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Sr. Margaret Michaud: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

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

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Dialogue Following Margaret Michaud's Presentation

Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.): This is our expertise—death, dying, sickness, so forth. As monastics, especially Buddhist monks and Christian priests, we always attend to the sick and dying. In some societies the child is born in the center. Suppose you assume a circle: the child is in the center of the circle. That symbolizes the attention everybody pays to the child. As the child grows, that circle grows, and attention is slowly withdrawn. The individual becomes productive, makes some contribution to society, and then everybody recognizes the person. When the productive delivery goes down—that is aging—then all withdraw their attention, respect, recognition, and appreciation. When the person is very old, that person goes out of the circle into the nebulous, next-to-funeral home that is called the senior citizens home. It may be very close to the funeral home. Nobody wants to look at the person, let alone attend to him.

In other societies, the person is born on the boundary, and attention increases as the person grows up. The older the person, the greater the respect. Younger people are taught to respect the elderly—parents,

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grandparents, great grandparents, and so forth. In capitalist societies like this one, which I'm part of it although not productive in the material sense, every time we consume, we make a contribution to the tax base, I can say I'm a part of the society. In this society everything is geared to capitalism. The funeral industry is a big industry. As soon as I turned sixty-five, I got lots of letters from insurance companies, asking me to buy insurance for my funeral so that my relatives would not be burdened and have enough money for my funeral. This is the whole thrust in capitalist societies. This is one simple example. As religious persons and monastics, we have a great responsibility to address this very important issue, as our brother monk Leo mentioned—whether it is embalming, the most expensive coffins or most expensive funeral homes etc. Insurance companies are very good in promoting these things, and everybody is looking for money. As Venerable John Daido Looi mentioned this morning, we need to look at this from our heart with compassion and love and try to help not only the deceased but the living to console themselves in their dealing with the grief.

Judith Simmer-Brown: I want to raise a question for my Christian friends. It's a question that comes from Gethsemani I and the discussion about the Algerian monks that was such a central moment in the last dialogue. I've been having bits of this conversation this week trying to understand the notion of Christ dying for our sins, and in particular what was said in the last session about Christ conquering death. From a Buddhist point of view, it is very difficult to understand this notion when contemplation on the certainty and inevitability of our own death is central to our practice. I need to be enlightened on this theological teaching of Christ conquering death. Does this not create an unrealistic expectation for people that when we read in the newspaper in obituaries that people lost their battle with cancer, and that death is a punishment, a problem, an unrealistic expectation that merely increases people's suffering?

Mary Collins: Certainly, there is a paradox in the language that we use. Benedict, for example, in his *Tools for Good Works*, tells the monastery to keep death daily before your eyes. So there certainly is not any kind of denial or cultivation of unreality about death. In a monastery where there are many elderly, you don't have to go through any special machinations to keep death daily before your eyes, because



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it's there. I think that the Christian theological statement of the reality is that we pass through death to new life in Christ. We talk in theological language about the Paschal mystery—the mystery that Christ has revealed is that we go through death into new life.

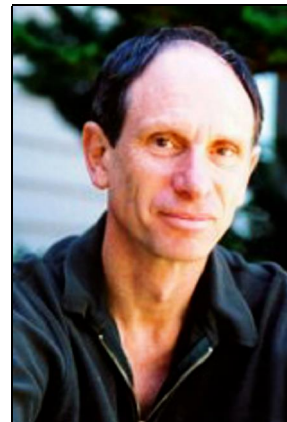
That is such a basic part of Christian understanding and the Eucharist. It's part of the understanding of the Easter season and so on. There really is not much room for Christians to deny the reality of death. The Christian funeral acknowledges that. Insofar as Christians are caught up in a consumer society, we can get confused to the degree that we are distracted. But I think that death is approached with hope—hope that God is faithful, that as God has raised Jesus to new life so also we who have been born into the body of Christ through baptism will experience that faithfulness of God when we pass through death to new life. A dominant image there is of passage. Maybe somebody else wants to speak to that.

Donald Grabner: I would like to add a footnote: That the principal symbol of this new life is something that makes us Christians very materialistic because it's resurrection from the dead. There is some kind of a psychosomatic continuance; we don't become angels; we don't become disembodied spirits. Whenever that fulfillment comes, and this is what we in faith hope for in the last days (the eschatological period), there is resurrection from the dead, understood in quite a physical, materialistic sense. There is a great mystery about it. We don't understand how it's going to be, but that's the point. That makes death quite different for us, as well as the subsequent afterlife. In general Christian understanding today that is an issue that has not been stressed or brought out as much as possible and needs to be.

James Wiseman: Especially during this Easter season, when we celebrate Christ's rising to new life, we think and often read in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians the verse, "If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are the most pitiable of people" [15:19]. When you hear phrases like, "Christ conquered death," it is exactly what Mary said and as the preface for our mass for the dead says: Life has changed, not ended. The only thing I would add is that in many respects it isn't all that different from what I've been hearing from Buddhists. It's very evident in the Pure Land Buddhism, but even the Theravada tradition says that when a Buddhist dies one hopes that he or she will be reborn

of Directors.

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into a peaceful, new life. I'm fully aware of the doctrine that that self isn't the same self, and there is no permanent self. But the language is in fact very similar, and I think that's worth keeping in mind.

John Daido Loori: That's exactly what I wanted to say. We talk about having settled the question of life and death, being free of life and death. We speak of life as the unborn and death as the unextinguished, that in birth, nothing arrives; and in death, nothing leaves. Not an atom, not a molecule. What those statements allude to is the fact that who we are is not this bag of skin, where everything inside the bag of skin is me, and everything outside is the rest of the universe. What's realized—and this is the settling of the question of life and death—is that this very body and mind is the body and mind of the universe. When that's realized, then we can say: "In birth, nothing is added. In death, nothing is lost." It's like conquering death, in a way.

Ajahn Amaro: I would echo that from the Theravada tradition. The Buddha's enlightenment is often depicted as the Buddha being assailed under the bodhi tree by Mara, who is a sort of Satan figure. Mara means death. So the enlightenment is actually depicted as the conquest of death. When I've been explaining Buddhism in a Christian context, I've often said that the crucifixion in Christian tradition is mirrored by the Buddha's enlightenment under the bodhi tree. They are both about the conquest of death itself. I would also echo exactly what Roshi John just said—that in Theravada language, we talk about the realization of the deathless. This is a common term for the initial experience of enlightenment as the realization of the deathless, which is the recognition of that dimension of our being that is unborn, undying, timeless, and intrinsically transcendent. It's the whole Buddhist process.

As I've been hearing this language about Jesus conquering death, it's been so resonant because it's exactly the same essential principle that we would be focusing on in Buddhist practice. Particularly within our tradition, the Buddha's body did die. It's also perhaps significant that we never talk about the Buddha dying. We say the Buddha attained parinirvana, because there is a recognition that you can't really call it dying, just like you wouldn't say necessarily that Jesus died. As the father from the Eastern rite [Damon Geiger] was saying, in some respects you can't say that Jesus died, because it's not the same kind



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of connotation that we would use for an unrealized being. That's probably an opening for discussion, but that recognition of liberation is not like preventing physical death. Sure, the body dies. But was one dimension of our being.

Norman Fischer: On the point that Father Donald brought up about resurrection in the body, which is a unique emphasis of Christianity. Your body changes over life, so when you are resurrected, do you get resurrected, if you die when you are very old, as an old body, or do you get to choose, are you better off dying young?

Donald Grabner: It's the body of glory.

Norman Fischer: One other thing. In the Gospels, I was reading that when Jesus is resurrected and comes back in the garden, when I think Mary Magdalene sees him, and then on another occasion when he is walking down the road with someone, it's astonishing to me that they don't recognize him. How could they not recognize him? What I'm trying to ask is what does the idea of resurrection in the flesh really mean?

James Wiseman: I think it's very important, if we don't present Christianity as something just totally incredible and absurd, to recognize that when we speak of that which comes beyond death—if I may use a medieval distinction that some of the best theologians today also make—a distinction between knowing and believing, we believe that a good person will live eternally with God. We don't know exactly what comes the other side of death. When I speak of hope of living with Christ, body and soul, it is totally impossible to try to imagine what that is like. To me, although I fully understand Norman's question, it doesn't make sense even to try to answer that in terms of a young, middle aged, or old body. To be with God forever, body and soul, means that you are fully in the divine presence. It's hopeless to try to go into greater detail than that.

Leo Lefebure: In the Middle Ages, some of the less enlightened Christian theologians said everybody will have a thirty-three-year-old body. That's the age that Jesus died at, and they felt that was a good age to be. You are not too young, not too old. On the lack of recognition of Jesus after resurrection: The resurrection of Jesus in the



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New Testament is clearly not simply the resuscitation of a corpse. It's not like Lazarus coming back to life where he is going to die again. The disciples have to go through a whole process of learning to see, which is not solely the experience of Mary or the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but representative of a broader process in the whole Christian community. It's especially dramatic in the story of the road to Emmaus, where the disciples hear the stories of hope, know the tragedy of history, and are in between. That's exactly where the early Christian community was. The figure of the risen Lord in the story teaches the early disciples how to understand the scriptures, and then they recognize Jesus in the breaking off the bread. As soon as they recognize him, he is gone, which is similar to him saying to Mary Magdalene, "Don't touch me. Don't grasp me. Don't cling to me." The resurrection of Jesus is not a possession that we can hold onto.

Norman Fischer: It seems as if those instances are the case of the disciples seeing another person and then recognizing that it's not another person. That's what it sounds like when you read it.

Leo Lefebure: Yes, they think it's another person. It is the risen Lord but in a radically new way, which means that it's partly about learning to see the presence of Jesus among us in a new way.

Kevin Hunt: To return to the idea that Judith brought up of Jesus conquering death. That type of talk about Jesus comes mostly from St. Paul. At the time that Paul was writing—and I'm not a scripture scholar, so just take it from somebody ignorant speaking—death was seen as final. The question was asked, "Why did we live if we have to come to that kind of an end?" The easiest answer was to say, "We must have done something wrong;" and, therefore, death is seen as a punishment for sin. So the more possessions I have, the more power and I have, the farther I'm pushing death away from me. Jesus, in his death and resurrection, throws that out. I can't help but think American society today is in a similar situation. How many people are having their heads taken off or their bodies frozen, so that when a cure for this or that disease or old age occurs they can be thawed out and redone? Death is still seen in our own society as the ultimate disaster. How are we going to show people that it isn't, it's a passage?

Felix Machado: This may be a fundamental difference between the

participated in the first two Gethsemani Encounters.

**All articles by or about
Fr. Leo Lefebure**

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Archbishop Felix Machado served as under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue prior to his appointment as bishop of Nashik (India) on January 16, 2008.

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two religions. When I say, in the Christian tradition "I," I am necessarily in a certain sense identified with my body. I am my body, not I have a body. Perhaps that's where Norman's question of which body resides: I am my body. All through my life I am that self which God has brought to birth. It will remain for eternity, at least that's why I was created as such. Even death cannot destroy this reality that God has created.

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All articles by or about Prof. Donald Mitchell



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All articles by or about Judith Simmer-Brown

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All articles by or about Ven. Samu Sunim



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All articles by or about Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.



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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.

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