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[Bulletins](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
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[Contact Us](#)
[Support MID](#)
[Benedict's Dharma](#)
[Gethsemani I](#)
[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
[Abhishiktananda
Society Bulletins](#)

 [Help](#)

Discipline and Spontaneity

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Fr. Francis Kline, OCSO

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

[\[Click here for a printer-friendly version of this article\]](#)

Page 2 of 2

Kline (continued): Another perspective that struck me was the wonderful story about the Buddha and Punna, who is traveling to a foreign country where he's afraid that the natives will be abusive and threatening, or they'll be worse and beat him with the blow of the fist, or they'll be worse than that and beat him with the blow of the stick. This is in the section titled, "Why Be Good?" And it becomes clear that the moral life has its own beauty and its own reality, something that we are all searching for. I'm reminded of a kind of an extension of the monastic tradition in the West: the perfect joy of St. Francis, where you have the same kind of story. St. Francis talks to Leo, and he says, "God's little lamb, What does perfect joy consist in?" And Leo says, "Well, I don't know." And Francis says, "Well, it's when you go and knock on the door of the community and they don't know who you are, or they treat you coldly. But that's not yet perfect joy." You all know the story. And then St. Francis goes on a little further and says to Leo, "God's little lamb, What is perfect joy?" and Leo says, "I don't know." And St. Francis says, "Well, that's when you go and knock on the door of the community and they throw you out. They're annoyed that you're there. But yet this is not yet perfect joy." Leo is getting more and more confused, and finally St. Francis says, "Little Leo, little lamb of God, What is perfect joy?" Leo says, "I don't know." And St. Francis says, "Well, it's when you go and knock on the door and they don't know who you are and they say you're a robber and they kick you out and beat you up: then that is perfect joy." It's a complete reversal of what we would normally think, but the Buddha was saying very much the same thing to Punna. So how far are we to take this moral concept, this



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Fr. Francis Kline, OCSO, served as abbot of Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, until his

moral beauty in one's life to a extreme even of glory—but it's not imposed, that kind of outreach to joy? It's something that's open to us, but I was glad to see it quoted in the chapter.

Another intriguing issue that was explored in the book is impermanence—the idea of reincarnations of course, but the impermanence of any one particular state. Well, we have that, of course, in the Rule, in the admonition to keep death before one's eyes at every moment. And of course that may seem dour, as is pointed out in the book, but if you stick with that understanding of the impermanence of life, then you start to see not only that life is finite as we know it now, but also that it's weighted with moral beauty, as the Buddha said; it's weighted with significance. Here's another idea or experience: that every moment is a moral opportunity; that there's no such thing as a neutral moment. Now Jesus teaches this: You're either for me or against me; you can't be neutral. You're either going this way or you're going that way. You can't just stand still and say, "I'm out of this game." Now, why we can't do that is the interesting question. It has something to do with life itself, I think. So this idea of keeping death before one's eyes really is a loaded issue. It's not just skeletons and crossbones. It's "what does life mean?" And "what does time mean?" And "what does space mean?" It's very well brought out, I believe, in that chapter on discipline and spontaneity.

Then we get to the wonderful reflections on the psalms and the one million recitations, a very beautiful, evocative description of the psalms by Norman Fischer, I believe. We all agree that the psalter, and rituals and prayers are extremely important in the monastic tradition. No matter what tradition you're in, it seems that those who are able to penetrate into the far reaches of that tradition have these things always on their minds and on their lips and hearts. Again, it's not so much something imposed as it is a response to something that's bigger than we are. So the psalter for Christian monastics becomes a way of life. It becomes the receptacle of all our feelings and our responses to life. It becomes the way we process life, the way we process experiences. And in the midst of that it becomes prayer, and it becomes the means, according to the Rule of St. Benedict, to continual prayer, if you use it correctly.

death in 2006. He was a member of MID's Board of Directors and participated in the Benedict's Dharma conference in September 2001.

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- **By Category**
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- **By Article Title**
- **By Bulletin**

I was very edified, intrigued, and delighted to see Judith's little autobiography about university administration in the midst of practice, something I can very humbly relate to. There was more of her revealed there in those several little paragraphs than most people might realize. Anyone who's tried to keep up a monastic practice in the midst of heavy responsibilities realizes that it's a great challenge, and it really does evoke from a monastic tremendous reserves of insight and even energy. When I'm asked to do something impossible, if I believe in the one who asks me and I believe in my own practice, I'll find a way. And this dilemma discovers in me places and experiences that I would never have imagined. That's real spontaneity, if you know what I mean.

I was also intrigued by the wonderful discussion on food and kitchens. I'm reminded of an experience I had one time at Gethsemani. I poured coffee in the guest house for years—I guess that's a very Buddhist thing to do, pouring beverages. And I remembered that the great Benedictine monk from Marialach, Burckhardt Neunhauser, who's still alive, in his late nineties, I believe, was at Gethsemani one time—it must have been in the late seventies—for a visit and to give some lectures. And of course he comes from the great Beyranese tradition, wonderful Beyranese art, and I'm not sure how many of us realize how disciplined their kitchen is as well. Well, he got to Gethsemani, and there laid out in the back of the refectory was a multitude of salads and tacos, all sorts of things. Now there is a story behind that story. I don't think I'm telling tales here, but Gethsemani was never known for its kitchen [laughter]. And I can tell you stories about that, sweet potatoes every Saturday for the rest of your life, and as the season progressed they got harder and harder. But anyway, we have a Hispanic brother in the community there, Brother Ambrose, who is very wise in the tradition of St. Bernard, and he said if you're going to make a monastic foundation, for God's sake make sure there's a good cook in the foundation, because you get to people by their stomachs, believe it or not. You never ask a monk to do anything before dinner; you wait 'til after dinner [laughter].

So Ambrose realized that the kitchen was in need of some help, and he

asked the Abbot if he could start to prepare some Mexican salads. Well, the Abbot said yes, and after several months the community started living off the salads and forget the rest of it. So here's this choice of salads that are really stocked, I mean, there are refried beans, there's sour cream, there's everything in these salads. Sometimes there are banana splits there for salads [laughter]. So Burckhardt walks into our refectory and he says, "My God, I don't know what to do, there's such a choice!" Because at Marialach, you just eat what's put out. And here he's in this Trappist place and there's such a proliferation of foods he doesn't know what to do. Well, I think that's where we all are at this point in time. I was interested in the revelation in the book about this particular monastery being known as a gourmet vegetarian delight. Well, what do we do with that? Does that represent where we are as monastics in relation to a fast-changing culture that's valuing food more than it ever did before? I don't think it's a question of a danger of becoming gourmets; I think it's a question of a response to or even a reaction against the cheapening of food and the tremendous lowering of cultural standards when it comes to eating, exemplified by all these fast-food places. There's got to be a healthy response to that, and isn't it fitting that monasteries often are the places where that can happen? So I don't know if it's so much a problem in monastic circles as it could be a healthy response to something that's going awry in our world culture. I just offer that as a perspective. I was delighted to see the admission that this is, or can be, an issue in any community. And we're thinking about these things not just for disciplinary reasons or ascetical reasons, but to seek a deeper kind of discipline and asceticism, about what's good for your body, about taking in foods that will strengthen practice, prayer, and mindfulness.

Finally, the last couple of pages in that chapter had to do with motivation, a wonderful idea, a wonderful perspective in monastic tradition. I'm reminded of the prophet in any kind of monastic community. There are always the prophets who are a thorn in the side of the superior. You know, you'd rather get them out or neuter them by making sure that whatever they say in discussion is taken care of by committees, that kind of thing [laughter]. But consider the motivation that is strong enough to be not just altruistic but prophetic—that is, I may be offending somebody in my community because I've got this

particular insight into the monastic tradition. Some people in the community may say, "That's just his own thing, the way he thinks it should be, and we should react against it as a community." Well, that's one perspective. Or perhaps the prophetic monk is responding to a spirit that's bigger than himself and the community at that particular moment. The prophetic voice that is discerned as altruistic, that is honored several generations down the line, may not be discerned as altruistic at the moment. It may take several abbots or twenty-five years for that perspective to be validated by the group, by the community, by the tradition.

Those are just some responses that I have had. I'm delighted by the book, delighted to be here, and I'm hoping that some of the things I have said will spark some response and some discussion. Thank you.

[<< Previous Page](#)

Continued in **Discipline and Spontaneity: Discussion
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