



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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## Abbot John Daido Looi: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, John Daido Looi, Prof. Donald Mitchell, Judith Simmer-Brown, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Ven. Samu Sunim, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam, Ven. Guo Yuan, Fa Shi

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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### Dialogue after Abbot John Daido Looi's Presentation

**Guo Yuan Fa Shi:** In response to what Roshi Daido said about the helping for the sick and the dying: In our organization we also have the practice of Pure Land to help passing away. We call it compassion for the dying. When a member of our organization is about to pass away, we have a group of people that go to the hospital or home to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. This also helps the family members. We advise the dying individual that they have to let go or put down without attachment to worldly things. We advise the family members not to cry when it's time for passing away. We chant.

Then, after the person passes away, we perform the service of reciting the Buddha's name, which is Amitabha Buddha. Twelve hours after the person passes away, we do the service. It could go on for about forty-nine days. In Taiwan, we have a mass funeral service that we do perhaps three or four times a year. People preregister for dying. We have ten people at a time the first time, and then many members gather together to recite the Buddha's name for those who pass away. It is very effective, for nine out of ten of the dying leave relics, which is something very powerful. It's also very soothing for the relatives.

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- [Abbot John Daido Looi's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)
- [Sr. Margaret Michaud's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)

**Fr. Mark Delery, OCSO,** is a Trappist monk at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia.

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**Zoketsu Norman Fischer** is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a

**Norman Fischer:** Venerable Guo Yuan Fa Shi mentioned the forty-nine-day service. What I want to say comes under the category of amazing facts. The forty-nine-day service is the in-between time, seven weeks between death and rebirth. There are also forty-nine days or seven weeks in the Jewish tradition between Passover, liberation, and the giving of the law, shevuot, on Mt. Sinai. That's the same forty-nine-day period between Easter and Pentecost in the Christian tradition, which is a time when, as I read the Gospels, the disciples went from confusion to wisdom, to be able to carry forth the Spirit into the world. So, strange and amazing fact.

**Heng Sure:** We call those "Gee whiz Dharmas."

**Thomas Keating:** I was struck by two points in Daido's admirable presentation. The first was how much the community extends itself to the lay sangha. It seems to me that in our times this is something that the Benedictine communities do more than the Trappists, but it's a consideration of what kind of positive action would be consistent with monastic life in reaching out to the local community or beyond it. My personal conviction is that the teaching of contemplative prayer is an extension of Benedictine hospitality, and it's not necessarily contrary to any tradition anywhere around the world.

The other thing I was impressed with, and indeed am in all the Buddhist traditions, is that the leader of the monastery receives a lengthy training in the transmission of the Dharma. As far as I know, there isn't any training for a monastic abbot. You just throw the poor guy into the lake, and he sinks or swims. He usually sinks. As a result, even the Trappists have gone for temporary abbots, because they know they are going to sink.

The third point suggested by some things that Norman said, but also that Daido referred to, is praying for the dying and the deceased. In Trappist monasteries, we sit beside the bier as long as it's exposed. And it may last for several days, but nothing like the forty-nine days or with some of the elaborate ceremonies that the Tibetans have for their outstanding leaders. I suspect that a lot happens in the process of dying that was never quite possible during life because we had a brain. But as soon as you are brain-dead, everything in the memory bank is relaxed, and it may be the first time we can really make a totally free

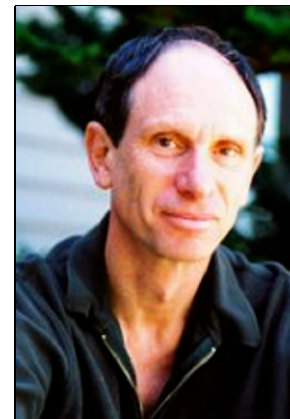
contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

**All articles by or about  
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**Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST,** belongs to the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and is Master of Novices for his religious order, the Trinitarians. He is an advisor to the MID Board of Directors.

**All articles by or about  
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**Joseph Goldstein** is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The

act of self-surrender to the Ultimate Reality.

**William Skudlarek:** At mass this morning, the celebrant, recalled that on this day fifteen years ago it was Good Friday, the day we celebrate the death of Christ. It was also the day on which Abbot James Fox died. He went on to note that Abbot James Fox's motto was Deus crucifixus, "God crucified," and noted the coincidence of Dom James dying on the celebration of the death of Christ.

He went on to recall that forty years ago when he made his first profession of vows as a Trappist monk here, it was Dom James who preached, and he said, "No one is saved except through suffering." And he said he repeated it five time.

I kept thinking, "But we want to be saved from suffering, don't we?" But, thanks to John Daido Looori's talk today, I'm wondering if it's a both/and—saved from suffering and saved through suffering. Is that one of the keys to the transformation of suffering?

**John Daido Looori:** Again, I'd like to mention the practical aspects. We do a lot of study, and there is a lot of theory and sitting and introspection that the monastics do. But I watch them. We spent about two weeks with a sangha member who was slowly dying an agonizing death, and I had a lot of the monastics come with me and be with him to hold his hand and chant and so on.

Coming into direct contact throws all that theory out of the window. It reaches really deep inside and does something that all of the textbooks, lectures, discourses, direct pointing, even the sitting doesn't do. The direct experience of someone suffering and dying transforms everybody around them in a very special way. How, I don't know, but I do know that it happens. I've seen it.

**Heng Sure:** What I appreciated about Roshi Daido's talk was the description of living into the Dharma, of the process of having it put down roots in Western soil. This happens when you make a commitment to lean on the Dharma, to rely upon it, to let it work for you as your root. To do it here in the West is exciting. What we heard was a serious attempt to define a sangha, a bhikshu or a monk, and what a leader is within that community. How do you do it? What shape does it have? How much does it weigh and what color is it? What are its

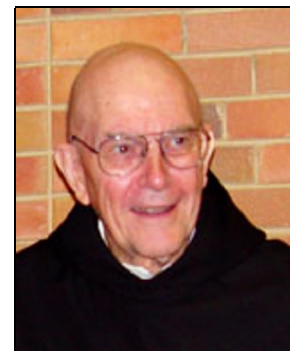
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

[All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein](#)



**Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.)** is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

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**Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO**, has written many books on contemplative

parameters, it's substance, function, and appearance? That was very heartening for you, Daido Roshi, to share that. I appreciate it.

Responding to what Guo Yuan Fa Shi said: It's a funny experience to come to a gathering like this and to have to introduce our major practice as an American branch of a Chinese Buddhist community from the first step. The major practice of the Chinese Buddhist community is Pure Land practice and not Ch'an. Ch'an is considered by and large to be something for athletes whose legs bend. As you age, Ch'an is less and less an option.

Pure Land is something that absolutely everyone does. When you go to Asia, you find Buddha halls and bowing benches.

Now, Ch'an is very much alive in China. Master Sheng-yen, Guo Yuan Fa Shi's teacher, defines herself as a Ch'an master. Master Shren-wa, my teacher, was a Ch'an master, and we sit two to four hours every day. But we recite the Buddha's name all day long, and people make vows to never let their beads leave their hands.

To introduce Pure Land to the West and to our Catholic and non-Buddhist brothers and sisters is such a joy because it is devotional. It is bhakti. It comes from the need in the heart to express a love for something very pure and good, which are the vows of the Buddha Amitabha. The whole thing arises from vows, and is based upon three particular scriptures called the sukhvati-vyuha scriptures, the Pure Land scriptures.

I had an experience lecturing on one of these texts in Burlingame about five years ago. At the end of the homily, I asked, "Does anybody in your family have experience with coming back to life after passing away?" Six hands shot up in the air from a very reticent Chinese community. "Oh, sure, Mrs. Wong. You should have seen her. She was our next-door neighbor. It was amazing. She was so happy, she recited the Buddha's name at the end of her life, and her face was radiant, and she said, 'Here comes Amitabha.' " "My grandma, too." So these are people who recite the Buddha's name, rely on Amitabha's vows, and at the end of their lives have these blissful surrenderings and meeting the Buddha Amitabha.

prayer, especially Centering Prayer, which he is credited with popularizing in the United States. Among these are *Open Mind, Open Heart, The Mystery of Christ, and Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*. He lives at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and serves as an advisor to ...  
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**All articles by or about Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO**

**John Daido Looi** is the founder and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.

**All articles by or about John Daido Looi**



**Professor Donald Mitchell** teaches at Purdue University. He is the co-editor (with James Wiseman) of *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1996) and *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (Doubleday, 2003).

**Joseph Wong:** I also feel very excited to hear Guo Yuan Fa Shi and Heng Sure talk about Pure Land Buddhism. Here are my prayer beads. In East Asia, the great majority of Buddhists belong to the Pure Land tradition rather than Ch'an or Zen Buddhism. That is for the elite. The heart of the Pure Land practice, as we all know, is the constant invocation of the name of Buddha. I remember my grandmother dusting or cleaning, saying, namu omito-fo, namu omito-fo. We would come in, greet her, she would stop and exchange a few words with us, and then would continue to say her prayer.

If we want to look at our Christian monastic practice, what is closest to the invocation of the name of Buddha, is the constant invocation of the name of Jesus, the so-called Jesus prayer. The Jesus Prayer started with the desert fathers and spread to Mt. Sinai, then to Greece and then to eastern Europe. From the middle of the last century, it was diffused to the Western Latin church also. Nowadays, not only monastics, but many Christians are committed to the path of the Jesus prayer. The formula is: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me." And you can also shorten it just by saying, "Lord Jesus, have mercy." That's very similar to the invocation of the Buddha. You need faith. You need love. You express your love and devotion, and rely on the mercy of the Lord Jesus. If people would like to know more about the Jesus prayer, there is an article in the MID bulletin.

We also have the experience of reciting the Jesus prayer at the bedside of a dying person. Several years back in our community an elderly brother was dying. Finally it came close to the time when he was passing away, and the community brothers gathered at his bedside. During the last days, I started to help him by reciting the Jesus prayer. He was very happy. During the last hour, I continued to recite the Our Father or the Hail Mary, but most of the time I said the Jesus prayer next to him so he could hear. I saw that he felt so peaceful and serene when hearing the repetition of the invocation of the name of Jesus and the mercy of Jesus.

I think that probably is the best way to spend the last hour of our life for passage from this world to the next, with the company of Jesus or Buddha.

**Don Mitchell:** I got a phone call recently from my mother telling me that she had fallen and broken her shoulder and was on her way to

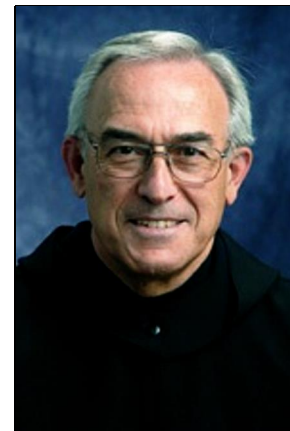
He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID.

**All articles by or about Prof. Donald Mitchell**



**Judith Simmer-Brown** is a professor in the religious studies department at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

**All articles by or about Judith Simmer-Brown**



**Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB,** has been the Secretary General of

hospital. She is 86. She didn't die, so I'm not picking up on that strain of our talk. But she did go into the hospital, and was losing blood. Eventually they were able to take care of her, and she is recuperating. But when I hung up the phone, I had all sorts of feelings. We had to go out and be with her and make plans. I was worried, concerned. I also found grief, which surprised me, because she hadn't passed away. It was like grieving for something that I had had and felt like I was losing, facing the possible and eventual loss of my mother.

I was struggling with this kind of suffering. I'd like to mention a particular Christian perspective of suffering in my own practice that I did at that particular time. On our first day, we discussed Jesus crucified and forsaken and his cry from the cross of abandonment. Christians believe that God is love. This love is agape, which I think is closest to compassion, a kind of self-emptying, self- that identifies with and cares for others, and yet also has an element of affection to it, in a sense like loving friendliness. God is that and Jesus is an incarnation of that love. Jesus emptied himself and became one of us. But then on the cross, he identified himself with each of us and our sufferings.

In my own spiritual tradition, this is understood to have reached a peak at the moment that he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," because he so identified himself with humankind and its suffering—moral, physical, and psychological—that he experienced what we all experience at the very depths of suffering, a loss of what is positive, his love as being just totally caught up in the darkness of the suffering itself.

What that means is that Jesus identified himself with all suffering humankind that had ever lived, was living, or ever would live, including me. In terms of my own spirituality, I went off by myself and reflected on the different feelings I was having—grief and worry and concern—and then in prayer went into myself as deeply as possible. In the midst of the suffering, I met Jesus forsaken and said: "This is what I want. Not that I want the suffering, not that I want my mother to be ill, but I want you. I want you as my savior." The acceptance of the suffering was the place where we could meet at this deepest core of myself. I believe that Jesus crucified and forsaken is the doorway to God. Each time I do this, and whatever sufferings I or others I'm with experience, there is a deeper union with God.

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.

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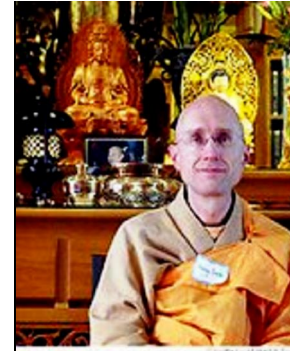
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Ven. Samu Sunim**

The other thing I would add as kind of a footnote is that the death of Jesus on the cross and his passion were moments of bringing all humankind into unity with God our salvation. In our own sufferings, united to Christ, we participate in that. Christians believe that our sufferings embraced and united to Christ do have an effect on other people. But the suffering itself can tear people down. It doesn't necessarily mean it's something good. But suffering embraced and transformed into love then is redemptive as well as healing to ourselves.

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**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.

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**Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB** Cam, was elected a member of the Council of the Camaldolese Benedictines in 2005 and lives at the Mother House at Camaldoli, Italy. He was involved in the second Gethsemani Encounter in April 2002.

**All articles by or about**

**Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB  
Cam**

**Ven. Guo-yuan** Fa Shi is a monk in the Chan Buddhist tradition. He became Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center until October, 2004, when he went back to Taiwan to oversee the newly built Chan Hall.

**All articles by or about  
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