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General Discussion

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Professor Ewert Cousins, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, John Daido Looi, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO, Eric Marcoux, Prof. Donald Mitchell, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Ajahn Sundara, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam, Ven. Guo Yuan, Fa Shi

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

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General Dialogue on Summary Reflections

William Skudlarek: There is no agenda for this session. I would like to make this an opportunity for people who haven't had a chance to speak yet and who want to say anything in some way related to what we've been talking about.

Eric Marcoux: Catholics speaking from the Buddhist tradition and people in the Catholic tradition speaking Buddhist truths and Buddhists speaking Catholic truths is an extraordinary bisymmetry that has made me both uncomfortable and extraordinarily joyous. Now, a leap, perhaps. My favorite passage in the Gospels is the changing of water into wine. Christian commentators have for years observed that Mary was pushy, a good Jewish mother. Perhaps my second favorite gospel passage is "gather the fragments so they are not lost." After the fishes and loaves had been multiplied, there was a lot left over. A good Jewish mother is likely to say, "Honey, we might need a snack tonight."

On that marvelous, literal human level grows a sacramental manifestation that for me is very powerful. It's a teaching that I've used in my own therapy for myself and with clients for years. Gather the fragments of your life mindfully; not dwelling on the past, but owning them in the present because, honey, you might need a snack in

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Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai 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 Gethsemani... [\[Read full](#)

the present. Here is a snack, and it's a story about the past. About fifteen years ago I got a call from a male nurse. He said, "I have a Buddhist client who is dying, and I really need some information." I met in the nurse's home. We exchanged information, and then he told me the story. He told me that the previous year he had been working and living in the hospital, and one of the young monks from Mt. Angel was dying of AIDS. Now, everyone in this room can imagine the subtexts, particularly that many years ago. The community was not allowed to know his circumstances. He was dying with his family in the outer hall, waiting for those last moments, but his community was not there.

The nurse said, "I said to this young guy, 'Is there anything that you've never done that you wish you could do before you die?' " He was literally in his last hours. "Yes," said the young monk, "I've never danced with anyone." "Ah." This is how skillful means arise out of the heart, as has been observed so many times. The nurse said, "My room was in that hospital. I went and got my turntable, and I got a Frank Sinatra record. I lifted him out of his bed, put his foot on my foot and his other foot on my foot, his arms around me and my arms around him, and we danced to Frank Sinatra. I put him in his bed, went out to the family and said, 'He's yours now,' and he died within an hour."

Thomas Ryan: There is a question in my mind which has been hanging over our exchanges in the last few days. I would like to try to articulate it, and I welcome your responses to it. The question relates to our fundamental approach to suffering as Buddhists and as Christians. On the one hand, I have heard in many different expressions the four noble truths, which seem to be saying the emphasis is on liberation from suffering. On the other hand, there is the Christian approach. While reading the little booklet that was in our folder the other night, "The Christian Meaning of Suffering" by Pope John Paul II, I found it expressed in these words. In reflecting on the cross, he wrote this: "If in this weakness there is accomplished his [Jesus'] lifting up, confirmed by the power of the resurrection, then this means the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's cross. To suffer in this concept means to become particularly susceptible, particularly open to the working of the salvific powers of God offered to humanity in Christ. In him, God has confirmed his desire to act

[biography](#)]

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Ewert Cousins, Professor Emeritus of Fordham University, died on May 30, 2009, in Bethlehem CT.

Dr. Cousins served for many years as an advisor to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He was the chief editorial consultant for the 100 volume Paulist Press series, The Classics of Western Spirituality and was also General Editor of the 25-volume series, World Spiritualit... [\[Read full biography\]](#)

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especially through suffering, which is man's weakness and emptying of self. And he wishes to make his power known precisely in this weakness and emptying of self."

I read those lines and I thought, "That's a very powerful statement of the grace to be found in the experience of suffering itself." Are these two approaches fundamentally in contradiction with one another, the one seeking liberation from suffering, and the other trying to embrace it and find meaning in suffering? The Dalai Lama says, "If you are able to transform adverse situations into factors of the spiritual path, hindrances and suffering will become favorable conditions for spiritual practice." I hear that line, and it seems to be a bridge between the two understandings. Am I understanding the Dalai Lama's teaching correctly to be in its own way a kind of recognition through the Buddhist understanding that suffering can be also a place of grace when it becomes a favorable condition for practice? That's the big question that's out there for me at the end as it was at the beginning.

Ewert Cousins: I was going to bring up the matter of suffering. But as we leave and enter in varying degrees into contact with the suffering of the world, as I think inevitably we will, what comes to my mind is the awakening that happened at Ground Zero on September 11, which in many respects has transformed the consciousness of the world.

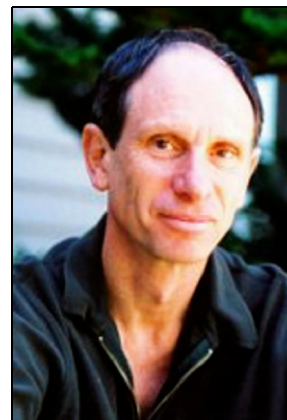
But it also revealed the interpenetration of religion and culture in such a way that we cannot say the religions are mere guides, but they have become part of the problem in many respects—especially in terms of politics, and the needs of the human community and the relationship between religions and the forces in culture that determine the sharing of the goods of the earth.

So it seems to me that this is the world we are going back into—a wounded world, a world that has become aware of suffering in a new way, and a world that needs hope and guidance from the great spiritual communities of the world. I think that's happening—but it's a different world with a different consciousness from the world that we went back to after Gethsemani I. We are in a different place, and I think it is very demanding. As we see how deep the suffering of the world is and seek transformation, then the support of the spiritual leaders of the communities of the world that has to penetrate into every level of the



Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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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

society, into science and politics, and economics, so that everything is relevant, and there are no walls to this global monastery.

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): Thomas Ryan's question is very important. Suffering is a very important beginning of the spiritual path. In the Buddhist scriptures we find that when one contemplates suffering that gives a person confidence and faith to proceed to overcome or transcend and use suffering to practice the spiritual path. Therefore, the understanding of suffering is absolutely necessary in order to proceed. The Buddha said that when one suffers one begins to develop faith. As everybody knows, faith is the root. From faith, we continue to proceed to find a solution. Therefore the Dalai Lama's and the Pope's statements seem to be telling the same thing in different language.

Joseph Goldstein: It's been taught that there are two kinds of suffering—the suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. For me that's been helpful in seeing what it is that makes the difference in our experience, and to see that suffering per se does not necessarily lead to greater understanding. It's the awareness that we bring to it. I wanted to mention one other dimension of this conference for me, which in addition to the beautiful expressions of Leo and Norman this morning in summing up, was the conference as a retreat. I felt myself go through many of the same things that I would go through on a self-retreat.

I found tremendous exhilaration and illumination in the various conversations. I felt times of tremendous impatience, sitting with it and practicing relaxing my heart. I found tears coming to my eyes over so many of the stories, from both traditions. At times I noticed myself getting really attached to my own point of view, and noticing that, seeing if I could relax that contraction. There is tremendous learning just from watching my own internal process as it happens in a retreat situation. There was the wonderful music that began each session, and the power of the rituals, both the Buddhist and the Christian. They really were transforming moments. Thank you.

Thubten Chodron: In that statement, His Holiness is referring to a type of teaching in the Tibetan tradition called the "thought training" or "mind transformation" teachings. The center of those teachings is how

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.

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Zenkei Blanche Hartman is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

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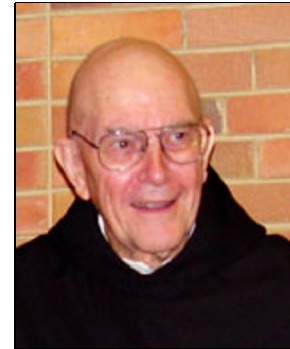
to transform adverse conditions into the path; the idea being that the nature of cyclic existence of suffering is unsatisfactory. We don't have to seek suffering. It comes automatically because of our ignorance, anger, and attachment in our karma. When it comes, how do we deal with it? Do we react to a suffering situation by generating more negativity, which keeps us in the cycle, or do we use the situation to generate positive thoughts and emotions that will lead us to liberation?

In the Tibetan tradition the idea is that when you encounter suffering, instead of getting angry or thinking, "Why me?" we think that it is a ripening of one's own karma. There is nobody to get angry at. If I don't like this result, I need to stop creating the causes. In other words, I need to reduce my selfishness, ignorance, anger, and attachment. In this way, you take a bad situation, and by your way of thinking about it, use it to uplift your mind and energize yourself on the path. Another thought transformation technique for suffering would be the taking and giving meditation that Geshe Lobsang led us through very briefly —using suffering to increase our sense of compassion or increase our determination for liberation or enlightenment. There are all sorts of techniques like this in the Tibetan teachings.

Ajahn Sundara: You [Thomas Ryan] mentioned at the end "suffering" and "favorable condition," and it brought to mind the relationship to suffering in our Buddhist practice. Because in the teachings of the Buddha, there is a statement: "There is only one thing that arises. It's suffering. And there is only one thing that ceases, and it's suffering." In Burma you hear teachings such as: "Suffering is Nirvana." The more you suffer, the closer you are to Nirvana. The two statements are a paradox, because when you hear all that arises and passes away is suffering, you feel you never get out of it, because things are constantly arising in your mind and passing away.

That's related to what Joseph Goldstein said that there is suffering that leads to the increase of suffering and suffering that leads to the decrease of suffering. To know and realize the difference is practice. A practice of seeing suffering as a favorable experience will decrease suffering. But what strikes me most is that the crux of the matter, whether as a Christian or as a Buddhist, is grasping, the mind that clings to experiences. As long as the mind is grasping at suffering or rejecting it, then instead of seeing the way things are, which happens

Zenkei Blanche Hartman



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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when the mind is actually open, alert, vigilant, and fully receiving suffering, it will react and imprison the heart, and that itself is suffering. So the suffering that leads to no suffering is when we see but don't grasp suffering, and that leads to the end of suffering.

In the Christian tradition, often I get mirrored back to me this feeling that you have to suffer and believe in suffering to really be transformed. From my Buddhist practice perspective, I have to be aware of suffering and to let it go. It's not that I have to become somebody who suffers more or who needs more suffering. As Thubten Chodron said, suffering is present most of the time. But we have to be aware of the grasping. The heart of the practice is non-grasping, which opens the mind and allows us to see things as they are. Then the concept of suffering can be useful.

Guo Yuan Fa Shi: When we see suffering, very naturally we want to avoid it and do something to make it better. Those are our tendencies. On the September 11 tragedy, my teacher said that the people who died in the tragedy were living bodhisattvas—showing us this lesson so that we will avoid this thing happening again. We are thankful for them for their bravery. We still want to make the situation better; our mind will not be saddened by it but grateful. It's the same with the earthquake in Taiwan a couple of years ago. The teacher went to see the victims or relatives of the victims. He said the same thing; "Your relatives are the alive bodhisattvas that are teaching us these lessons, so we want to avoid this and alleviate the suffering of the victims who are still alive."

Norman Fischer: I think every teaching has its other side. The other side of this teaching of the virtue of suffering, especially in Christianity, is that the imitation of suffering can be really negative. Ajahn Sundara was talking about the grasping in suffering. I teach in Mexico, and sometimes women come to the retreats, and for many years they've been suffering, often at the hands of husbands who drink too much and beat them up. They've received the message in their minds that it's a Christian virtue to suffer and to continue to suffer these things. They don't think, "How can I stop this situation?" They think: "I become magnified and more holy by continuing to endure this suffering."

When I hear them and practice with them, it's true—they do become



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Eric Marcoux is affiliated with the Dharma Rain Zen Center in Portland, Oregon.

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Professor Donald

ennobled by their suffering. On the other hand, it doesn't seem to me a very good idea that they should continue in this way. I usually go and I speak about the practice that can help you end suffering and that they don't have to persist in conditions that create suffering if there is a choice and a way out. It's a very radical message for them to hear. I go twice a year. I don't know what happens in the times I'm not there, and I don't know if the next time I go the husbands will be after me. But this is an example of the negative side of the valorization of suffering.

Another example, again from Mexico, is the tremendous faith I find so admirable in the native people of Mexico, who are tremendously faithful Catholics. I go to a Cathedral in Oaxaca and see them lined up, thirty, forty, fifty people to say confession, one after another. They don't have confessionals; it's out in the open in the Church. And their faith is tremendously inspiring to me. I read in a book that the Mexicans accepted Christianity truly because it made perfect sense to them in their condition; that there is a suffering God. They could understand because of their condition, so they took Christianity into their hearts. But how did they get to be so suffering? They got to be so suffering because of our civilization coming to mess up theirs. The teaching of suffering has its other side, and I think we have to pay attention to that and be sensitive to the way these powerful messages are received.

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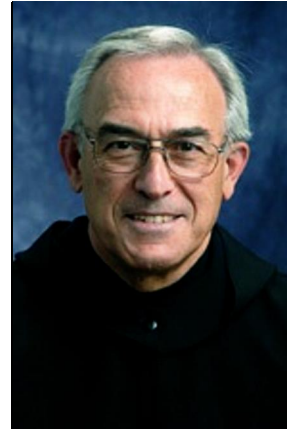
Mitchell teaches at Purdue University. He is the co-editor (with James Wiseman) of *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1996) and *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Doubleday, 2003). He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors 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](#)



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.

All articles by or about Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB



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**



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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Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam, was elected a member of the Council of the Camaldolese Benedictines in 2005 and lives at the Mother House at Camaldoli, Italy. He was involved in the second Gethsemani Encounter in April 2002.

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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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