Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
Sponsored by North American Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries of Men and Women

Home
About MID
Bulletins
News
Events
Glossary
Links
Contact Us
Support MID
Benedict's Dharma
Gethsemani I
Gethsemani II
Gethsemani III
Abhishiktananda Society Bulletins

Search MID Help

Joseph Goldstein's Presentation

Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Joseph Goldstein, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

[**Click here for a printer-friendly version of this article**]

William Skudlarek: Welcome to this first full day of our coming together. We have asked the presenters to think of their role at each of these sessions as being the first at the microphone, the first one to offer a word on suffering. Today's topic is suffering caused by a sense of unworthiness and alienation. I would like to introduce Mr. Joseph Goldstein, who first became interested in Buddhism when he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. He has led insight and loving-kindness meditation retreats worldwide since 1974. He is co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, where he is one of the resident guiding teachers, and he helped establish the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Currently, he is developing the Forest Refuge, a center for long-term meditation practice. His books include Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom and The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation. He is presently working on a new book called One Dharma.

Joseph Goldstein: I'm very honored to be here, but I feel a bit of an interloper since my monastic career was limited to six weeks in Bodhgaya, a very temporary ordination. But I have tremendous appreciation and respect for the purity of the monastic commitment, and perhaps in the next life. . . .

This morning I would like to talk about the suffering of unworthiness and alienation, some of its causes and some of the possibilities for liberation. The impulse toward unworthiness has many voices in our

Related Articles

- **Introduction: Henepola Gunaratana (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**
- **Joseph Goldstein: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

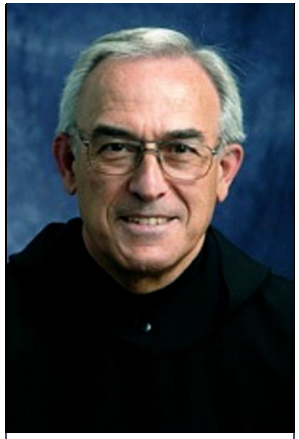
Joseph Goldstein is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein

minds. It's the voice of, "I'm not good enough." or "I can't do this," or "Did I do something wrong?" In fact, just this morning the voice arose in my mind as I was a minute or two late for Lauds, and I found myself sitting I think in the wrong row. During the beautiful prayers, I was thinking, "Am I doing something wrong?" It's the feeling that somehow we don't quite measure up. In Buddhism, this tendency towards comparing oneself with others—and the comparison can be "I'm better than…," "I'm worse than…," "I'm equal to…"—is called conceit. What's quite interesting is that this conditioning of conceit is said not to be uprooted from our minds until the final stage of awakening. We can have uprooted pride, desire, anger and ill will, and still this pattern of conceit keeps arising within us. So it's very powerful and deeply conditioned. Because it is so strong and deep, we need to understand it carefully and investigate how it's working.

Feelings of unworthiness or comparison arise from many causes and social conditions: our parents, schools, junior high school. Think of the comparing mind that goes on with advertising. How could we not feel somehow inadequate when in our culture we continually see all these beautiful, happy, smiling, contented, perfect people? This is what is being fed to us, and then we measure ourselves against it. Even when we see through the ruse of social conditioning, feelings of unworthiness still come very strongly when we come face to face with our own hearts and minds. It's not only in comparison to what's out there; it's what we see when we look inside.

When I first went to Asia in 1967 and was practicing with my teacher, Anagarekameninja in Bodhgaya, India, I was just starting to learn meditation. I would sit and see all the judgments, fear, desire, and the comparing. I would run to him, telling him what a terrible person I was. It was the first deep and careful look into my own mind. Of course, he would smile and say, "Just go back and watch your breath and be mindful." And I would go back and see more of this stuff. It was the beginning of an insight that has stayed with me all these years—that if it's not one thing, it's another. There is always something coming up. There is a line from Nikos Kazantzakis' book Zorba the Greek, where the author says, "Self knowledge is always bad news." Anyone on a contemplative journey looking into their hearts and minds will see that.



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.

All articles by or about Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

Browse the Archive

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

It's not simply a question of these negative or unwholesome thoughts and feelings. It gets worse: because we see the unskillful actions we take. It's not only limited to what's within us; it's how we are acting in the world.

An incident happened almost twenty years ago now that was really a transforming moment for me in my practice and spiritual journey. Our teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, one of the great Burmese masters, came to America for the first time. It was the first time I met him. He was a very demanding, fierce teacher, what our image might be of a really fierce old Zen master, and I was anxious about going in for the interviews. It was hard. We were seeing him every day for very intense practice. One time I was giving a report on my experience about what was happening [in my meditation practice], and he looked at me and he said, "That's not true." My heart sank. And in that moment of the sinking heart, I realized that he was right. I had been practicing a long time already. I knew a lot and I knew how things should be unfolding. On some half conscious—hopefully, it was half conscious!—level, I was just shading my experience by way of wanting to move it along. When he caught me and said, "That's not true," it was totally devastating. I spent days in feelings of unworthiness, remorse, regret, and guilt.

Then something happened. After days of being immersed in that feeling of shame, a light emerged where I began to see a way out. That was the recognition that acceptance of our shadow side is the key; not the pretense that we don't have one. As soon as I could admit to myself that, in fact, I could shade the truth, that I could lie even in a situation where I never thought I would, in the moment when I opened to that possibility, there was a tremendous sense of relief, because it was coming into balance with what was true, rather than sustaining the inner pressure of keeping that side away from myself.

I think this is a turning point in our spiritual journeys. It was for me very significant: When I realized I would much rather see my flaws, defilements, or sins—whatever word we use to describe those negative forces—than not see them. That was revelatory for me because it opened up the possibility of seeing the totality of myself—without self-judgment or those feelings of unworthiness arising. Carl Jung, the

famous Swiss psychologist, said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular." It is disagreeable at first. But what is so amazing over all these years is that I think we come to a point where our commitment to the truth is so strong that there's actually a feeling of delight in seeing the flaws and defilements. Now, when I watch my mind get lost in something, I'm happy to see it, because in the seeing of it is the possibility of being free. In the seeing of it, we begin to open to the possibility of a deeply transforming insight and wisdom into what the Buddha called the empty, insubstantial, transparent, selfless nature of phenomena.

As Father Thomas was talking last night about baptism, it occurred to me that there is an equivalence, at least in Theravada Buddhism, and I think in all the schools. It is something we call "entering the stream." It's a very nice parallel image. Entering the stream is the first, genuine realization of selflessness, of going beyond this notion of ego-self. When we have this authentic baptism into selflessness, into the emptiness of self, then we see that unworthiness and alienation are not the problem. It's our identification with those feelings. When we develop the wisdom-mind to see the insubstantiality of them all, they become simply arisings in the mind that we don't condemn ourselves for and don't act on. In this light of wisdom, there is a transformation of negative emotions in a quite remarkable way. Guilt transforms itself to genuine remorse, which is not self- lacerating. Sorrow transforms itself to compassion. Grief transforms itself to equanimity. Attachment transforms itself to love. Unworthiness transforms itself to faith. All of these emotions, which can cause us so much suffering when they are not understood in the light of emptiness and selflessness, become powerful forces for the good when we understand them with our wisdom.

This whole process of transformation is made possible through the great power of mindfulness and awareness. We need to stay aware of what's arising within us, around us, and in the world. We need to stay aware with acceptance, love, compassion, and discriminating wisdom.

William Skudlarek: Thank you very much. Sister Meg was telling me

the other day that, after the first Gethsemani Encounter, she was speaking to the Dalai Lama about our plans to come together once again. He, of course, was present in 1996 for Gethsemani I, and he said, "Ah, yes, level one dialogue." So I began reflecting on what he might mean by that. He himself did not explain what he meant. He just said, "Level one dialogue."

This is what his words suggested to me. It suggested that Gethsemani I was a wonderful beginning, and we need to move forward. What I would understand by "level one dialogue" is a sincere and wholehearted attempt to speak honestly of our own tradition in a way that others might be able to understand; to respond to questions and clarify, but basically to clarify one's own point of view and way of relating to the world, to God, and to one another. Also, of course, level one means listening intently to the other, without judgment, simply hearing and doing what is necessary to hear what the other is saying about another position, faith, or another point of view. Perhaps level two dialogue is moving to that point when we may be able to say something together. For me, that would be a rich outcome of this week together; that together we might be able to speak a healing word to a suffering world, drawing from what is richest in our own traditions but together, Buddhists and Christians, speaking this word of enlightenment, compassion, and healing to a suffering world. That at least is what I would like to suggest might characterize our dialogue this week,

One doesn't ever move from level one to level two and no longer do anything at level one, whether it's in dialogue or in a relationship. One is always bringing forward the whole. There will be obviously opportunity and necessity here to state our own way of looking at things, our own point of view, and to ask, clarify, state, and listen. But what I hope we can always be attempting is to arrive at that word that expresses what is best in both of our traditions, and that it be a word we speak together. My hope is that that would be the main content of the book that will emerge from this gathering. It will include our individual statements, the opening statements of the participants, but, ultimately, I hope a word that we speak together to our world.

For that to happen as we come together to speak to suffering, we need

to hear from as many voices as possible. If that is to happen, then we all need to speak with relative brevity, and to be ready to defer to another. I was reminded of a passage in the Rule of Benedict as I was reflecting on this. It occurs in his chapter on humility. In that wonderful translation of Abbot Patrick Barry, which is appended to the book Benedict's Dharma, the eleventh degree of humility sounds like this: "The eleventh degree of humility is concerned with the manner of speech appropriate in a monastery. We should speak gently and seriously, with words that are weighty and restrained. We should be brief and reasonable in whatever we have to say and not raise our voices to insist on our own opinions. The wise, we should remember, are to be recognized in words that are few."

At Gethsemani I, you may remember the room was divided into participants and observers. The reason for that was that so many people wanted to be part of that historic encounter that it was simply not possible to think of a dialogue that would involve that many people. So a decision was made that the participants would be the invited guests and the official representatives of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. For this meeting, a decision was made early in the planning that there would be no observers; that everyone would be a participant. For that reason, many people who would have liked to be here were told that unfortunately it would not be possible to invite them, because then again the group would simply become too large. So, you are all participants. You are all invited to participate. And we welcome this word from each of you that will enable us, I hope, to speak together a word to our suffering world.

Continued in **Joseph Goldstein: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**
