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## Gethsemani Buddhist-Christian Meeting

Fr. James Conner, OCSO

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The Buddhist-Christian Meeting on the theme of Meditation took place from July 22-27, 1996 at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the home of Thomas Merton. It was the Dalai Lama himself who requested this meeting after the experience of the World Parliament of Religions. He had specifically asked that it be held at the Abbey of Gethsemani because of his respect for Thomas Merton whom he had met very shortly before his death in 1968.

Originally it had been planned to be for only 25 Christian and 25 Buddhist experts. Then the East-West Board decided to invite also the Contact Persons from the Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries. Along with some invited guests and the press, about 150 persons were in attendance, plus the Gethsemani Community.

The Conference began with the planting of a blue spruce tree at the entrance to the Monastery in honor of the event. The tree was blessed and planted jointly by Abbot Timothy Kelly of Gethsemani and the Dalai Lama. Afterwards all processed into the monastic Chapter room where the event was to be held. Abbot Timothy first greeted the Dalai Lama in the name of the monastic community and then Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, Chair of the East-West Board, spoke of the meaning of the event. Sr. Pascaline Coff, OSB, gave a survey of "How We Got to this Point", indicating the main events in the history of North American Monastic East-West relations. Jeffrey Hopkins gave a brief presentation on "Dependent Arising and Nirvana", and Dr. Donald Mitchell followed up with "The Philosophical Vision of Life Behind the Traditions of Christian Spirituality".

### Related Articles

- [About the Conference \(Gethsemani Encounter I, July 1996\)](#)
- [Book Review: The Gethsemani Encounter \(Bulletin 59, May 1998\)](#)
- [Gethsemani Encounter II: A Report \(Bulletin 69, August 2002\)](#)
- [Harmony, Dialogue and Meditation \(Bulletin 57, February 1997\)](#)
- [Introduction and Welcome \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)
- [Participants \(Gethsemani Encounter I, July 1996\)](#)
- [Book Review: Spiritual Advice for Buddhists and Christians \(Bulletin 63, March 2000\)](#)

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- [Gethsemani Abbey](#)

Each day began with a period of silent sitting meditation for the group. This was followed on alternating days by a Buddhist or a Christian liturgy or chant.

Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, acted as Moderator and was very successful in moving the speakers along. Each day had a theme which was divided into Buddhist and Christian Presenters. The theme for the first day was: *The Practice of Prayer and Meditation in the Spiritual Life*. Buddhist presentations were: *Meditation Practices in Theravada Buddhism* by Ven. Dr. Dhammarakkhita and *Meditation Practices in Zen Buddhism* by Sensei Norman Fisher. Christian presentations followed in the afternoon: *Contemplative Life in Christianity* by Fr. James Wiseman, OSB and *Lectio Divina* by Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB. In the evening the Dalai Lama spoke on *The Tibetan Buddhist Approaches to Meditation*.

The second day theme was: *Stages in the Process of Spiritual Development*. The morning presenters were: *The Stages of Meditation in the Theravada Path of Purity* by Ven. Dr. Mapapagama Wipulasara and *Meditation Stages and Experiences on the Tibetan Buddhist Path* by HH the Dalai Lama. The afternoon was given to *Stages of Prayer and Contemplation in the Christian Spiritual Life* by Fr. Pierre de Bethune, OSB, and *Phenomena Associated with the Stages in Spiritual Growth* by Sr. GilChrist Lavigne, OCSO. In the evening the Dalai Lama anticipated the theme for the next day: *The Role of the Teacher and the Community in the Spiritual Life* and spoke on *The Role of the Spiritual Teacher and the Place of the Sangha in Tibetan Buddhist Meditation*.

On Thursday the same theme continued with *The Role of the Monastic Teacher and the Sangha in the Theravada Practice of Meditation* by Ven. Dr. Chuen Phangcham and HH the Dalai Lama spoke on *The Bodhisattva as an Ideal for both Personal-Contemplative and Collective-Social Transformation*. The afternoon sessions were by Christians: *The Role of the Spiritual Father or Mother, the Spiritual Director and Spiritual Discernment in the Contemplative Life* by Sr. Donald Corcoran, OSB Cam., and *The Importance of the Monastic Community and the Church in the Contemplative Life* by Abbot Armand Veilleux, OCSO.



**Fr. James Conner** was for many years the editor of the AIM/MID bulletin and has reviewed many books for the bulletin over the years. He is a monk at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky and took part in the "Monks in the West" conference in 2004. He is a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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The morning of that same day also saw a *Tribute to Thomas Merton*. This was held in the monastic Church. A picture of Thomas Merton was placed before the lectern. A reading was done from the *Life of Milarepa* and a poem of Merton was read. Then H.H. the Dalai Lama placed a Tibetan scarf around the picture of Merton and offered flowers in honor of him. He then spoke in a very personal way of his own contacts with Merton and the effect that has had on himself and his dealings with Christians. This was followed by a *Tribute to Merton* by Fr. James Conner, OCSO, and the closing prayer by Bishop Joseph Gerry, OSB.

The theme for Friday was: *The Spiritual Goals of Personal and Social Transformation*. The morning Buddhist presentations were: *The Arhant Ideal and Its Relation to Socially Engaged Buddhism* by Ven. Ghosananda of Cambodia and *The Relation of Zen Awakening to Social Transformation* by Ven. Samu Sunim. The afternoon talks were by Christians: *The Christian Ideal of Holiness in the Contemplative Life* by Bishop Joseph Gerry, OSB, and *Building the Reign of God* by Dr Ewert Cousins. The evening talk was *The Stages of Spiritual Growth in the Zen Life* by Ven. Eshin Nishimura. The evening concluded with a Fire Ritual. All of the participants processed to the hill across from the Monastery. Each was given an incense stick which they lit and placed in a large bowl. Then both Buddhist and Christian chants were performed. At the end each was given a candle and all processed back to the abbey.

The final session was presided over by Dr. Diana Eck and Br. David Steindl-Rast and gave opportunity for the participants to make observations and comments on the general sessions. The concluding remarks were given by Dr. Donald Mitchell.

During the Press Conference the first day, the Dalai Lama expressed a wish that there be four types of meetings among followers of different religions: (1) seminars and dialogues among scholars to discuss the similarities and dissimilarities of their philosophies; (2) meetings of practitioners (monastics and others) to share information about the spiritual life and practices; (3) pilgrimages to the sacred sites of each others' traditions to meditate and pray; (4) meetings of the leaders of

different traditions.

He stated that the differences between religions are very good, for each religion serves the unique needs of a group of people, but at the same time it is important that people of different faiths recognize their common ground and from this place mutually serve humanity. He acknowledged that at times religion, instead of helping, is blamed for conflicts throughout the world. For this very reason it is imperative that religions have awareness of their differences and their common ground. He said: "The world is growing smaller and smaller, and humanity has become one big family—we are heavily dependent on one another." He also expressed how impressed he is with the work that Christians have done in the fields of education and health care, and he is urging Buddhist monastics to follow suit by spending a larger part of their time in work that directly benefits humanity.

A theme that frequently recurred in the discussions was that of the place of *anger* in the spiritual path. One Christian noted that anger frequently results from "attachment" to something, drawing a parallel to the core Buddhist teaching that suffering results from attachment to desires. Ven. Dhammarakkita, a Burmese monk and meditation scholar, noted that "the world is crying because of anger". Without "mind-culture", a term that he said better translates the Buddhist notion of meditation, "we cannot know the danger of anger. That is why we meditate."

Zoketsu Norman Fischer, an American convert to Buddhism and co-abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, spoke of the "uselessness" of Zen meditation. He said meditation done for any utilitarian reason—including the love of it—misses the point. One can only meditate for meditation's sake.

The Buddhist Abbot raised a question regarding the crucifix, which is the central Christian symbol and which hung prominently in the center of the Chapter Room. He said he greatly admires Jesus and feels "sad" to see him nailed to a Cross. One Christian responded that the helplessness of Jesus on the Cross resembles the "uselessness of meditation".

Joseph Goldstein, co-founder of Insight Meditation Center in Barre, MA, said the crucifix seems to represent the first of Buddha's "Four Noble Truths" that all humans suffer. "It seems like it is the common ground," he said. The Ven. Nishimura, director of the International Research Institute for Zen Studies in Kyoto, Japan, observed that the crucifix reminds him of a koan given him by a Zen master: "When you meet a situation from which you cannot escape, how do you get out of it?" He compared the dilemma posed in the koan to a frog falling down a deep well. "Maybe the frog would now do meditation at the bottom of the well", he suggested. "That would be called the uselessness of meditation." He then concluded: "I would recommend you do this kind of useless meditation before you fall into the deep well of death. I think Jesus Christ on the Cross is showing us the fact of the whole situation, which we call death."

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, the Executive Director of MID noted that while Christianity has its own tradition of meditation, it has been obscured by centuries of emphasis on social action, and now many Christians are looking to the East to re-learn meditation. She asked the Dalai Lama, who has been encouraging Tibetan monastics to become more socially involved, how he reconciles the apparent conflict between prayer and social action. The Dalai Lama said that he feels Buddhists are too inclined to withdraw from the world. "We have to learn from our Christian brothers and sisters. We should have more socially engaged activities." He acknowledged that Buddhist monastics' lack of social action may have partly prompted Pope John Paul II's widely publicized criticism of Buddhism in his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Buddhists in Sri Lanka bitterly protested the Pope's visit there last year after he wrote of Buddhism's "negative" emphasis on "freeing oneself from evil by becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil". But the Dalai Lama said the Pope had an inaccurate impression of Buddhism. "Naturally the Pope lacks time to study all the Buddhist texts," he said, down playing the dispute and adding that he had a warm meeting with the Pope earlier this year.

Robert Thurman, director of the Center for Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, commented on the Pope's book more directly,

saying that Buddhism teaches that one overcomes suffering not by shunning the world, but by destroying the causes of suffering, which are ignorance, greed and hatred. "Then you are in Nirvana". He added that Christian and Buddhist meditation are alike in that both are anchored in compassion and concern for the welfare of others.

Donald Mitchell added that Christians can see a striking parallel in the concept of Nirvana. When Buddhists describe Nirvana as "an abode of security", a "place of rest" that brings "pacification of suffering", they are sounding very much like St. Augustine in his famous prayer: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

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