asleep, even those in the cemetery. The cemetery is not a place for dead people; it's a place where people are sleeping.

Mary opens her eyes and is surrounded on her deathbed by the Church. (You never die alone; you die accompanied by the Church.) She opens her eyes in the arms of the Lord. The final point is where there may be a difference between Buddhism and Christianity. In Christianity, the hope of a resurrection has nothing to do with us. In other words, in our creed, we do not say we believe in an immortal soul. Many Eastern Christians, myself included, would have doubts about that. Our hope in resurrection is not in something in us but in the fidelity of the Lord, who calls us to the fullness of life because he has destroyed death and bestows life. I get the feeling, unless I'm misunderstanding, that in Buddhism the hope for an afterlife or a rebirth depends on your efforts. In Christianity, it's not our effort. It's God's.

Gene Gollogly: We know that not just in Western Christianity but in Eastern Christianity there are a number of writings that purport to be given by Christ from the time of his death to the time of the ascension. These are writings like the Pistis Sophia and the Revelation of St. John. These are much more mystical and difficult writings to understand. They are koan-like things, and they are worth looking at. Another point I would like to make is that Christ did not heal everybody. In the esoteric dialogues, Christ is spoken of as the Lord of karma. Reincarnation and karma are actually present in the Gospels and in the Judeo-Christian writings. Our task is to try and understand what the laws of karma are and how reincarnation and karma work—just as we've learned to understand the physical laws in the last few centuries,



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and we are learning to understand the laws of the unconscious or the laws of soul with psychology.

A third quick point: We understand that Christ went through death, and in the agony in the garden said, "May this cup pass from me." Some interpretations of those words have been that Christ wanted to be able to live through the crucifixion. The death struggle had already begun in the agony of the garden, and he didn't want to burn himself out and die prematurely before he went through the crucifixion and then into the resurrection. Finally, footnotes are very important in writings. Even Ray Brown in his book, *The Death of the Messiah*, talks about one of the last words on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." It is not always accepted that "forsaken" is the term that Christ actually used. There is a tradition that the sentence should really be interpreted as, "My God, my God, why hast thou glorified me?" Ray Brown mentions this and that interpretation has certainly been part of a tradition. It's worth thinking about that subtle distinction between being forsaken and glorified.

Samu Sunim: My understanding is that the immaculate conception and Jesus' dying on the cross and conquering death are matters of faith. You have to have faith to accept them. In Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, simply died. In the Mahayana tradition, however, teachers are reminded that they are the incarnated or transformed bodies of the Shakyamuni Buddha, carrying on the tradition and teachings and transmitting the Dharma.

Joseph Goldstein: A lot of our discussion seems to have been revolving around the notion of someone who dies and our various views about what happens. From my understanding of the Buddhist teaching, another way of looking at the event would be that there is no one there in the first place either to be born or die. One simple example of this would be our common experience of going to the movies. When we go to the movies we get completely absorbed in the story with all of our reactions and feelings—especially if it's a good movie. People are born, people die, there is war, etc. Then we step outside and realize that nothing really happened. It was just a projection on the screen of color and light. From one perspective our identification with this body and



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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

mind is like being in a movie. We are caught up in the story of our lives, and the story of our deaths. One of the realizations in meditative practice is stepping out of the story, seeing that it's a movie.

This was illustrated in the story of the death of His Holiness, the Sixteenth Khamapa. He died in Chicago, his body riddled with cancer, and his disciples were grieving. And as I understood the story, at one point His Holiness turned to his disciples and he said, "Don't worry. Nothing happens." I love this story as a reflection of that more ultimate reality, that there is no one in the first place being born or dying. That's the experience we have in practice, even just momentary glimpses of it when we drop back into that space of not being identified with the body and mind.

Heng Sure: To follow up on Joseph Goldstein's comment. The experience of not being born or dying would be true if we started at square one. It is fundamentally true. What you said is in accordance with what the sutras say. However, the experience of suffering and the momentum of our past lives' karma are also very real. Thus, in the midst of that nothing happening and the movie flashing on the screen, these heaps of body and mind that are uniquely mine based on the seeds I planted in the past as well as the impact of all that karma as momentum are still registered by my six senses. So it still hurts like hell, or is partially and temporarily joyful. Both of those are going on at once.

The meditative experience allows you to put your head above the water and say, "Fundamentally, the skandhas go back to nothing. Earth goes back to earth. Fire, air, and water all return." Yet there is this thing inside that is still progressing. I wanted to expand the doctrinal context around the discussion to say that in the Mahayana, we talk about death and dying in terms of a six-spoked wheel or the sixfold path of reincarnation. We had the comment this morning from Roshi Daido about Buddhism being nontheistic; yet the heavens are very real. There are six levels of heaven in the desire realm. There are twenty-eight levels of heaven in the form realm, and four levels of heaven in the formless realm. It's very intensely diagramed as a map, and the Buddha and the sutra talks about the passage through.

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**All articles by or about
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John Daido Looi**



Archbishop Felix Machado served as under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue prior to his appointment as bishop of Nashik (India) on January 16, 2008.

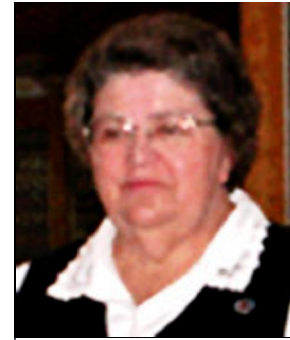
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Only when we get out of the formless realm do we get to the first level of arhatship, which is where one ends birth and death and attains a level of stagehood. That's not the final realm. There are four levels of arhatship before you begin the bodhisattva path. There are fifty-two stages of the bodhisattva path before one attains Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodi. It's a long journey. Being reborn in heaven, interestingly enough, just for the context of our discussion, is not the final goal at all. In fact, the Buddha said, "Don't aim to be reborn in the heavens, because it is a mortal realm." Even the gods in heaven still have seeds of karma, and they have to come back. Hopefully, they will continue to cultivate and can transcend the heavenly realm. So heaven is not the goal of a Buddhist cultivator. Nirvana would be the goal or the bodhisattva path, where you come back with vows to rescue others. It's a complex picture.

Don Mitchell: One distinction that I think has helped me to understand a bit more about the resurrection of the body is that between *sarx* and *soma* as two different ways of speaking of the body in the New Testament. *Sarx* is "flesh," and that would be not what resurrects. That would be the resurrection of a corpse, which, as Leo said, is not what we're talking about. *Soma* is the "embodied person." In the Jewish tradition, this was very important, because *soma* is the way we relate to one another. Without our bodies, we wouldn't have that ability to relate or enter into relations. What resurrects, then, is our embodied personhood that enables us to relate to one another and to God, and that reality of personhood then continues forever.

As I was listening to Heng Sure, I was thinking that I don't have that spiritual ambition to go through all those things. The church is saying that our embodied person, created by God, has great dignity and value. It's just not one little element in a long process through all these different stages. We are unique and there is great value to us—so much so that God loves us as we are, even in our woundedness as an embodied person. It is maintained in its fullness, and in our full realization of who we are, forever. For me, that's enough.

Margaret Michaud: I don't have a lot to say except that, listening to



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All articles by or about Sr. Margaret Michaud, OSB



Professor Donald Mitchell teaches at Purdue University. He is the co-editor (with James Wiseman) of *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1996) and *Transforming*

this discussion on sickness and aging, I have noticed that the discussion has been about death, dying, what the process is, and what we can look forward to on the other side of death. Perhaps that reveals to us where we are and what our real concerns are. It's interesting that all of us struggle to make sense of that, and we really don't know. We haven't been there. We have the teachings of our various faiths and what we've learned, but what we believe is really a matter of faith. We haven't experienced it directly. We know through believing. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." It's our faith that enables us to lead our lives and continue on doing what we can.

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Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times (Doubleday, 2003). He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID.

**All articles by or about
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Judith Simmer-Brown is a professor in the religious studies department at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

**All articles by or about
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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.

**All articles by or about
Geshe Sopa**



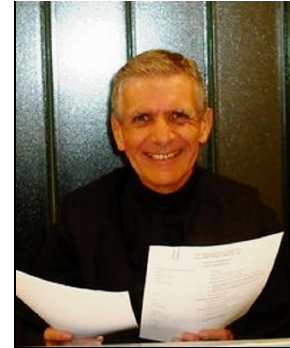
Ven. Samu Sunim is the spiritual director and head of the Zen Buddhist Temple in Ann Arbor and the Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

All articles by or about 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.

All articles by or about Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.



Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, is a monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, and teaches theology at the Abbey School and at Catholic University. He served as Chair of the Board and President of MID, has been editor of the MID bulletin since 1998, and again serves as a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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**All articles by or about
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Ven. Guo-yuan Fa Shi is a monk in the Chan Buddhist tradition. He became Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center until October, 2004, when he went back to Taiwan to oversee the newly built Chan Hall.

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