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Ajahn Sundara: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Stephanie Kaza, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, John Daido Looi, Archbishop Felix Machado, Sr. Barbara McCracken, OSB, Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Ajahn Sundara, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

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

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Dialogue after Ajahn Sundara's Presentation

Blanche Hartman: I noticed this morning, as I think Venerable Ajahn Sundara also noticed, that we went from the subject of aging and sickness to death. What it reminded me of was the fact that I have had a heart attack and nearly died. I figured, "Okay, I'll die of a heart attack some day." Then, sometime later, I developed atrial fibrillation, and one of the risks of atrial fibrillation is stroke. I noticed that I was much more afraid of being disabled and dependent and perhaps not being able to communicate than I was about the possibility of dying. I think it's easier for us religious to look at the question that we have spent a lot of time studying—dying—and that our religious traditions give us some way to deal with, than to look at the more difficult thing of that period between youthful vigor and death.

On the question of dying, I'm going to mention something that I wanted to mention this morning. It is a story about a Zen master. A student asks: "What happens when you die?" The master says: "I don't know." "What do you mean you don't know?" says the student. "Aren't you a Zen master?" And the master says, "Well, yes. But I'm not a dead one."

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- [Ajahn Sundara's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)
- [Fr. Donald Grabner's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)

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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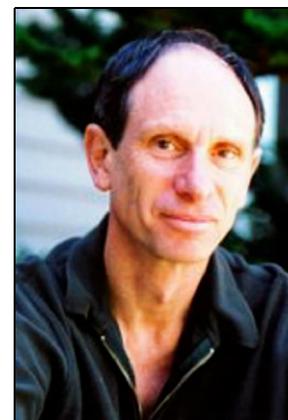
Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai

I think Father James Wiseman mentioned that knowledge about what happens when you die is a matter of faith. In our tradition it's quite common for the officiant and others at a funeral to speak to the deceased rather than about them. I often begin by saying, "The great mystery is no mystery to you now." But it's still a mystery to me and all of us who are still alive. I have a student in clinical pastoral education who has been meditating on death, and she found, as the only Buddhist in a group of Christians, that it was quite a revelation to the Christians when her attitude was that death was not a defeat but was natural. We often say the cause of death is birth. That was kind of shocking to the Christians my student was working with, whose attitude was more that death was defeat. Monsignor Felix Machado mentioned that perhaps it's a fundamental difference between Buddhists and Christians when he said, "I am this body." If indeed that is your meaning and understanding, I think that is a fundamental difference between Buddhists and Christians, because none of the Buddhist traditions believe that this form is what this [pointing to herself] is. Whatever this is, it's much vaster than this body. Sometimes we say it includes the whole universe.

Our teachings don't see us as Buddha but as having Buddha nature, which is the possibility of being Buddha. This is what Suzuki Roshi saw—not that he was a realized Buddha, but that that was his fundamental nature, and it would ripen with time. Twice in my life I've almost died. Once was before I started to practice, and once was after I practiced for twenty years. The first time was what actually led me to practice. There is a commentary in Mumonkan, I think it's Case 17, where he says, "You'd better pay attention to me, because if you don't, when it comes time for the five elements to separate, you'll be like a crab in a pot scrambling with all eight arms and legs to get out." That's the way it was the first time I almost died. I had been vigorous, energetic, and I got an infection which was almost fatal. That threw me into great confusion and fear. In the course of it, I met Suzuki Roshi and met practice. Twenty years later I had a heart attack. During the heart attack, I thought:, "Oh, I could die now. That wouldn't be a problem." Afterwards, as I was walking out of the hospital, I thought: "Wow, I'm still alive. I could be dead. This is all free." Then I thought: "Well, it always has been. Too bad I didn't notice it." I think that twenty years of sitting had something to do with those two different responses.

Lama, Tsenzhap Serkong Rinpoche, and Zopa Rinpoche, she has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore and Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She is active in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogue, including the MID-sponsored Gethseman... [[Read full biography](#)]

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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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Stephanie Kaza: What I wanted to draw our attention to around sickness and aging are stereotypes. I'm working with my mother with Alzheimer's. One of the hardest things I have to work with is everybody's idea of what Alzheimer's is. If you've worked with cancer patients, it's a similar thing. In our desire to help, we often create suffering through thinking we know something about any of those medical words that come up. It can be just as cruel and unkind as gender or racial stereotyping, in allowing ourselves to escape from the immediate, direct, embodied experience with a person suffering the illness. If you can put a label on it or somehow simplify it, it allows distancing. Sometimes I feel I have to actually argue with caregivers or doctors or somebody who is simply categorizing. This is part of our discomfort with aging.

Our ideas about sickness, aging, and particularly death have tremendous implications for how we view the natural world. I think we might flag that as a future conversation and not to necessarily go into at this point. But if we think that death is natural, we have a different relationship with animals and plants and so on. If we think it's not natural, then it really makes human beings different from the rest of the world. It's a very significant marker of difference, which then spills into many other ways in which human beings allow themselves certain activities in relationship to the natural world. I think this can be a very fruitful point of understanding our environmental relations. For those of you who don't know, my ending note of humor is that the United Kingdom is so advanced in their environmental movements that they have a Natural Death Movement. It tries not to put further toxins into the soil through embalming, and promotes cardboard coffins. So, if you thought your simple biers were the closest, you can construct them and make them yourselves.

Thomas Keating: I would like to offer a further question or clarification about the statement that we are our bodies. I would have difficulty agreeing to that statement as it stands. I think what it really means is we are body and soul. We are incarnated and so on. One of the problems of the spiritual journey is disidentifying with our ideas of our self or overidentifying ourselves as our feelings, bodies, roles, as ourselves. As Jesus suggested, unless you renounce your inmost self, you can't be his disciple. Any self-identity is itself an obstacle to the fullness of the Christian life. The Christian life does not end with the



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Stephanie Kaza is an associate professor, concentrating on

resurrection. It is a major step, but when we say we follow Christ, it's not just down the road of Galilee or to Jerusalem or to Calvary or to the resurrection—it's to the ascension, which is Jesus' return to the bosom of the father. It seems to me that it's in that mystery that the Buddhists and Christians have the greatest chance of meeting, because in that place there is no self, as we know it, no fixed point of reference. Instead, there is the openness to the Ultimate Reality, in which there is only the identity of whatever the absolute self is and our relation to that.

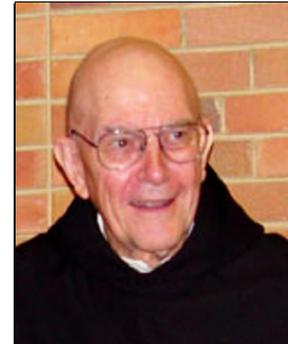
Felix Machado: I made that statement to clarify what Norman Fischer was saying about which body would be resurrected. I was trying to say that the crucial difference here is regarding God the creator. The first statement of our faith, our creed is: "I believe in God, the creator." The creator created me as I am. He did not create me just as an idea in his mind. He did not create me an angel. He created me as I am. If I were to say, "I'm Felix," and then people said, "But where are you, because this body is not Felix?" I would have to say that what you see is what you get. I mean, this [pointing to himself] is Felix, five feet something, with brown eyes and losing hair. Whatever you see is me. I fully agree with Father Tom Keating. But the point needs clarification.

Thomas Ryan: I'm working with both Christian and Buddhist perspectives with regard to sickness, aging, and death in a retreat setting. When I turned fifty years old, I didn't just want to have another birthday party, I wanted to do something that had some significance. So I invited family and friends to come to our retreat center and spend a weekend meditating and reflecting on facing our mortality. It turned out to be such a worthwhile experience that I have continued to do it each of the last five years, once or twice a year, expanding it to a week-long retreat—just to give people more opportunity to really engage and do the inner work. After constant refinement and attunement and so forth, I am finding out what works best. I have structured the whole retreat on the four assertions that Ajahn Sundara mentioned: "I am subject to sickness; sickness is unavoidable. I am subject to aging; aging is unavoidable. I am subject to death; death is unavoidable. I will be separated from all that I hold dear; separation is unavoidable."

This really forms the scaffolding for the retreat. At each point I ask

environmental ethics, religion and ecology, and ecofeminism at the University of Vermont.

**All articles by or about
Stephanie Kaza**



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 serves as an advisor to ...
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John Daido Looi is the founder and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.

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people to get in touch with an experience in their own life of sickness, aging, separation, and we use that as a point of departure. I'm well served in that retreat by some of the meditations on sickness, aging, and death from Buddhism as well. From the Christian perspective, the retreat is a very rich opportunity for us to apply the whole Christian conviction of faith that every new experience of life only comes through an experience of dying or letting go, which is called the Paschal mystery in Christian spirituality, the passing over through death to new life, seen in its fullest expression in the resurrection. The challenge for us is to identify how we live that in a daily way. Where are all the little places each day that I live the letting go or the dying experience and face those fears and see what happens when I do that? How does it bring me to an experience of new life, deeper understanding, and greater compassion?

I find that a very rich mix, working with perspectives from the two faiths to the point where it is really a favorite retreat theme, both in ecumenical and interfaith settings, because we all have to pass through this door. We are all concerned with this. We all have fears around it. The wisdom that I see coming from each religion is that the best way to prepare for death is to modulate our fears by anticipating it in little pieces.

Thubten Chodron: I'd like to make an observation. We began talking about death this morning. First of all, we are religious people who all are seeking the answers to life and death, and who are hopefully more introspective, self-aware, and mindful. But when we started talking about death, what did we talk about? First of all, how to help other people die. Then, in the second session, what did we talk about? All the theology around death and what happens after death. We didn't talk about our feelings about death. And I'm seeing that happen in this discussion also about aging and death. We are getting into theology and all sorts of things. The questions that Ajahn Sundara asked us to contemplate at the beginning, we are resisting right and left, because they are really hard to look at. As a junior member in some ways, I feel there is a lot of wisdom in the elder people here that I would like to learn from. I would like to request you, please, to share some of your experiences about how you feel about aging, how you feel about the sicknesses that you've gone through; and, as you are looking ahead to death, what you feel has been valuable in your life? I'd like to request



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.

All articles by or about Archbishop Felix Machado



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you to do that as service to those of us who can learn from your lives and your experience.

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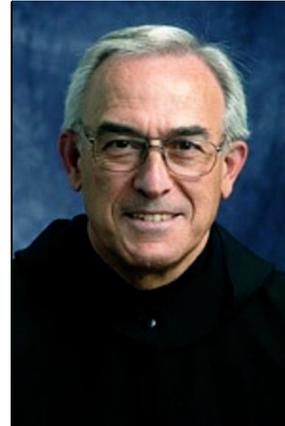
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Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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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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