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Abbot John Daido Loori's Presentation
Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, John Daido Loori

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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Mary Margaret Funk: Good morning. Today we have a full day to stretch our boundaries for the sake of our own transformation and the transformation of others on the theme of the suffering caused by old age and sickness and even death. We had marvelous psalms this morning. Let me quote two verses out of Norman Fischer's new translation of Psalm 102: "Let my cry come before you. Don't hide your face from me now. When suffering overwhelms me, bend your ear toward my wailing and answer me swiftly. The days of my life have gone up in smoke. My bones are smoldering like hearth fire logs, and my heart is as dry as desert grass. I can't eat. My groaning bones chatter inside my flesh. I am like a scavenger bird in the wilderness, like an owl amidst the ruins. All hungry. I am like a lone bird on a nighttime rooftop."

When Father James Wiseman and I were in Tibet, we were staying at a hotel near Mt. Everest, although because of the different names given by the Chinese, Tibetans, and Nepalese to the area we weren't quite sure where we were. So I said to the Chinese clerk, "Where are we? Where are we?" And she said, pointing to the ground, "Here, here." Of course, that didn't satisfy Meg Funk, the leader of the band, so I went to the map and pointed to it. "No," I said, 'Where are we?" "I don't know," said the clerk. "I've never been anyplace else." So, here we are.

It is my privilege this morning to introduce a new friend for me and probably an old friend for many of you—but a great discovery, a jewel in this dialogue, John Daido Loori Roshi. He is the spiritual leader and

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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . ..*

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the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. Trained in koan Zen as well as in the subtle school of Master Dogen's Zen, he is a Dharma heir of Haku Taizan Maezumi Roshi. He has received transmission in both the Rinzai as well as the Soto lines of Zen Buddhism. Abbot Loori lives at the monastery year-round and is very active in its day-to-day activities, making him highly accessible to students. Devoted to maintaining authentic Zen training, he has developed a distinctive style called Eight Gates of Zen, based on the Eightfold Path, involving both monastic and lay practitioners in a program of study that embraces every aspect of daily life. Zazen and a strong teacher-student relationship form the core of the training, supported by art practice and other areas of study, as was traditional during the Golden Ages of Chinese and Japanese Zen.

John Daido Loori: I'd like to begin by just expressing my appreciation to everyone who's here, to the organizers of this conference, but mostly to the participants. I normally don't do well at conferences, so I came prepared to be bored senseless. Instead, my heart has been ripped open by what's taken place here. I've been touched deeply by the openness and honesty of all the participants, and I deeply appreciate it. Thank you. One other thing I wanted to mention for future conferences is language. Sometimes I'm not sure if we're talking about the same thing. There are many words in Buddhism that are translated into English to the closest equivalent, and they don't convey what's really behind the word—like prajna into "wisdom," karuna into "compassion," and dukkha into "suffering." For instance, there is much more to the word dukkha than the English word "suffering" encompasses.

As I see it, there are different ways of dealing with suffering due to old age and sickness. Of course, the basic Buddhist way is that the extinguishing of suffering is essentially the definition of Nirvana. Then there is alleviation of suffering, which is a different approach. Then there is the transformation of suffering, and I'd like to look briefly at all three of those.

The extinguishing of suffering forms the whole basis of training at our monastery. People who enter come with a statement: "I come here

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realizing the question of life and death is a grave matter. I wish to enter into training." These novices are essentially saying that they want to resolve those ultimate questions: "Who am I? What is life? What is death? What is truth? What is reality?" They enter a training program that takes place in eight different areas, and moves through ten successive stages. It's clearly defined; each day and each week these ten areas of practice are engaged. Zazen is at the core of everything that we do. A student tries to develop a single-pointedness of mind, to deal with the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that come up. It's a very slow process that takes place over years.

A second area of training is the teacher/student relationship. Because we are an ancestral lineage, the teachings are conveyed one to one from teacher to student rather than through scriptures or study. It's mind-to-mind transmission. For that we use koan study. In our lineage there are 750 of those koans that a student needs to go through over a period of between fifteen to twenty years, or sometimes more. These koans are designed to short-circuit the whole intellectual process. They essentially frustrate linear sequential thought. They try to open up another aspect of consciousness, which is direct, immediate, and intuitive. That's where religious experience and artistic expression takes place. It's not linear and sequential. Unraveling these koans each day, the teacher and student meet face to face during periods of zazen.

Another area of training is liturgy. Liturgy punctuates our entire day—not only the services that take place in the Buddha hall, but services that we use to begin work practice, or before we take a meal, or before using the bathroom. Each event of the day has a liturgy that precedes it to remind us what that activity is about. Another area is moral and ethical teachings—the precepts. It's not just in the precept ceremony where people receive the precepts and become Buddhists, but a continuum that moves through each of those ten stages of spiritual development. Because American students have no grounding in historical Buddhist teachings—we come from a Judeo-Christian tradition—the tendency is to equate what we are doing with the Judeo-Christian counterpart. So services are misinterpreted as being worship services, and they are not. Buddha is not a God, and the process is not a worship service. Buddhism is nontheistic. It's not atheistic; it doesn't

say there is no God. It's not agnostic; it doesn't say, "I don't know if there is a God or not." It simply doesn't take up the question of whether there exists a God or not, which keeps the whole question open in a very interesting way.

Work practice is another important aspect of life and how to take it into the activity of the world. One of the things that happens during that period of spiritual development is that some may get to that place of the extinguishing of suffering, and some may not. But a spiritual maturity does indeed occur. That happens at the monastery, and it doesn't deal with the problem of what takes place outside the monastery. We have a very broad sangha of lay practitioners, and here is where we get into the question of alleviation of suffering. When people are sick, they turn to our lay sangha, and the monastery responds. We respond with the classical kind of response that any kind of a religious organization would make—for example, each day we do a healing service. I remember years ago, when we first started doing this and people wanted to know what it was, I said, "Well, we are sending out healing energy." Everybody chuckled. This was twenty-two years ago. Since that time, with the studies that have been going on on the role of prayer and healing, the chuckling has stopped. There is pretty clear evidence that there is a healing that can take place when a community directs their energy to helping people. The priestly services, bedside services, counseling the family, particularly where death is imminent, last rites, deathbed vigils—those are all of the normal things that any religion would do. Then we try to do more than that, and call upon the broad sangha to give support to people who are housebound and handicapped. Sometimes we provide legal aid and financial support. Sometimes people need their bills paid, transportation, food, baby-sitting, and housecleaning. All those things are responded to with the 10,000 hands and arms of great compassion.

There is the extinction of suffering, which is realization. There is the alleviation of suffering, which is the physical and spiritual support. Then there is another aspect. There is the transformation of suffering. The great Master Dongshan, who is the founder of our lineage, the Soto lineage, was not feeling well—there is a koan that emerged out of this—and a monastic said, "Master, you are not feeling well. Is there

anyone who doesn't get sick?" Dongshan said, "Yes, there is." The monastic said, "Does the person who doesn't get sick take care of you?" Dongshan said, "I have the opportunity to take care of that person." The monastic said, "What happens when you take care of that person?" Dongshan said, "At that time I am unable to see my sickness."

This is an actual event that became a koan, right before Dongshan died. Seeing that his end was near, he shaved his head and bathed himself, put on his robes, and sat cross-legged, preparing to die. As he began to expire, his very large congregation started wailing and carrying on, and the wailing went on and on. Finally, he opened his eyes and he said, "For those who have left home, a mind unattached to things is the true practice. People struggle to live and make much of death. But what's the use of lamenting?" Then he ordered a temple official to prepare what he called a banquet for stupidity, and everybody celebrated, and he joined in the celebration. The negativeness didn't stop, so he continued it for seven days. Finally Dongshan said, "You monks have made a great commotion over nothing. When you see me pass away this time, don't make a noisy fuss." Then he retired to his room, sat upright, and left his body.

This sort of a thing not only happens with great Zen masters. My grandmother, who was a peasant from the mountains of Italy, was in her late 80s when she was getting ready to pass away. My mother was with her, lying in bed, and she expired. My mother told me the story. My grandmother had just expired and her fingernails and lips started turning blue. My mother started wailing—she was, you know, a very passionate Italian daughter. And my grandmother sucked in air again and sat upright. Then my mother calmed her down again, and she laid back, and again she expired, and again my mother started wailing. Once more, my grandmother returned. Her daughter was crying out to her. She couldn't go. Then my mother realized that she was preventing her mother from leaving her body. She told her, "It's okay, Mom. It's okay to let go." And finally she expired.

I think that's the great heart of compassion that resides in every one of us. We all in this room come from different lineages, all incredible

lineages back through history. If we look at the people we represent, that we hold the banner for now—the great saints and masters, Jesus, Buddha—we need to realize that it is now in our hands. As I have said a couple of times during this retreat, it's a hopeless task. Yet we vow to do it. I look at the four vows that we chant every day: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them." It can't be done by definition. They are numberless, yet I vow to save them. "Desires are inexhaustible. I vow to put an end to them." They are inexhaustible. You can't put an end to them, but I vow to do it. "The Dharmas are boundless. I vow to master them." To master them means to put a frame around them. It can't be done, yet I vow to do it. "The enlightened way is unattainable. I vow to attain it." Impossible, the impossible dream. All we can do is turn and bow to our ancestors and take up their call to heal, to administer. We bow to them, and turn and enter the fray with that vow that no matter how long it takes, how impossible it is, we vow what needs to be done.

Continued in **Abbot John Daido Loori: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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