



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Postscripts

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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Patrick Henry: In the course of our time together we've heard some Christian monastics responding to Benedict's Dharma: **Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of St. Benedict** and it occurred to us that here, at the conclusion, we should ask a Buddhist to reflect on the conference and the book. So I'm happy to introduce to you Reverend Heng Sure. He's the senior American disciple of Venerable Master Shen Wa. He was ordained in 1976 at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California. He is now a doctoral candidate, all but dissertation, at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and is serving as director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. He has been a board member of the United Religious Initiative since 1997. I am confident that every one in this room has a feature of their story that would cause amazement in all of us. But I am quite confident in saying that what I'm next going to tell you is an example of mind-blowing, heart-stopping, prophetic imagination and initiative that will out do anything any of the rest of us can say. Rev. Heng Sure made an 800-mile, 33-month-long pilgrimage for world peace from South Pasadena to Ukiah, California, taking three steps and making a full prostration after each set of three steps for the full distance. Moreover, he maintained a vow of total silence for six years during this period and otherwise. To give a sense of that, for those of us who were at the Gethsemani Encounter in 1996, if, immediately after that, we had stopped speaking it would still be ten months before we could utter a word. He's talking now, he says, and is pursuing ministry as a translator of Chinese Buddhist texts.



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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Reverend Heng Sure has been an ordained Buddhist monk in the Chan lineage of China

Venerable Heng Sure: Thank you Patrick. Good morning everyone. I get the pleasure and the honor to extend thank you. I can't say on behalf of everyone, but at least we can join with one heart perhaps to say thank you to the sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery and the staff here. I think of Sister Mary Luke and how kind she has been at providing everything and to Sister Meg, what can you say? I don't think any one was uptight and somehow the schedule just flowed. I'd like to also acknowledge the power of the vision of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in making this possible. And Father William was our wise guide. We heard from Father Patrick and Patrick Henry was both the editor of the book and kind of the editor of the conference as well. Sister Sarah Schwartzberg, Abbot Francis Kline, Father Columba Stewart, Father James Wiseman, all spoke, all turned the wheel as we met.

It's fallen to me today, not to talk so much about the book, but to talk about the talking about the book. Brother David Steindl-Rast gave a postscript to the book and my job is to somehow give a postscript to Brother David's postscript, and then bring it up to present so it's no longer post, right, because it's not over yet. But the flavor of brotherhood and sisterhood, of fellowship, is what I think I will take home with me most, and it began actually as soon as we got off the airplane, walking down the corridor in the Indianapolis airport. Someone comes up and says, "I beg your pardon, are you going to the Dharma conference?" "Yes, I am." He said, "You don't happen to know a nun by the name of Mary Margaret Funk, do you? I'm her brother." So this is Brother James going to the birthday party of a daughter, and as soon as we arrived at Benedict Inn, the first person to come out and greet us was the brother of Mary Margaret Funk, and this was Ed. I said, "My goodness, the Funks populate the Catholic world in Indiana." [laughter] And I fully expect to be sent to the airport or meet one going out. So the brothers of the sisters made me feel welcome. And the sister of the brother is the spirit that I think I'll also carry with me, that's Sister Mary Margaret herself, who plays recorder very

since 1976. He is the director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery.

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sweetly.

The second Buddhist-Christian conference that kicked this off was in 1987 at the Graduate Theological Union. There were some 800 folks there. It was a week long and it was epochal, a milestone. I remember hearing that there could be a monastic dialogue, and I went to the monastic dialogue full of hope and the reports of the monastics were, first of all we were told we couldn't meet, for some strange reason, it was very cryptic. Then, they met nonetheless and they met in the university church on the hill at GTU, and there was talk about some exchange between European monks and Zen monastics. Some brothers were doing Zen meditation but it was scattered. Pascaline Coff was there, and gave a report. That was 1987.

Well a lot has changed. Talk about the progress of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in a few short decades! Monastics had a hard time finding each other, even there on the GTU campus there was a wish unrealized. But last year in New Camaldoli down in Big Sur, we saw the maturation of this dialogue and how far we've come. At the New Camaldoli conference, we got to hear about Christian monastics and laity, Catholics in particular but not limited to Catholics, who had had experience with Eastern forms by this time. Dr. John Borelli gave a knowledgeable and nuanced response to Sister Donald Corcoran's presentation on Confucianism, exchanging Chinese footnotes. That's the kind of sophistication I couldn't have predicted in 1987. Father Nicholas Koss talked about his experience training nuns in Taiwan and learning their meditation. Father Thomas Hand talked about his 27 years of Zen training. Father William Skudlarek has precise pronunciation of Japanese. Father Kevin Hunt talked in his inimitable way he says [Brooklyn accent], "Yeah, I cultivate Zen. Yeah, I went to the Pashana sits. Yeah, I know Korean Buddhism, too." [laughter] So he says, "I don't know any Catholic monastics who don't do meditation." My goodness, we've come a long way. This is wonderful. So, here we are, now, balancing, harmonizing that interest of Western monastics and

Eastern meditation techniques and spirituality by coming back and reflecting on the Western tradition, the Rule of St. Benedict.

Benedictines love the Rule, that's clear. Inviting Buddhists to respond shows a kind of maturity, a kind of depth and a love to share that I think needs to be commented on. The Catholic community said, here's our jewel. What light is reflected from your radiance? What corner of the spectrum comes off that we can all share in? The light that makes divine. As Brother David reminded us, the light of divinity breaks the cycle of violence. I believe that. Some of the anecdotes that I'll carry away are how gracious Brother David was in taking responsibility for the Buddha image falling off the wall at the very beginning. He said, "Oh, I was applauding Sister Meg's contribution too hard and my applause knocked it off the wall." What a wonderful thing to say.

Now I wanted to say something about the Rule in the sense that the word that came up from Dom Patrick was, we have trouble with the word obedience, young people in particular. And my reflection on how that obedience might be interpreted, something that I'll take back from this conference, is the idea that the Rule and certainly the Vinaya, the Buddha said, "After my demise, after my Nirvana, take the precepts as your teacher." Now that's a bold statement because if you take the precepts as your teacher, the precepts that the rule must be perfection, the role of the teacher, the role of the rule in embodying that perfection is to say, "This is the ideal." It's neither in deficiency nor is it in excess. When we come face to face with that rule, our job is to match ourselves with that perfection and detract where we are excessive and augment where we are deficient to match that perfection. When that is done perfectly, we have learned by reduction. What happens from the Buddhist context is that the rule is nothing that you add on top, it's something that arises from within so that you match the form. When you match the mold, there is perfection. The light, ad deificum lumen, that light is held in by the precepts. What is fundamentally perfect and complete, the

innate Buddha nature, the image of God, is allowed to remain.

What we do to the rule for obedience is bow to it. We bend to it. We cultivate our nature, increasing where deficient, subtracting where it's deficient, so that that perfect pure light, ad deificum lumen, remains and shines. At that point, there is no rule necessary. Like Confucius who said, "Finally at age 70, I embodied the rules so thoroughly that I could follow my mind without fear of transgression." At age 70, he said, after a lifetime of practice. But that is the rule and, in that sense, there's nothing about this is an oppressive set of regulations put down by some external authority, not at all. It's my cultivating my nature to perfect that light that is fundamentally bright but I cover it over with my transgressions—my greed, my hatred, stupidity. So from that point of view, obedience becomes a bowing to, a bending to, and a cultivation so that the light of divinity shines forth.

We didn't have time to share many of the other monastic rules that are in the Mahayana tradition. I'm thinking particularly in the Sutra that I spend a lot of time with called the Avatamsaka, the Flower Dharma Sutra. There is what is called the Pure Conduct Chapter. In the Pure Conduct Chapter there are 100 answers to questions given by Manjusri Bodhisattva about how to cultivate for sublime merit and virtue. Those rules are so personal. They apply to the moment you set your foot down off your meditation platform or your bed in the morning, you say a mantra, recite a prayer for the bugs and the insects that you may inadvertently send off to rebirth that day under your feet. That's the first thing you do is you pray on their behalf, you transfer, you dedicate merit on their behalf. All the way through the day, everything that you encounter has a mindful verse for it. It's very much a personal rule in the same tone as St. Benedict.

I liked very much what we heard in the beginning from our translator Dom Patrick when he said, "This is a wise old man speaking gently and singularly to a disciple." That's

immediately what attracted me to the Rule of St. Benedict when I first touched it at Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco in 1975. It was a little tiny book, and immediately that voice came out and gathered me in. When I touched the Pure Conduct Chapter of the Avatamsaka Sutra, I get that same voice. It's loving, careful guidance from someone who's saying, "Your not wise enough to fail to overstep this rule. Just come back. Just get in the form. Match this cultivation and your light will shine."

So that's my sense of the obedience and how that can work, and I wish we could share more about the Pure Conduct Chapter, and the 53 mantras that have now come out of that in the monastic community to guide young monks' and nuns' steps. Another is the Shurangama Sutra's four unalterable aspects of purity, which are said to be the basis of samadhi, that when one cultivates these four unalterable aspects, that stillness and purity of samadhi follows, is built upon that, transformed out of our former ignorance into bright light. So, that's another of the Mahayana codes that is very much alive in the tradition. Maybe we'll, at a future conference, be able to talk about some of these guidelines that are the foundations of monastic practice in the Mahayana.

I'd like to address those people who ask, "Why do we need a rule?" A Roman Catholic friend of mine who read our book, read our Benedict's Dharma book, and gave me her response to it as a practicing Roman Catholic, someone who also practices at the Mercy Center in Burlingame, by the way. She said, "Now, you're going to have to face the music and understand that Catholics do talk about love." Because she knows at the monastery, we always translate love into caring or compassion, because she said, "If you want to understand the heart of Catholic practice, and I hope you do, you're going to have to come to grips with the word love, and how that is meant."

So from a Buddhist point of view, love can be very complicated. It can be a kind of a grabbag of unexamined feelings in motion, "E-movare," in motion, and that one word covers all from eros

to agape and every thing in between. We talked about this, I know, in length. But love from one point of view in the Buddhist tradition is the antithesis of wisdom. Wisdom is transformed out of all emotion and love, hate, fear, joy, grief, sorrow, and desire are called the seven emotions, and they're all moving. They're not still, they're not a reliable place from which to analyze experience, most of all my own thoughts. So, that's a quick Buddhist approach to love. She said, "Now, if you start talking that way, it's not going to be understood." So I won't talk that way [laughter].

So, how do we balance? I heard Sister Sarah say at the beginning: "I'm not going to comment on love and emptiness. I'll punt on that one." And with good reason, I think. Here's, I think, my lasting memory of this conference. If emptiness or stillness in the prajna sense of emptiness and form in non-duality, I think how it coordinates with love is when filtered and leavened by the Rule, the Rule of St. Benedict or by the Vinaya. And here's how I see it. Emptiness and love as a non-dual duality, as a harmony of opposites, makes sense when you add the Rule.

What is emptiness? Emptiness would be wisdom that sees through the surface differences, sees through the facile dissimilarities, the characteristics that are all colors of the rainbow, all different shapes and sizes and forms and sounds. Wisdom sees through the apparent differences on the surface to the heart, to the nature. It sees the causes that give rise to those conditions and finds in that nature an absolute sameness in all living beings. Arising from the mind, fundamentally nothing to grasp, and yet a blessing. That would be the emptiness, that stillness of samadhi. But, in that moment, the suffering manifests. The flipside of that emptiness immediately is compassion. Suffering happens to us. One who is able to still the mind in that emptiness can be liberated from the reactions to that suffering, the fear of the suffering. You see that all things that arise come from causes and conditions based on one's deeds. That insight is liberating. But from the point of

view of the Rule, I hear the Rule as being the preparation for engagement.

Love is the compassion, as I understand it now having leavened it with the Rule. Love is the compassion to relieve suffering and bestow virtue, to lead others to the wisdom that liberates from suffering. So that, when it's really truly empty, you cannot rest there, because immediately you connect through the single substance of all beings, the need to relieve that suffering. And the Rule gives us the foundation to do that without wavering, without being moved. That's the strength of the monastic precepts—samadhi, wisdom and compassion. So, I see that formula, the eternal Buddhist algebra of precepts, samadhi, wisdom—shila, samadhi, prajna. An ethical base, meditative concentration, and insight as the reason why one must take that rule into engagement, into virtue. But they keep transforming one into the other. Emptiness becomes love which, when applied and suffering is relieved, returns us to emptiness, to stillness, to St. Romauld. St. Romauld, the patron saint of the Camaldolese said, "Sit in your cell as in paradise." That's emptiness, but you can only do that after love, after you've gone out to relieve suffering, first the living beings in your own heart and then outside.

Matter becomes energy becomes matter, right? It's seamless. $E=mc^2$. Insight into suffering leads to the need to engage, which leads to the emptiness of suffering after suffering ends, which prompts us then to want to help. From the point of a monastic, it might be teaching. It might be simply transferring merit. There's nothing there originally in stillness and purity but once it's still, you hear the sounds of the world. Kwan Yin Bodhisattva extends a hand out to end suffering. When that suffering is over there's stillness again. So the stillness lies at the heart of the Rule and I get that from St. Benedict's Dharma.

There is a profound stillness at the heart of St. Benedict that allowed that rule to speak so eloquently to us now, regardless of the robe we wear. The dynamic stillness of that rule puts in

service of God, the compassion of the Boddhisatva Kwan Yin, and I wanted to finish with a story that I witnessed at New Camaldoli.

Father Bruno Barnhart, many of you know him, was said to be a mystic in the monastic world, at least in the Camaldolese world. Father Bruno spoke last the last morning, the equivalent of our Sunday morning today. On the white board he had a circle and he divided it into quadrants. So Father Bruno says, "You'll notice that this circle indicates the beginning, the first step, and the summit of a Catholic's experience. The circle is a baptismal font looked at from above." So we're looking down and seeing the baptismal font. He said, "And it is a Communion wafer, so that the Eucharist becomes the penultimate experience. That's the transformation." And there was a Chinese scholar who's name was Chun Duming, and professor Chun from the University of Hawaii was sitting there with tears in his eyes and he said, "I've studied this doctrine for so long and never understood it. That's so beautiful." And he had tears in his eyes as he was sitting there. He'd been a student of Catholic doctrine and hadn't put it together that way. He said, "But something's missing!" And he stood up and said, "May I?" Father Bruno said, "Yes, of course." So he handed him the black marker and he went up and he took the circle and he went SLASH, and he drew with one mark a yin-yang fish and he said, "There. That's what's needed. Now it's truly a unity." So, by turning the circle of the baptismal font and the communal wafer with that familiar yin-yang, right, he said, "Now, he said, there we have the chi of this conference, the pneuma of this conference, the breath of this conference is in true unity of them." So that was really, I thought, inspired.

And then Father Joseph gave a talk about Chuang-Tse and Meister Eckhart. Both met in their search for the true one, the true man, true one. And they talk about how the true one lives. Now I'm going to paraphrase this—I didn't bring my notes so it's a little bit rough. "The true one sits in stillness and in purity and gets to a place where he has truly transcended the world."

And, as we were sitting there, I thought, that's wonderful. That's the state of the arhat in Buddhist tradition—one who has put an end to personal suffering through hard cultivation. And I raised my head and I saw the crucifix on the wall behind Father Joseph—I responded to that paper. There was the crucifix on the wall and I realized that I had been seeing crucifixes all over Camaldoli on the walls but nobody had commented on them. And I thought, "You know, Chuang-Tse and Meister Eckhart have a wonderful state of stillness and purity but, simply because of that, there's a need to stay engaged. We have to come off the mountain top."

The suffering of the world in ignorance is before us at all times. The light of the Rule transforms that ignorance. The suffering of the twin towers, the sufferings of bin Laden's caves meet in that crucifix. The Lexus and the box cutter meet in that crucifix. The need to listen and then to respond but not from self, not from desire, but from compassion. The Rule and the Vinaya allow us to respond to that suffering not from self. When the perfection of the Rule, take the precepts as your teacher, becomes one with us, then we can respond selflessly, matching the mold, not in excess, not deficient. Chuang-Tse and Meister Eckhart lead to inner peace. Jesus' twisted form on the crucifix is the symbol of living beings' existential dukkha or suffering and the need for us to embody that rule, to end that suffering.

Bodhisattvas, awakened beings resolved to remain in the world and take on suffering as long as our larger family of beings, still revolve in the delusion of separation and isolation. The delusion of consumption and accumulation as the source of lasting happiness, I think, and this is probably what I've learned this weekend and what I will take home to tell my community, is that the image of the crucifix that I saw over Father Joseph's head and over, you can say, higher than or deeper than Meister Eckhart and Chuang-Tse, the image of the crucifix and Jesus' sacrifice and the Bodhisattva's heart of great compassion remind of us of the need for continued East-West dialogue and practices.

**Continued in Dedication of Merit (Benedict's Dharma,
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