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[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
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[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
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Stephanie Kaza's Presentation Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Stephanie Kaza, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

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

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William Skudlarek: This afternoon, to continue our reflections on the suffering caused by personal and structural violence, we will hear from Professor Stephanie Kaza. She is associate professor of environmental studies at the University of Vermont, where she teaches religion and ecology, environmental justice, ecofeminism, radical environmentalism and, as she described to us, unlearning consumerism. Stephanie holds a Ph.D. in biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a Master of Divinity degree from Starr King School for the Ministry. She is a long-time practitioner of Sota Zen Buddhism, affiliated with Green Gulch Zen Center, California, and she has also studied with Thich Nhat Hanh and Joanna Macy. Among her writings are the book, *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*, which consists of meditative essays on deep ecological relations with trees. She is the co-editor with Kenneth Kraft of *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, a collection of classic and modern texts supporting a Buddhist approach to environmental activism. Stephanie is a member of the International Christian-Buddhist Theological Encounter group, and she serves on the board for the Center for Respect for Life and the Environment.

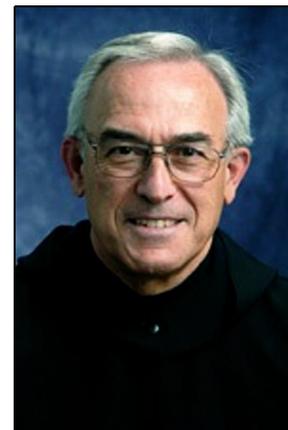
Stephanie Kaza: I want to thank everyone here for being so kind and supportive of each other in the midst of asking and trying to answer very difficult questions. I'm honored to be here, and I'd like to particularly honor Robert Aitken Roshi, whose place I'm taking, who, I'm sure, would have liked to be here with you. He is one of my earliest teachers in the Zen lineage, particularly in the lineage of socially engaged Buddhism, and is a tremendous hero to many of us trying to

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Stephanie Kaza is an associate professor, concentrating on environmental ethics, religion and ecology, and ecofeminism at the University of Vermont.

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Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November

take on these difficult issues.

In the midst of such intractable situations where we all feel a bit crushed, perhaps, by the weight of them, I want to tell you about my experience with the poet Gary Snyder. About fifty of us were doing a wonderful circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, chanting Zen chants all the way up the mountain, and hearing him recite his poetry about that the mountain. At the top of this beautiful mountain, you could look out and see the entire bay area—Berkeley, San Rafael, San Francisco. Part of you felt it was simply amazing, and part was somewhat full of despair at the smog, etc. I immediately started to crush downward in my environmental interpretation, and I said, "But, Gary, how does one live with this?" He had this twinkle in his eye, "You just simply take the long view. Think of it in 10,000 years." It had never occurred to me really quite that way. This was his gift of a Buddhist view to me—the really long view, the kalpas-long view. In case any of what we are talking about this seems too big, I pass that along to you.

In many of my talks I try and take my global eye and scan the entire world. I look for the types of systems that were in place that are causing the most suffering, and then see where we could apply our liberative methods to them. This is a little bit akin to comparing that to which kind of car you'll buy instead of deciding whether to pack your boxes with Styrofoam peanuts or not. It is is a much weightier decision to own a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) or not, compared to the little stuff. So I apologize in advance for the scale of this. My own personal motivation is that, in my environmental studies, I've found tremendous angst in looking at some of the Christian inheritance regarding environmental views. I looked further to Buddhism and found a home that seemed like I could keep my experiences with the natural world and not have them feel like such a misfit. We may talk about that further, but my discomfort has to do with the dualisms that come through many of the Christian scriptures: Body/Mind, Body/Spirit, Nature/Spirit. Nature is usually on the lower side, along with body. The nondualistic view within Zen has served me well, because my first, deepest love was the natural world, as well as Dogen's (in particular) and the Japanese sensitivity to nature. That may allow you to know me

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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a little bit better.

So I looked at suffering worldwide very specifically in terms of what actions are being caused, what thoughts and world views generate those actions, and whose intentions are having the greatest weight in carrying them out. This is a very condensed overview. I'm going to go through some of these quickly, assuming you've read the paper, and then invite us to dwell on two of them a little bit more. I want to invite us to think of structures as more than just us, as Meg said, but also as policies, government structures, histories of omission, and accepted behaviors of privilege and of submission—all of which are transmitted from generation to generation. In these senses, institutions are more than us.

From a Buddhist perspective, I use the four noble truths to try to name the cause of suffering, and then find a path to liberation through that suffering, hoping to find some skillful means or upaya, a term that some of you will be familiar with. In some cases there are ideas, and in other cases I hope you all will make the suggestions of what is most skillful. In all of this I'm going to borrow from the Christian tradition and issue a prophetic call to you to provide moral leadership in dealing with "out there." In our earlier talks this morning, we knew it was difficult to face the "in there" parts of these issues. But even while we are doing that, the "out there" parts are continuing in a profound way, creating tremendous suffering. Religious structures have always been very large players and big social forces. In fact, at this scale, individual action is not as powerful as structural systemic organizational action.

Peers speak to peers. This is a well-known truth among activists. So, the Pope, representing the entire church, speaking to the President in some sense is a peer to a peer; whereas, if I tried it, I don't think it would go quite as far. This is a call for moral leadership. Let me brush through one of the five aspects of suffering, because we have spent so much time on it. These are racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism—types of suffering resulting from discriminating attitudes and structures that are codified in policymaking regulations and cultural stereotypes. We talked at length about this in one particular arena, and of course it spills out elsewhere. I'll just throw out to you a couple of

ideas, and you may have this opportunity to see how they feel in your body. One of them is: What if we had a session as part of this dialogue where the men religious members met together from both Buddhist and Christian traditions and the women religious members met together? Then what kind of dialogues would we have? Or, in the foot washing ritual tonight, if all the men washed all the women's feet as a gesture toward the entire history and legacy of their roles.

We could spend much more time on this, but in a similar way I will only mention the second arena, the abuse of workers, which is very related to the greed of consumerism, but hasn't particularly come out in our conversations. Venerable Thubten Chodron mentioned many of the things I spoke about, but I would like to suggest that we consider human rights issues as deeply inextricably linked with consumerist issues in this day and age. They are fairly inescapable. The third issue of militarism is a particular arena where churches can provide moral leadership and they have a long tradition of this. I only want to emphasize that the United States bears some of the greatest responsibility here. The U.S. is the world's leading exporter of arms, supplying over \$700 billion worth of arms to over fifty authoritarian governments. The seeds for violence are being sown very widely. It's a very serious and overwhelming reality. Even in this current Middle East conflict, many of the weapons are being supplied by America, and many of the deals cut with countries surrounding Afghanistan in support of our efforts were being cut as arms trade deals. I think of Thich Nhat Hanh's version of the not-killing commandment in which he said, "Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Do whatever possible to prevent war. Aim to resolve all conflicts as they arise, no matter what the scale." This is a very large view of ahimsa and the non-killing precept based on his own experience with the Vietnamese war. I think this is one place where religious institutions, particularly monasteries, can provide refuge for difficult conversations and join together to support each other in that kind of role. It was done during the war in El Salvador and on other occasions, and we may be entering another one of these times.

The two issues of suffering I want to bring to your attention the most, which have not been discussed hardly at all, are the abuse of the

environment and media violence. The abuse of the environment reflects very much a Western approach to land management, which is based very deeply in some Christian philosophy. This is shown in mechanistic and utilitarian views of nature, reductionist models, short-term thinking, good/bad stereotyping of species and of landscapes. These images are throughout the Bible and many of our philosophical works, resulting in tremendous environmental violence. In this case it's not really helpful to take up responsibility as if we are all equally responsible. That actually blurs the boundaries of responsibility.

I remember I was particularly struck when Rainforest Action Network (RAN) tried a new strategy and somewhat shocked people by pulling out a full page ad in the *New York Times* with the pictures of five CEOs of the major logging corporations—Mitsubishi and several others—saying, "These are the people making the decisions that are logging these forests." It was asking people to take specific responsibility. There is a burgeoning religion in ecology movement, which if you are not aware of I fully invite you to join in on and support. In two specific ways I think members of this dialogue can collaborate. One is around an open space movement that is just emerging particularly from the Christian Catholic tradition. Catholics are the largest landholders, I believe, in the United States among religious traditions. We could have an interfaith coalition for land protection. It would actually be very easy because all the groundwork has been laid by land trusts and other nonsectarian movements. We could also join the ecological sustainability movement, which is exploding on university campuses. I co-chair an environmental council at the University of Vermont. The kinds of questions we look at are: How toxic are our cleaning products? What is our solid waste policy? How do we take care of our land? Do we use pesticides? We attempt a caretaking of our actual space. Those are some of the things we could do.

I have almost the least to say about media violence, and am the most curious about what others will say, because really nobody is taking the lead on it. There is a center for media literacy in Santa Monica; but other than some evangelical critiques of the media, I don't see a strong enough questioning of how mediated experience is not only shortening attention spans, but fragmenting them and literally breaking down the

imaginative capacity of the human mind. Because violence sells and violence overstimulates a fairly dulled population, numb from psychic assault, I think religious institutions who practice religious work that demands a deep, contemplative, and sustained attention span could be extremely useful; though first they may have to take a kind of assessment of their own media habits within the monasteries and retreat centers—How much television is watched? How much Internet? How much time on e-mail?—and then figure out how that kind of media literacy and awareness could be brought to the wider community.

I'm much more interested in the collaboration between Buddhists and Christians than in offering only Buddhist answers to these problems. I will end my talk with a question of how we can encourage each other in these bigger issues. What joint actions could we undertake together? Perhaps referring back to what we mentioned earlier, How could we invite the young people who are inheriting this world in its damaged ways to express to us what they are experiencing and what they need?

They are the ones getting the most concentrated inoculation of society's structural violence.

Continued in **Stephanie Kaza: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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