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## Freedom and Forgiveness: Discussion

Catherine Bielski, Yong Chin Denn, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Rev. Kusala, Judith Simmer-Brown, Ven. Yifa

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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**Patrick Henry:** Thank you very much, Sister Sarah, for weaving so many rich and important and emotion-laden themes together. Thank you for reminding us that the prophetic, the Hasidic, and the rabbinic traditions also speak to this, and for appreciating what's in the book and suggesting a way to carry it forward with, for instance, purity or purification as a middle term to help bring apparently disparate things together. I want to thank you very much for a marvelous contribution to the discussion that we hoped this book would get started. I was particularly struck by your reference at the end to transparency. As I have continued to think about the discussions we had and what was uncovered in this effort to explore Benedict's Dharma, I think now I would give even more prominence to the notion of transparency as a goal of the spiritual life, so I especially appreciate your highlighting that.

I would like now to ask Judith and Yifa if you would like to comment. When Sister Sarah was talking about the attention paid to excommunication here, I was remembering very clearly Judith's initial resistance to talking about that chapter—and then her discovery that that was for her one of the most important insights in the Rule, because every community has to talk about its boundaries. And I think you found Benedict's way of talking about it very helpful, so I'm not...well, yes, I am trying to load the conversation [laughter]. I guess I hoped you might reflect a little bit on that.

**Judith Simmer-Brown:** Thank you so much, Sister Sarah. Even though Patrick has loaded the gun in a particular way, I found that

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**Patrick Henry, Ph.D.,** (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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what struck me was maybe a little different from what Sister Sarah said. I was reminded of what Brother David was talking about last night, about Benedict's reminder that death should at all times be before our eyes. And I so appreciated that you began with that, Sister Sarah, the importance of relating our conversation here to the suffering in the larger world that we are very much a part of. And so just a couple of things came to mind ...

I really think this conversation is less about this book and more about the kind of waves of communication and contact that come from the conversations that we had, which hopefully will extend further and further. And I was thinking about the twin towers event and Sister Sarah's asking, "Can we ever go back?" I think obviously we can't go back. The Buddha, when he led a life of protection and privilege in the palace as a young prince, when he went outside the palace on the ride in his chariot is one of the most beloved stories in all Buddhist traditions. When he saw old age, sickness, and death, he saw them directly, and he saw that they related to him, that they were not just for some sort of abstract situation out there. When he, who lived a life of privilege and protection and pleasure, was touched by these passing sights, he was not able to go back to the palace. And to me it seems that one of the blessings of this particular tragic, horrible situation is that perhaps we won't go back to the palace.

Unfortunately, I see our leaders wanting to go back to the palace and to wage war. But it's extremely important for us as people whose hearts have been very deeply touched not to try to go back or to let the country go back to the palace, but to go outside the palace gates to really encounter the suffering and reality of destruction and violence in our world. And that is an extremely important part of the trellis of the Rule. The Rule is a direct expression of our seeing the reality of suffering and old age and death in the world. So it seems to me that it is a very natural thing for us to begin to relate to that in a much more immediate way and to appreciate how it is that the practice of the Rule keeps us from going to extremes. It keeps us from moving either into hopelessness and powerlessness on the one hand, or revenge and war on the other.

There could be some kind of contemplative reflection, waves that could move further out from this situation and inspire some sanity in this

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

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world that we're in, rather than the kind of insanity that we're seeing rising habitually around us. And I think this relates to some extent to an understanding of boundary. If there is a boundary of community, it is to make us strong and help keep us from falling into the habitual extremes. It is to create a sense of being able to hold the power of the truth of suffering and violence and war, and to do something different and extend that to a much larger situation. So I think that relates very much to a sense of purity and openness of heart, and I think I'll leave it at that and turn to Yifa.

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#### Judith Simmer-Brown



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