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Tradition and Adaptation: Discussion

Roger J. Corless, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Rev. Kusala, Jack Milan, Scott Rains, Judith Simmer-Brown, Garth M. Stanton, Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Ven. Yifa

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Rev. Kusala: The Buddhist Western monastic conference has been held six times so far and we have a seventh one coming up at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. What surfaces at these Western monastic conferences in Buddhist tradition is, number one, we're all wearing different kinds of robes, so we're a very colorful bunch. And I'm hoping one day when American Buddhism takes hold, our robes will be of a more blue denim nature [laughter] to have some connection with America. But what came up at the last conference was the fact that most Buddhist Western monastics don't have health insurance. They don't have life insurance. They don't have any place to go when they get old. It was so wonderful when I was sitting in the chapel this afternoon to look up and see the nuns on the second floor. I was just joyful to see that. And now in America, if you're an old Western Buddhist monastic, you're pretty much fending for yourself. So there are an awful lot of difficulties involved. I'm very lucky. I have health insurance and a room to live in and I get a couple of bucks each month. And I'm doing well, I'm a very successful Buddhist monk in America [laughter].

Joseph Wong: My comment is not related to the habits of the future American Buddhist monk, it's more related to what Columba mentioned in his talk. It's about the influence of St. Augustine on the Rule of St. Benedict. And he mentioned the communal, fraternal aspect, the

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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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human warmth probably came from Augustine in many cases. I would like to add another aspect which is also, I think, very central to the Rule of St. Benedict—and that was the main topic of the earlier session this afternoon about passing from or growing from discipline to spontaneity. I think that's the heart of our monastic life and especially monastic formation. The whole purpose of the process of formation is growth or transformation from initial resistance or pain or fear, gradually growing towards a maturity in spontaneity, love and joy, a love that expels fear, a joy that compensates all our labor. That crucial aspect mentioned in the Rule of St. Benedict, has its source, I think, in Augustine through Cassian perhaps, through the Conferences, especially Conference Thirteen about chastity.

But the ultimate source I think is from Augustine and, in this passage, Augustine tells clearly it's the fruits of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit and that forms the center of Augustine's spiritual teaching on this inner transformation—the healing of our wounded human will is through the working of the Holy Spirit. That's especially treated in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit and Letter, De Spiritu Et Littera*. There he thinks the marvelous transforming work of the Holy Spirit consists in transforming our delight in illicit desire or passion or carnal pleasure (carnal in the wider sense of St. Paul including everything that goes against the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit transforms our delight in this illicit desire or pleasure into a new delight, delight in spiritual desire, spiritual pleasure. And that's the working of the Holy Spirit in us, very much emphasized by St. Augustine, especially that treatise *On the Spirit and Letter*.

So I think we have to thank St. Augustine, in spite of all the other maybe negative things he has brought to Western Christianity. But at least on these two major aspects, the communal aspect, the human bonds and this inner transformation so important in our monastic journey, I think we have to give thanks to Augustine. We can use this knowledge to understand the Rule better, because the Rule only describes this process of transformation or this journey without giving much explanation. It says it's the working of grace, but the Holy Spirit is mentioned only twice (if I am wrong please correct me) in the Rule of St. Benedict, whereas St. Augustine explicitly mentions the Holy Spirit



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Dr. Scott Rains is a resident scholar at the University of California-Santa Cruz,

continuously. It's the working of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the working of the Spirit, that accomplishes this process of inner growth and transformation in us. I think we really have to thank Augustine and I thank Columba for mentioning the influence of Augustine, through Cassian, on the Rule of St. Benedict.

Ven. Heng Sure: Rev. Kusala mentioned the monastics conference and, rather than hearing it from my memory, I'd like to ask Bhikshu Heng Lyu, who is the Abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and was tapped at age 30 by our late minister Shren Wa to take up that duty. The reasons why, he said, "He looks a lot like an Arhat first of all and second he's really tall so nobody will bully him."

Heng Lyu: Whether you have heard of an abbot or not, I want to point out that Buddha didn't develop the position of abbot. In the tradition, there was no abbot position in a sangha. However, the wisdom of Buddha and St. Benedict are similar regarding democracy. Buddha created the regulations to call a meeting, whether a kitchen meeting, or a closed meeting, or even a special kind of meeting where the group dealt with a person who was rebellious and didn't admit their mistake. Everybody was asked three times, "Do you have any questions?" If they were silent, then the person was passed. But later, people were lazy; they didn't want to study the Vinaya or take over. So they have paid a price when the senior or the abbot passes away and no one can take over. Originally, Buddhists took part as a whole group to take over their own lives, not to put all the burden on the abbot or abbess.

Yong Chin Denn: Before I came here, I promised myself I was going to keep my mouth shut this time [laughter], because I've been getting in a lot of trouble lately over my speaking out. But I just wanted to ask one question about obedience. As a lay person looking at monastic obedience, I guess I do not quite understand how that works. To me, God does not push anybody, force anybody, and every quality of God like beauty, peace, or love or endurance and gentleness, all those things instantly melt human hearts. You don't have to force anybody. But I can see the purpose of having somebody let go of their own will, because I practice centering prayer. I do in centering prayer I let go of my thoughts. To me your will is your thoughts. Is that your main

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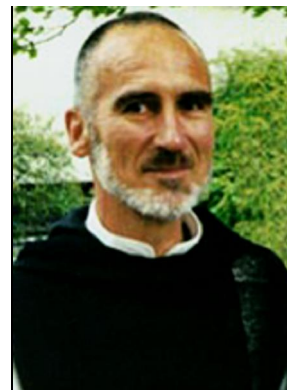
purpose of obedience, just letting go of your thoughts, or is the idea that the abbot is always right because he is a direct descendant from God or something like that. Especially in Catholicism, the Pope is infallible. And I have a whole huge trouble with that [laughter].

Patrick Henry: Be assured that none of the Catholics in the room has any trouble with that, right? [laughter]

Columba Stewart: Well, whatever the Pope has, I don't think abbots or prioresses have it [laughter]. But I'm not one, so I say that. I think the first thing I want to say is maybe to return to a point I made toward the end that traditional Benedictine understanding of obedience has those two dimensions. One of them I labeled ascetical, of working on the will and trying to relax the will, so that one can be more open to full knowledge and acceptance of the self, more open to the word of God and scripture, more open to God's will mediated through other people. Because, we would say that God's will often comes to us through others, rarely because we hear a voice that comes from heaven.

The second dimension, though, I think is important in Benedictine community and it is that notion of obedience as learning to recognize the needs of the other, and to respond to the needs of the other rather than our typical preference for our own comfort or desire. I think that's what Benedict brings out beautifully at the end of the Rule. I think it's important also just for a reality check, and I think you all know this. It is very rare that my abbot tells me to do something. I mean almost never. Most obedience in Benedictine life is implicit—in the way that the community has chosen to structure the day or the way that we serve each other at table. So rarely is it a contest of wills, or do I feel that I'm being assaulted by authority. I think when that kind of thing happens, as I noted, it can be an abusive situation and that is not what Benedict is envisioning. There are horror stories about monastic obedience, but there are also beautiful stories about how we learn those reflexes of generosity and openness. And I think that's the real point of what he's teaching.

Patrick Henry: This question of what is the nature of monastic



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obedience reached very high public prominence recently when Time Magazine had the article over the controversy over Sister Joan Chittister's appearance at the Women's Ordination Conference. Joan is a dear friend and I love to see her doing what she's doing. To me, the most powerful moment in that whole episode was her prioresses saying to the congregation in Rome, "We have a different understanding of obedience and you can tell me to deliver a letter to Sister Joan saying she can't do this, but that's not the way obedience and authority work in our community. We discern as a community." So, many of you know much more about that than I do. I'm reminded of another, perhaps apocryphal story at St. John's, and it might be Columba who said this, but it has always illustrated for me this monastic loose-jointedness when it comes to authority, whether inside the community or outside. Someone once asked one of the monks at St. John's, "What do you do when you get a directive from the Bishop that asks you to do something the community doesn't want to do?" And he said, "We post it on the bulletin board." [laughter]

David Steindl-Rast: I think there is a linguistic problem with obedience. We have to recognize that word "obedience" just doesn't have the right ring any more. And I would go along if I had the daring of Abbot Patrick, I would translate the word obedience in the Rule always with "heart listening." I think that comes much closer to really saying what obedience is—it's a thorough listening. I think we might just dare just once in a while to say heart listening when we want to say obedience.

Patrick Barry: Could I venture just to read a sentence from the Rule of Benedict? Of course you must understand that it's being distorted by the incompetent translaor [laughter]. Nevertheless, it is a sort of interpretation.

That means that the abbot or abbess should never teach anything, nor make any arrangement, nor give any order which is against the teaching of the Lord. Far from it, everything he or she commands or teaches should be like a leaven of the holiness that comes from God, infused into the minds of their disciples.

**Fr. Columba Stewart,
OSB**



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.

**All articles by or about
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Ven. Yifa belongs to Fo Guang Shan and is Dean of Hsi Lai University in Los Angeles. She has a Ph.D. from Yale University. She participated in Gethsemani Encounters I and II, in Benedict's Dharma, and hosted Nuns in the West I and II.

Scott Rains: I especially appreciated the last several inputs. Having had the privilege of (I was going to say of studying with Columba, but he knows better)—but at least I showed up most of the time in class—I know there is much more that he can offer. One of the most joyful experiences, I think for me, in being exposed to other practices is the light that they then shed on my own tradition, and the resonances. I think what my heart longs for is a direction that Columba has been pointing us to. In particular, when he specified his take on the Rule, which is that he sees Benedict as the culmination of a long tradition. He's very eloquent on that, and if you haven't had the chance to hear him in depth or study with him I would certainly encourage anyone Buddhist, Christian or other wise to do that.

And it is a matter of language. It's a matter of first understanding that he does represent or is a focal point for a depth of tradition and a variety of traditions, and what my heart longs for is that can be communicated not only to us who are lay Catholics, oblates, or Christian, but especially to Buddhist practitioners—that the language gap and the exposure are somehow crossed so that the real depth is ascertained. And I would say this is true perhaps especially for Western Buddhists, because we assume that we have an understanding of Christianity, or Catholicism in my case, which I didn't, and monasticism, maybe through popularization or spending a little time in a monastery. So to wrap that up, I would like to say simply that there is great depth in looking at Benedict in this particular way and then just diving into that tradition. And I would encourage those monastics who are capable of doing that, of bringing that out to us as lay people and those who are involved. Or maybe we can get involved in monastic interreligious dialogue to bring that forward, so it takes on a life of its own.

Patrick Henry: Thank you very much and we will reassemble here at 7:00.

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Ven. Yifa

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