



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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## Abbot John Daido Looi: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, John Daido Looi, Prof. Donald Mitchell, Judith Simmer-Brown, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Ven. Samu Sunim, 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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**Samu Sunim:** Suffering has to be elevated and extinguished; no one is saved except through suffering. Both are true and right. However, I would say that suffering is optional. "Suffering is optional" is the truth, and sums up the four noble truths. Suffering is a great opportunity for liberation. In suffering, one becomes free, finally, to concentrate on impermanence and ultimately death. The best example in traditional Buddhism are the Son or Zen or Ch'an teachers when facing death. While it is true that in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism both the clergy and lay people are predominantly Pure Land practitioners, in Korea, and South Korea in particular, among the clergy, particularly in the Chogay order, they are predominantly Son or Zen practitioners. Some of them face great suffering at death. Yet even at that moment, they are challenged by their own disciples to maintain awakened and enlightened awareness. They usually die sitting up—that's the tradition—and being witnessed by disciples surrounding them, to make sure they carry enlightened awareness and consciousness through to the next life or the life of the candle, so that when they are reborn, they enlighten the consciousness with the light of that candle, and then come back to the world.

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**Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO,** is a Trappist monk at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia.

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**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

**Judith Simmer-Brown:** We've been working at Naropa University with a Master of Divinity program that is relevant to this discussion. It trains students to be Buddhist chaplains, working with the sick and dying in hospital. That's the ambition most of them have. Some of them would very much like to work in prison, and it seems that that's the main direction our students are moving. When our students do internships in the hospital, they work under supervisors who are mostly Christian chaplains. But it's been a very interesting dialogue for our students, because we train them in Tonglen as Geshe Lobsang taught yesterday, and the students develop a stabilized Tonglen practice that they then take into the hospital.

The students go into rooms where people are sometimes in great suffering or sometimes have very minor things happening. Many times, however, people are dying. Our students work in the emergency rooms and critical care situations. Instead of doing the Jesus prayer or Pure Land practice, they are doing Tonglen. This is an incredibly powerful practice. This is how we are taught to work with our own suffering and directly with the suffering of others at the bedside. There is an atmosphere in the room with someone dying that is an incredible teaching for us as practitioners: to open to suffering, to let it teach us very directly about our own mortality, and to share our presence with those who are dying, who want someone very much to just be there.

It has been such a powerful thing for us to be able to take our own experience of this and teach students to do it. One of the most interesting things for us has been to work with Christian supervisors who tell us that there is something about our students that when they go into the room they seem to be able to be there. That's true even if students are relatively new, simply because of Tonglen practice. Tonglen is a practice that could be used by any of us as a way to open to an environment in the hospital or the bedside of a dying person.

**Damon Geiger:** I want to go back to the idea of transforming death. In our Eastern Christian traditions, we are closet monophysites. A monophysite believes that Christ was only God and not really human. During this season of Easter, we sing many times during the day that

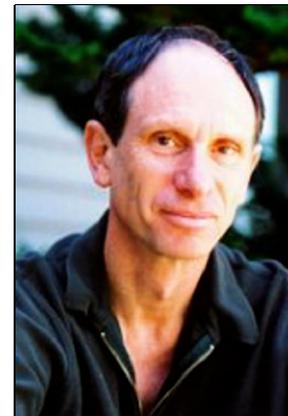
contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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**Joseph Goldstein** is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The

Christ destroyed death by death. When we have funerals, the funeral of the person is not in the Eucharist, but follows exactly what we do on the Good Friday evening and Holy Saturday service. In other words, what we do for the burial of Christ, we do for the burial of a Christian, which is exactly the same thing as the services on August 15 for the death of Mary. Christ being God was not bound by death but assumed death. The miracle for us isn't that he was resurrected. He is God; you expect that. The miracle is how he can die. By sharing and embracing death but not deserving death—because in our approach death is always a result of sin and Christ is sinless—he destroyed it by that very fact.

In the case of the mother of God, the theotokos, she shared in death, but she also was sinless. It was a pure death like Christ's death. The ideal for a Christian would be to make your baptism work. If in baptism you die with Christ and are resurrected, the last act that would have to be your death—hopefully a pure one—is that with Christ you pass through the realm of death. The prayers of the community accompany the person in his or her passage, making sure that it is a pure death. By our own death we can trample upon death, and that way try to transform the reality of it.

**Mark Delery:** I'm a physician who has been in practice for over fifty years. I've seen many people die. I'll just give you two or three illustrations you can use as koans. One was a woman named Mrs. Barry. She had cancer of the lungs, and I used to see her on house calls. When her time for dying approached, she was in the living room, and her family was all gathered around, weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth. They called me around nine pm. I dreaded the idea of going and having to spend the rest of the night—not so much with her as with her family. I entered the room. "Ah-huh," she said. Her family were weeping, "What are you saying, mother?" "Ah-huh." "What are you saying mother? What do you mean?" "I breathed." "What does that mean, mother?" "It means I'm not dead yet." That statement relieved that whole family. I could leave them. I could say, "Call me up when she dies." The whole thing illustrates how Christ has conquered death. When we get the fullness of that effect—we cannot say how, when, or where—that truth comes out.

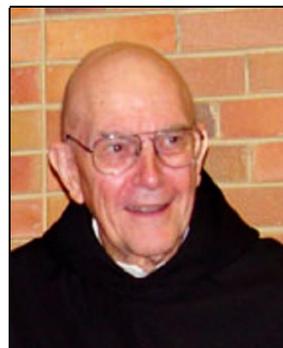
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

[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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**Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO**, has written many books on contemplative

I remember a nice old Irish monk at one of the abbeys, who had been born and brought up a Catholic and was a very simple man. As he was dying of stomach cancer, one of the more recent monks, a very fervent convert said, "Oh, brother, brother, we are so pleased you are suffering. You are a victim soul," etc. When he left this monk turned to me—I was attending him—and said, "I wish he would cut out that pious crap." Recently, my own sister died in Richmond, which was close to my monastery, and it was beautiful. She was a rosary-reciting Catholic. Here I am doing all these things in the monastery, hoping I can be peaceful at death, and when I visited her in the hospice, I just said, "Do you have any questions?" She said, "No. I didn't think it was going to be this easy."

**Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.):** When we think of death, there is a Buddhist meditation called the reflection of death. It means there are three kinds of death. One is momentary death—that we are dying and taking rebirth every moment. Mindful meditators are advised to contemplate on this momentary death so that the person will become conscious of death all the time. It doesn't mean that we stop everything and lie on the road to die. It simply means preparing our mind to face death peacefully. The second type of death is the conventional death when our body heat and mental activities and consciousness leave the body. That is what we call death. And we prepare ourselves to face that death by focusing our mind on this conventional death. People who are not trained in this mindful way of looking at death will have a lot of confusions at the moment of death. In Buddhist as in Christian traditions, we all are trying to help a person live and die peacefully, assuming that when somebody dies peacefully the person will be reborn in a peaceful place. We devise all kind of methods to help the dying: reciting Amitabha, reciting Jesus Christ. Sometimes we go to a dying person's home, stand by his bed, and recite certain sutras to console and soothe the person, and make him or her feel comfortable and peaceful. We deliver a sermon explaining the meaning of life and death, and all the good things the person has done in his life, so that the person will remember the wonderful things and yet has forgotten last moment.

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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**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 Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Doubleday, 2003).

These are various ways of helping the dying to die peacefully. Why? Because most Christians and Buddhists believe that there is a rebirth, either in heaven or in some other place. So the last moment, therefore, is extremely important. What we call death proximates the karma the mental state the person is at the moment of death is extremely important. That is why our Christian brothers and priests recite passages from the Bible and say the rosary. The Buddhists do various things. We all are trying in various ways to eliminate suffering of the dying and minimize the suffering of the bereaved families.

The third kind of death is as brother Damon mentioned, the pure death, which we call parinirvana, when the person's mind is completely free from all psychic irritants and defilements. That death is called the final death. That is the person who can pass away and come back to relieve the pain of the deceased, just like the Buddha did. We believe Buddha attained a pure death. He attained stages of of meditation. Then his closest disciple, Ananda, who had not attained that state of enlightenment, began to cry, thinking that Buddha passed away. The Buddha came back from his highest stages of meditation and relieved the mind of the Venerable Ananda.

**Joseph Goldstein:** I'm struck by the difference between the energy of the conversation of today and yesterday. I was reflecting on why there was a difference. It seems to me that in this discussion of suffering due to illness and disease and death, we have a certain kindness and compassion and love that comes forth even in the tone of our conversation because we know death is inevitable. When we were talking about violence, there was a certain edge of anxiety, panic. This goes back to the point that was raised yesterday: If we see violence as a disease of the earth body rather than a mistake, then would we relate to it differently? Would we relate to it with the same care and compassion and kindness as we've been talking about in relating to disease? I think the two are related in interesting ways.

**John Daido Loori:** I wanted to say that I feel that in the critical moments of life and death, of sickness and suffering, we really transcend traditions. When my mother was at the end of her life, she had really severe Alzheimer's, so didn't recognize any of the family. My

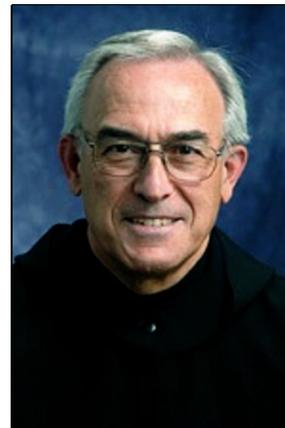
He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID.

**All articles by or about Prof. Donald Mitchell**



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

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**Fr. William Skudlarek**, OSB, has been the Secretary General of

brother called me to tell me that she was nearing the end, and I went to Florida, and sat with her. She was sitting in a chair, completely out of it. She had no idea who I was, and I had brought her a rose, and that triggered something. She just sat there, rocking, and muttering, "Rose, Rose, where is Rose?" I wanted so desperately to help her. It was clear from the look on her face that she was frightened. She knew the end was near, and she was scared to death. I had previously made contact with a Catholic priest to have him come and work with her, but somehow they didn't connect. Here I was, sitting with my mother, a Buddhist priest, my whole life is dedicated to helping people. And I didn't have the tools to reach her, to help her.

Then suddenly I thought, What was the continuum in her life that went all the way back to when she was a little girl? And it was prayer. I said to her, "Do you want to pray? Would you like to pray with me?" All my Buddhist invocations were useless. They had no meaning to her. When I said "pray," she looked at me. I'll never forget her look. Her eyes just penetrated mine, and she didn't say yes or no. I started praying the Hail Mary, the Our Father, and her lips started moving. She was kind of saying it quietly to herself. Then I switched to Italian, which is the language she knew as a child, and her voice then came into it. She closed her eyes, and I watched her face transform, become quiet and angelic, and she fell asleep in the chair.

The nurse came, and I helped her put her in the bed. The next morning I came to see her, because she was in a nursing home. She never woke up from that sleep is what the nurse told me. It seems that whatever we do, regardless of what the process or methodology is, it's the heart behind it that makes the difference.

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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**



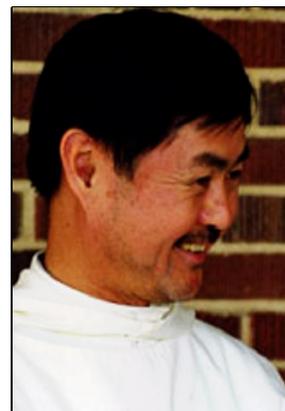
**Ven. Samu Sunim** is the spiritual director and head of the Zen Buddhist Temple in Ann Arbor and the Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

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**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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