



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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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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**Thomas Keating:** Just a word in response to your reflections, Norman, it's not a Christian virtue specifically—unless one has some special inspiration—to endure oppression or abuse. One of the things about the false self that needs to be overcome is a certain passivity or endurance of unjust treatment. It's a sign of virtue when women begin to stand up for their rights. I notice in the practice of centering prayer that there is often a crisis in the family among the spouses when, as a result of deep affirmation from God in contemplative prayer, the wife begins to assert her equality and will not agree to be pushed around anymore. This is a crisis for macho men who expect to be obeyed, and the wife is supposed to be completely submissive to the husband. While Paul recommends that in one of his epistles, it probably should not be read out loud in the liturgy.

I mention that because suffering is not an end in itself. There has been in the Christian tradition an emphasis on suffering in the crucifixion that is positively unhealthy. One should first become fully human, which involves respect for oneself and one's rights, before one is capable of finding positive value in suffering for deeper values or the good of others. The real thing I wanted to say was that I was very

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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](#)

impressed with the Norman and Leo's masterful summings-up. I can't help but ask the question, Is this group ready for a more common action? We've heard many suggestions of what people are doing out of their own monastery, but I noticed the Buddhists got together for private interviews among themselves. I hope that was very fruitful. Perhaps it's too soon to hope that the Catholic spiritual folks could do the same. Certainly, it's easier to talk with Buddhists than most Catholics about spiritual matters, at least up till now.

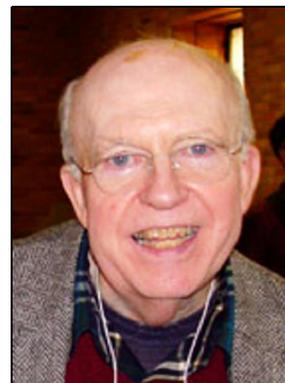
I throw out as perhaps a premature thought that it would be quite something to have a more organized aspect to the Buddhist/Christian dialogue, and perhaps then gradually incorporate other traditions into it, especially those that are very congenial, like Daoism, and to reach some kind of common statement. In other words, a kind of United Nations of religions—a united front, in which the values we've been discussing and were so well summed up in the two final remarks here could be translated into positive action in some way in the future. As a group, we could speak to the violence or particular issues in society that desperately need a religious or especially a spiritual perspective.

Finally, there is a place beyond every tradition where I think every human being has the potential to meet. It's that place of unity and oneness to which all traditions are pointing that suggests that there is something so deep in human nature that it can be awakened and addressed regardless of religion or no religion. Those with the experience of using religious tradition and spirituality would seem to be the ones, if they could organize, who could awaken that sense of the profound human value of all coming from the same source and manifesting the same source, and thus raising the consciousness of humanity to some degree.

**William Skudlarek:** Father Thomas: What you were saying reminded me of one of my conversations with Ajahn Amaro. He said that their center in England is actually on the property of what used to be a Benedictine monastery for women. He says there is no problem with the ordinary country English folk. They look at the Buddhist monks and say, "Oh, you are back. The monks have returned. How wonderful." That deep archetypal monk may be one of those meeting places.

[biography](#)]

[All articles by or about Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron](#)



**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 Spirituality...* [[Read full biography](#)]

[All articles by or about Professor Ewert Cousins](#)

**Blanche Hartman:** Yesterday, Father Thomas Keating complained that we don't give novices a practice. I noticed a young monk nodding his head. I spoke to him later and he said something to the effect, "Yes, but we young monks don't get listened to so much." I wonder what was meant by a practice and what would be recommended in the formation of monks? I have one comment, because it's such a strong image in my mind from the first Gethsemani Encounter. We were discussing suffering and a response of self-righteous anger to suffering, anger itself as suffering. The conversation went around, and then Brother David Steindl-Rast handed the microphone to Maha Ghosananda, who took the mike. He was sitting, cross-legged, beaming as he always does. He said, "When you know suffering, you know Nirvana," and he handed the microphone back. It was stunning, and it has stuck with me ever since. I don't think I understand it, but it stuck with me.

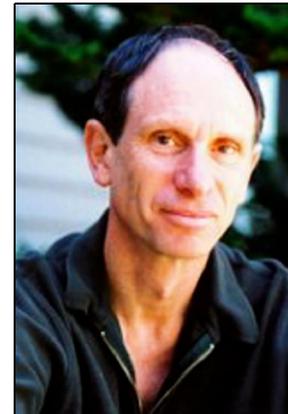
**John Daido Looi:** I think we Buddhists may owe an apology to our Catholic brothers and sisters. It came to a head during the dialogue between Norman and Leo, and I'm not sure if that's what Leo was pointing to when he asked the question, "What does Jesus of Nazareth mean to you?" When we wrote the dedication to our service, we used Jesus of Nazareth. When I read it, it seemed that that wasn't the way it should have been expressed, Jesus of Nazareth. It should have been Jesus Christ our Lord, or something like that, because we are equating Buddha and Jesus. As far as I know, Jesus of Nazareth is not the Christ yet, or not recognized as the Christ. Am I correct in that? If I am, I apologize for all of us. I would like to see that corrected and not published the way we said it but the way we apologize for it, rather.

**Joseph Wong:** I also would like to express my appreciation and thankfulness for the whole conference, and especially for the summing up of the two speakers this morning, Norman and Leo. I'm glad that Thomas Ryan brought out that big issue about the basic difference in our approach to the problem of suffering. I think that should be dealt with at this conclusive stage. I agree that there is a difference in our basic response to the problem to the issue of suffering. The Buddhist response would be liberation through enlightenment and comfort through meditation practice that leads to enlightenment. The Christian



**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*.

**All articles by or about Zoketsu Norman Fischer**



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

response to suffering would not be seeking suffering; except in the case of some saints in history. They pray for suffering. But the usual approach is that we accept it. When suffering comes our way, we accept it and even embrace it in view of the participation in the suffering of Christ—first of all for our personal transformation, the reparation of sin and transformation, and then for the redemption and transformation of the whole world.

As far as I understand it, there are two basic approaches or responses. In between, we find some nuances, here and there, which would bring the two approaches closer in touch. For example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama points out in his message the positive value of suffering for a person. We can put right our past karma and strengthen ourselves for our ongoing spiritual paths. That's the positive value of the meaning of suffering. Maybe there are some other proposals the Buddhists can find in their teaching. Personally, I find one area where the two traditions come very close in terms in facing suffering is in the idea of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is a person who has achieved enlightenment and is ready to enter into Nirvana or Buddhahood; but for the good of all the sentient beings makes a vow not to enter into Buddhahood, but try to save all sentient beings, knowing that that would imply an endless process of rebirth and suffering. Yet that person is willing to embrace that. Here we can use the term "embrace," in the sense of embracing the suffering of endless rebirth for the good of sentient beings. I see the closest parallel between the Buddhists' approach to suffering in a bodhisattva and the Christian approach to suffering, especially as exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, coming very briefly to the point of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, the complete title for Jesus is Jesus Christ or Jesus the Lord. But we also feel comfortable calling him Jesus of Nazareth and meaning Christ the Lord—an historical person, who fully entered into our human history and our human condition as fully one of us. I think both titles would be right, depending on different occasions.

**Don Mitchell:** I thought I should say something because I was one of the people who talked about the experience of Jesus forsaken the other day in terms of my mother. In that example, I was talking about the

involved in both  
Gethsemani Encounters.

**All articles by or about  
Joseph Goldstein**



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

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Henepole Gunaratana**



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

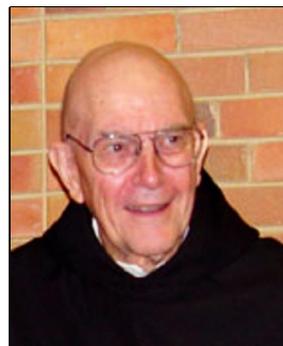
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experience of Jesus forsaken in terms of a source of love, compassion, strength, and light in dealing with another person's illness. But in the passage that Tom Ryan read, the Pope mentions that there is in this reality of suffering a lifting up, and that adds the resurrection element. There are certainly other situations where suffering is caused not by another person's illness, but by oppression, which Norman Fischer was talking about. In that case, this source of grace in the midst of the suffering is not just a consolation, impelling one to remain and accept the abuse, but is also a presence and strength of God lifting one up and empowering one to address whatever is oppressive and to overcome it.

Certainly, liberation theology emphasizes this—to be able to recognize Jesus crucified and forsaken in those elements of society where there is oppression and to try to overcome it. The Catholic tradition has always been committed in terms of Catholic charities and all of our work around the world to alleviating suffering wherever it's found. On the other hand, and I've seen this in my own community, people will just say, "Well, just offer it up," or something, and that's not what it's all about. At the very beginning of the apostolic letter that Tom read, in the very first paragraph, John Paul II quotes from Paul's letter where he says, "In my own flesh I make up for what is still lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body." So there is this element of sharing in something. In the next paragraph, the Pope also quotes another passage from Paul where he says, "Therefore, I rejoice in my sufferings for your benefit." He is talking to other people. Grasped rightly, experiencing suffering is a real source of personal liberation and also a rejoicing in terms of the liberation of humankind. Like anything good, it can be turned around, just like emptiness can be turned around in a very destructive way.

I thought that both Norman and Leo were right on in terms of the tone of this encounter. The first encounter was more of a getting to know each other. There is a kind of excitement of finding the treasures of one another. This time it was more intimate—a deepening of what happened before. It's building a loving friendship, as Bhante mentioned, between us. We came here to address the problems of the world and the solutions. I thought, "Maybe we are living the solution. Maybe we are a living sign of the solution that the world needs."

#### 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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**Kathy Lyzotte:** I'd like to affirm what Don has just said. We arrived here as strangers, and we are being transformed into friends. The friendship is a context in which people can share their suffering and find the support of others and bear one another's burdens and where suffering can be expressed, shared, and transformed. It seems to me that in some of our sessions some quite painful things emerged, and I really felt those in my heart. Then going to the rituals, I experienced them as directly addressing the pain and suffering that emerged in our conversation. In our quiet meditation sessions in the morning, there was a place where the remembrance of the painful things could emerge, and in the context of the community come to a greater reconciliation.

**Heng Sure:** I have another Maha Ghosananda story to tell to follow up Blanche's. At the United Religions Initiatives Global Summit in 1997, Bhante Maha Ghosananda was there and beamed through the whole week without saying a word. These would be intimate groups and he would sit at the table and beam in silence and didn't say a word, wearing his orange hat in the ninety degree weather. The microphone was passed around on the last day, and it was really time for Bhante to say something. Obviously the moment had come, and it was time for him to speak. He took the microphone and sat with it for a full minute, and then he said, "We are all in the same boat together," and passed the microphone on.

We are all in the same boat together. Whether you apply that to the realm of suffering or the realm of monastics who are in a social context that is going to be influenced by the world as the world becomes more greedy and confused is up to you. In that context, thinking of Father Thomas's exhortation for us to go further and look for the deeper source—the United Religions Initiative (URI), the Parliament of World Religions, and the local interfaith gathering in your own community is a wonderful place for the monastics conversation to put seeds down. At URI there were three Buddhist monastics and half a dozen Catholic monastics, and we met, again for the first time, to extend the hands in friendship. The idea that monastics meet and talk is good news. It's water on dry plants. We need to recognize the power of this gathering



**Sr. Kathy Lyzotte,** OCSO, is a Trappistine nun from Our Lady of Mississippi Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa. She has served on the MID Board and was one of the speakers at the second Gethsemani Encounter.

**All articles by or about Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO**

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

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**Professor Donald**

and its impact on folks who are despairing of religions meeting together and the daily enduring conversations.

I would encourage everybody not to hesitate to join the local interfaith organization as a monastic or one in the orbit of monastics, contributing to the community, witnessing what happened here and carry it back. Father Jerry O'Rourke, the ecumenical and interfaith officer of the archdiocese of San Francisco says, "We are all babies in this conversation." That's another elder to quote. Buddhism has been in the country for a century, and there are many more treasures in the treasure room that we are beginning to discover. I heard a conversation going on in these four days about a wish to embrace Zen and go beyond Zen into Bhakti sides of Buddhism, which are profoundly expressed in Asia and yet brand new to us here in this country. What could that do if we investigated Buddhist lectio divina and shared from that point? There is much more. And I'm overwhelmed with the energy of the gospel of monastic interfaith dialogue, the good news to take back and share.

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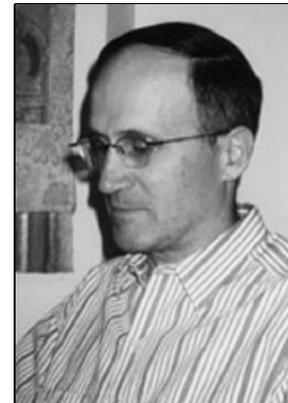
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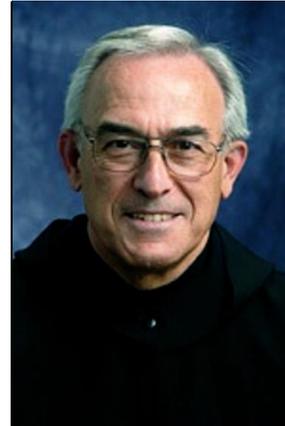
**Mitchell** teaches at Purdue University. He is the co-editor (with James Wiseman) of *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1996) and *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Doubleday, 2003). He serves as an advisor to the Board of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

[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.

[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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Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.**



**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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Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB  
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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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