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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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Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): I have a few experiences of both sickness and death. Until I was twenty years old, I had a photographic memory. I was able to read a 500-page book in fifteen minutes and remember everything. If somebody asked me a question, I was able to answer, not only giving the page numbers, but even the punctuation marks. Everything stuck in my mind. At the age of twenty, I had amnesia. I lost my memory so badly that I could not recognize the Sinhalese, English, Hindu, or Tamil alphabets. I had learned all these languages. Because my memory was so powerful, I just had to look at the page. I was always so proud because of my memory. Other students had to struggle very hard to memorize text. I didn't own many books because we were so poor, but I was able to borrow books from people and give them back within an hour because everything was stuck in my mind. When I lost my memory, I was desperate. It was like punching a hole in a big balloon with a pin. Pride disappeared. I even wanted to commit suicide because the sickness was so bad. I managed to overcome it because I took meditation very seriously, and I was able to recover some of my memory.

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

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

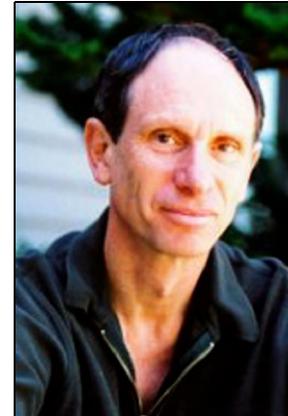
Once, I was seventeen years old, I nearly drowned. I was taken unconscious out of the water. When I opened my eyes, I saw a man over my body. What had happened was this man had pumped water out of my body and had done mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. There were hundreds of people around me, and next day my picture appeared in the newspaper. That was the first time I had publicity! In 1976, I was flying out to Sri Lanka. In Hawaii, I got on a Pan Am jumbo jet. I was sitting on a window seat. About an hour and a half after taking off, I saw fire coming from one of the engines. I thought it was excess fuel burning. Next minute, the pilot announced that the engine was on fire. Then the flight attendants began to explain how to deplane, how to sit, put on the seat belts, and so forth. "If we manage to return to Hawaii," they said, "this is how we should deplane."

It was a very interesting experience, because they told us the floor lights would be on automatically and then pregnant ladies, little children, old people, and others should line up and go to nearest exit as soon as the plane touched down—if we managed to return to Hawaii. The chutes would come down and all those who were at the door, without waiting for a second, should jump and run away from the plane. They made this announcement several times. I was watching this fire—sometimes blue, sometimes yellow, sometimes red, with occasionally large flames coming out of the engine. I turned around and looked at the people on the airplane. Except for the little toddlers, everybody else was stricken with fear. They were crossing themselves. Some were reading Bibles, some were crying. Some were kissing. Some were hugging. Some were almost half dead. I don't mean to boast, but I remained mindful. I thought: "This is the moment that I'm going to die." My contention was that when the plane dropped several thousand feet all of a sudden, we would all become unconscious and wouldn't know what happened after that. I thought that it was better for me to remain conscious, to remain mindful, aware of death, something I had been practicing since 1947 when I had amnesia.

Even now, every night, when I go to bed, I think: "This is my last night. Tomorrow I will not wake up." When I wake up, I work as if I'm not going to die. But at the same time I think, "Every moment I'm dying." During the experience of the plane engine being on fire, I may

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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have been the only one who stayed awake, mindful, not afraid of death. Of course, the plane managed to get into Hawaii; otherwise, I would not have been here today. The chutes came down and we all jumped as instructed. That was the first time in my life I had jumped in a chute. Even as a little child, I have never seen a chute—let alone jump in it. So I was able to enjoy that jump off the plane. If we remain mindful, sickness and death may not be a big burden for our mind.

A monk who wishes to be anonymous: Some years ago in a major clinical depression, I really wanted to die. The interior suffering was so much, I planned suicides to be right at the superior's door. You can see what that's saying. A number of times I had the blade at my jugular. What stopped me each time? It was not fear of hell, because I don't believe that God condemns suicides. But I would think about saying goodbye to the people that I loved, and that's what stopped me. I knew that my friends, some of them in this room, from whom I had hidden these thoughts and actions so well, would blame themselves. They would look over their lives and say, "When did I miss this, to let him go ahead with this?"

And I owe my life to a monastic writer, St. Aelred of Rievaulx and Spiritual Friendship. I would keep thinking about that, and that's what stopped me. I did go for psychiatric help, so if you ever hear of me falling off a cliff or something, it's not me doing it! But there was something in the monastic tradition that offered hope out of that friendship. St. Aelred's work on spiritual friendship centers on Jesus at the Last Supper, where he embraces us as friends. So, we very much have something to offer in our monastic setting, and that's hope.

Barbara McCracken: My story isn't as serious as the last two we've had. For some years I've kept the line from the Rule of Benedict about keeping death daily before your eyes printed on a little card on my desk. A few months ago I did have a serious illness, and I tried to examine all the feelings that came up when I found out that this happened. Some of the feelings I probably didn't handle real well, but the main thing I felt was a loss of control. And I thought, "What do I control? What am I losing here?" Finally, I decided it was my calendar book with all my appointments in it, and all of the activities I am



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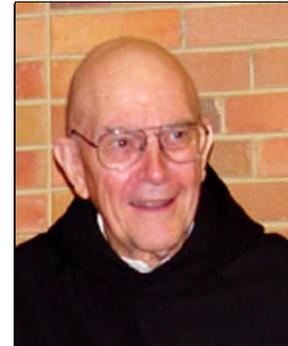
involved in. Right now my prognosis is pretty good, and I'm recovering. But I don't want to go back to exactly the way of living I had in the past. Gratitude is one of the things I'm trying to nourish in my own spiritual practice right now.

William Skudlarek: Most of you probably know that I spent seven years in Japan. After about five years there, it became more and more clear to me that Japan was not the place where I would be able to spend the rest of my life—for a lot of different reasons. I mentioned this to our abbot shortly after he was elected. When I was home last July, I went to see him, having no anticipation of an early return. He asked me if I would be willing to come back in that year to be his assistant. That came as wonderful, totally unexpected news. I went back to Japan, and every morning when I got up, the first thought in my head was: "I'm going home. I'm going home." It just a wonderful sense of being reunited with my monastic community in the States. Then, in preparing to give a retreat, I dealt with keeping death daily before our eyes. Suddenly, that's what it meant: "I'm going home." It wasn't that depressing thought that it was coming to an end. It was "I'm going home." It reshaped the way I think about my death.

John Daido Looi: When Ajahn Sundara suggested that exercise about illness, I tried to do it. I thought, "I have never really gotten seriously ill in my life." A few years ago, however, I got pneumonia. It was the worst that I've ever had, and I felt very weak and vulnerable, and started thinking about how old I was getting. That implanted the thought. For the next couple of years I started becoming aware of my limits—that they've changed. One of the places where that realization was very important to me was in the wilderness trips I lead that are pretty rigorous. I'm usually the main person there. I began to realize that if I needed to rescue somebody, I didn't have the strength anymore to swim any great distance, so I started adapting. I made sure to have two strong, young people with me whenever we went on these trips. My experience is important for the trip, but my physical endurance is not. I do get upset when one of the monks comes and wants to carry my canoe. "Get out of here, punk," I think. "I can carry my own canoe."

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

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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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Another thing I've been finding that I do, almost unconsciously, is kind of preparing to die and trying to organize the things for the monastery, labeling things so the monks can go through my files and find what they need to find—getting rid of junk on the computer that's not useful. I'm trying to think about the future, about the next generation, and about the things that need to happen and be taken care of. But I never really feel that I'm going to die. I know several times while I was young and in the Navy I came very close to death on several occasions; but even at the very edge of it I never for a moment thought I was going to die. I was invulnerable.

I still carry that feeling that it's not going to happen, yet I know logically that it will. But in my heart I proceed as if it can't happen. It's an interesting process. Thanks for suggesting it.

Joseph Goldstein: A few years ago I had an experience of being very debilitated, and the emotion that arose with it was extreme anguish. At that time I really understood what led people to suicide. I wasn't actually contemplating it, but I was approaching that space. What turned it around was a word that came to me as I was lying there, hugging a pillow. The word that came like a kind of mantra in my mind was "courage." It just kept repeating itself: "Courage, courage." I could feel my heart getting stronger. It was really like a momentary shift of going from a space of fear and hope to one of total presence. I felt courage was the valor of being present. It was amazing to me how hope had kept me locked into the anguish as much as fear. It was only when I could let go of the hope that I was just there. It was like that [snaps fingers].

Heng Sure: Ajahn Sundara talked about "as it is" as a kind of a hallmark. My reflection was how I would very much appreciate folks, as they leave and go back to their various communities, to do a little bit of advocating for Buddhism. When you hear folks say, "Don't you think Buddhism is just so negative and pessimistic and passive," say, "No, it's neither pessimistic nor optimistic. It's realistic." Is it not passive? No. In fact, what we are hearing are multitudes of strategies and techniques for being proactive based on the reality. It's based on that coping. I think the pessimistic negative view is largely a product of the



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.

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translation of Nirvana by the early European scholars as “extinction.” Extinction is what happens to dinosaurs. But Nirvana is not an extinction.

Brother Paul Quenon: Ajahn Sundara, you mentioned the importance of reflecting on our own end, and doing it every day. I find that from experience the best way to do it is by accompanying people who are in that process of sickness. I had to take care of my mother, who was an extremely strong person. She had seventeen children, and she was totally paralyzed for the last three years. I spent the last ten days in the hospital with her, being her nurse, and I’ve learned more about my own finality and I’m totally at peace with it. Even at a distance, in the monastery, many times I would be totally with her. As monks, I think we have a big advantage to have people of all ages in the monastery and to have an opportunity to be with people in that stage and detach us from ourselves, yet at the same time acquire the deep knowledge of our own finality and suffering.

Ajahn Amaro: I appreciated that exercise that Ajahn Sundara described, also. I think certainly in a contemplative life, one of the skills that is so important is to be able to receive those experiences, like painful emotional experiences, where we meet that feeling of powerlessness and lack of control. My own experience of working with this whole area is to do a lot of what Father Thomas Keating was talking about, dealing with the early childhood reactivity and the instinctual domain of the mind. There is a huge part of us that is terrified of sickness, that retreats from pain. It has a lot to do with meeting the sort of reptile brain reactivity we have that pulls away from natural experiences.

It’s exactly what Joseph Goldstein was saying. It’s the courage to find the heart that can receive those instinctual rejections of pain, of loss. Those states can be emotional—like feeling grief, of being a failure as a monk or a nun, or being a useless person, or that you haven’t achieved anything in life—as well as physical. We need to hold that experience of that instinctual reaction, and receive it into the heart and digest it. That process is crucial to any kind of development. We need to enable the heart to redigest those feelings. In that digestion there is an automatic

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awakening to what is beyond sickness and aging in us, that which is deathless and unborn. It's strange: only by the apprehension of those feelings and allowing them to be seen can the heart awaken to that dimension of its nature which is beyond them.

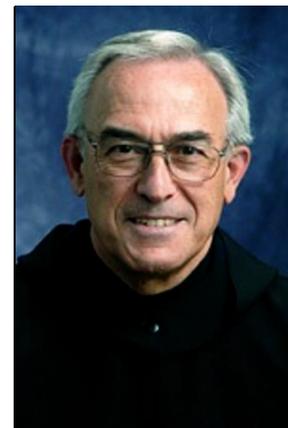
Blanche Hartman: When I got atrial fibrillation, I found that I didn't have the stamina that I was accustomed to having. There were some days where I felt I really shouldn't get up to open the Zendo and do the morning meditation and service. I would get up anyhow. Then a couple of hours later I would have a fibrillation, and I would have to go to bed for twenty-four hours. I thought, "Well, okay, maybe I'm going to have to resign." I was feeling terrible. I said to my friend, "I'm going to have to resign as abbess. I can't get up every morning." She said, "No, you don't." I said, "Well, Suzuki Roshi got up every morning." And she said, "No, he didn't. Don't you remember when he got sick? He said, 'You may have to sit zazen for me some days. I may not be able to be here.'" And I thought, "Oh, you know, I had an idea of myself as heroic abbess, leading the community, something, you know. I had some big idea."

The next time I gave a Dharma talk a couple of days later, I told people this, and I said, "You know, I may not be able to open the Zendo some mornings. Some mornings, if I stay in bed for an hour or so, then I can get up, and I don't have to spend twenty-four hours for it to go away. So, some days you may have to do zazen for me." Once I took that pressure off myself, I never had another incidence. It's interesting how our idea of who we are and how we ought to be can really mess us up.

Ajahn Sundara: I am really grateful for Thubten Chodron's intervention in keeping it right to the point. Suddenly, everything shifted, and that was very beautiful—to come from a personal experience rather than talking about external conditions. That really made a beautiful sharing.

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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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